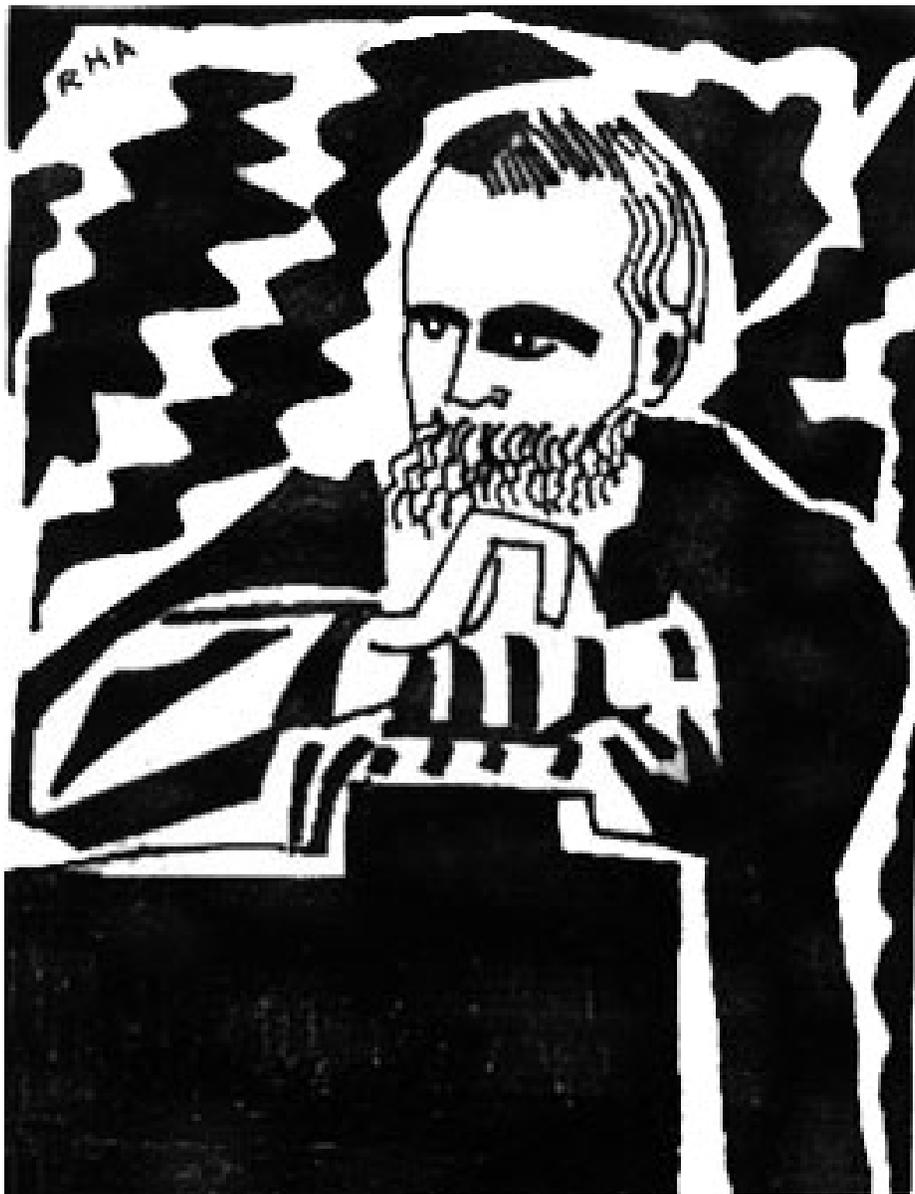


*Streams
of
William James*

*The Newsletter of William James Society
Volume 1 • Issue 2 • Fall 1999*



Streams of William James

*A Newsletter of William James Society
Volume 1 • Issue 2 • Fall 1999*

Randall H. Albright, Editor
423 Marlborough St. • Boston, MA 02115 • USA
e-mail = albright@world.std.com
<http://world.std.com/~albright/james.html>

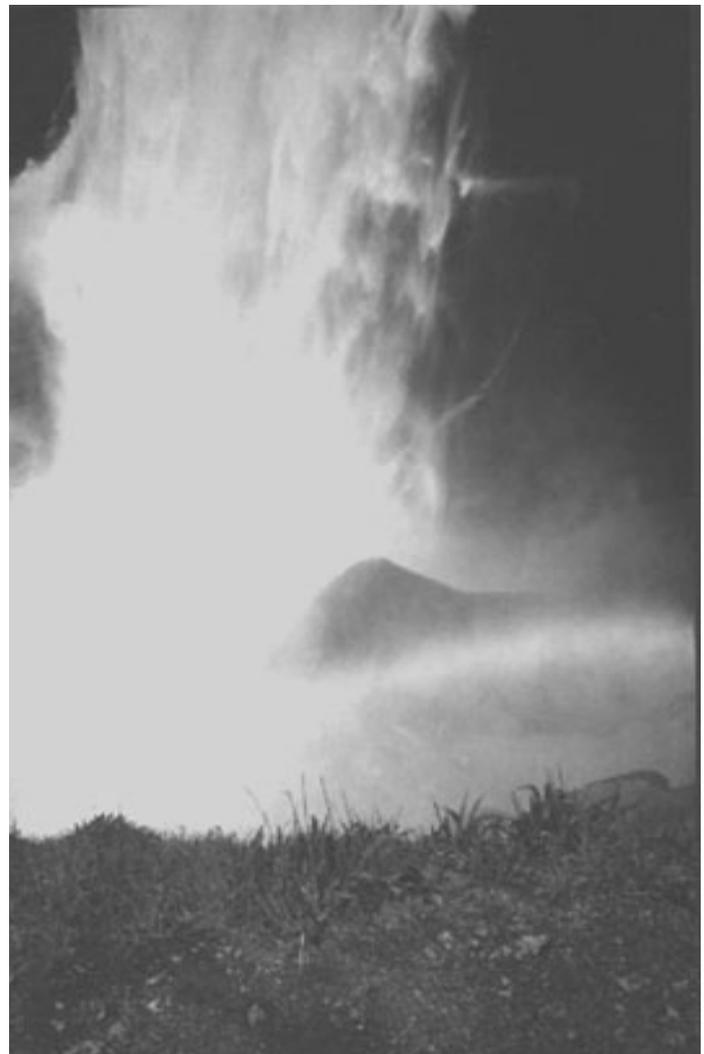


Advisory Board:

Jason Gary Horn
Chair, Humanities Division, Gordon College
Jonathan Levin
Assoc. Professor of English, Columbia University
Frank Pajares
Professor, Education Division, Emory University

In This Issue:

- James and Emerson: A Humanistic Affinity 1
by William Hoyt
- Membership Information 3
by Randall Albright
- The Polysemiality of the Concept
of "Pure Experience" 4
by Michel Weber
- Robert Frost's Dramas of Desire and James 7
by Richard Wakefield
- Getting It Right 8
by George Cotkin
- An Appearance of Vehemence 10
by Mark Scott
- Pragmatism, A Look Ahead 13
by Randall Albright
- Neglected Centennial:
The Birthday of Pragmatism 15
by Bill DeLoach
- What did WJ Believe? 16
by Greg Stone
- And More!



Vernal Falls by R.H. Albright, 1999

Table of Contents

<i>Recent Books</i>	<i>inside cover</i>
<i>James and Emerson: A Humanistic Affinity</i>	1
by William Hoyt	
<i>Membership Information</i>	3
by Randall Albright	
<i>And An Invitation</i>	3
by Randall Albright	
<i>The Polysemiality of the Concept of "Pure Experience"</i>	4
by Michel Weber	
<i>Robert Frost's Dramas of Desire and James</i>	7
by Richard Wakefield	
<i>Getting It Right</i>	8
by George Cotkin	
<i>Pluralism, Rescher, and James</i>	9
by Randall Albright	
<i>Trapped in Limbo with an Analytic Philosopher</i>	9
by Randall Albright	
<i>An Appearance of Vehemence</i>	10
by Mark Scott	
<i>Notes on William James</i>	12
by Mark Scott	
<i>Pragmatism, A Look Ahead</i>	13
by Randall Albright	
<i>Neglected Centennial:</i> <i>The Birthday of Pragmatism</i>	15
by Bill DeLoach	
<i>What did WJ Believe?</i>	16
by Greg Stone	

Recent Books

The Divided Self of William James
by Richard M. Gale (Cambridge UP, 1999)

William James and the Metaphysics of Experience
by David C. Lamberth (Cambridge UP, 1999)

Painting Religion in Public
by Sally M. Promey (Princeton UP, 1999)
discusses John Singer Sargent's affinity with some of the thoughts of James.

The User Illusion
by Tor Nørretranders (Penguin, 1999)
talks about the continuing relevance of James's scientific work, specifically, and has many Jamesian ramifications throughout.

The Feeling of What Happens
by Antonio Damasio (Harcourt Brace, 1999)
notes James's pioneering work on emotions.

Saints and Madmen
by Russell Shorto (Henry Holt, 1999)
has a chapter on James and several well indexed references to James throughout.

If you know of any others, please let me know. Also, if you want to write a book review of any of these (or others), we could publish it here. This most certainly includes books by James, himself, and how you still see them to be relevant or not.
— Randall Albright

New Pragmatism Cybrary

John Shook is putting together a WebSite on pragmatism. He has generously given a page for the William James Society under "Societies." The core Web address is:
<http://www.pragmatism.org>

© 1999 William James Society
c/o Randall Albright
423 Marlborough Street
Boston, MA 02115 • USA
e-mail = albright@world.std.com
<http://world.std.com/~albright/james.html>

Streams of William James is a newsletter of William James Society, a non-profit organization sponsored by Randall Albright in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The contributions to this newsletter are copyrighted by each creator of the text or visual imagery.

All rights reserved.

James and Emerson: A Humanistic Affinity

by William Hoyt

(Conclusion from the Spring Issue of Streams of William James)

Of particular interest in James's affinity with Ralph Waldo Emerson is that the former's "strenuous mood" bears a striking resemblance to the spirit of "self-reliance" in the latter. Indeed, Emerson may well have been one of those men of whom James spoke, who was born with the strenuous mood upon him. Certainly, when reading Emerson's work, one cannot help but find it to be singularly robust and 'religious' in tone. In his essay entitled "Self-Reliance" he writes:

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know your duty better than you know it.¹

Surely, this statement would have served as a poignant urging-on to a man who spent the greater portion of his years living by his father's imposition. As if in response to James's plight, Emerson remarks:

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.... Great men have always done so.... And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort and advancing on Chaos and the Dark.²

Without a doubt, the strength of conviction and the spirit of autonomy which James held to be so laudable in the actions of the saints is of a remarkably similar nature to the spirit expressed in the exhortation of his predecessor. In addition, we see that both men had a deep-seated belief that, when confronting matters of momentous importance, action was necessary.

In light of the central role which human action assumes in the work of both Emerson and James, it is not surprising to find in the former an anticipation of the latter's belief in a melioristic universe. In Emerson's *Journals*, we find clear evidence of his belief our

actions aid in determining the future state of our world. As he writes:

The government of God is not on a plan—that would be Destiny; it is extempore. The history of the universe is a game of which the object to be gained is the greatest good of the whole, and is attained by a long series of independent *moves*. The omniscient Eye makes each new move from a survey of all the present states of the game. Hence the efficiency of *Prayer*. God determines from all the facts— & my earnest desires make one of the facts.³

Moreover, for Emerson, this belief that "we and God have unfinished business with each other" leads us to trust in our insights and our convictions. In turn, such trust will impel us to strive for the realization of our ideals. Therefore, in lauding action, he writes: "I settle myself ever firmer in the creed that we should not postpone and refer and wish, but do broad justice where we are."⁴ Again, the parallels between Emerson and James are striking: firstly, the shared conception of a world that is 'unfinished;' next, the common notion that God is in time and that He works with us; and, lastly, their belief that only by acting are we doing our part in bringing about that world's salvation.

James recognized how the momentous need for action in our lives frequently places a greater burden upon our rational capabilities than they can handle. Furthermore, it was shown that in his essay, "The Will to Believe," he was able to sidestep the problem by offering the notion that our passional nature has a right, if not the imperative, to intervene in matters where our intellect is over-taxed. In point of fact, we find in Emerson's *Nature* the expression of a similar belief. In the fourth chapter of this work, entitled "Idealism," he argues thus:

Whether nature enjoy a substantial existence without, or is only in the apocalypse of the mind, it is alike useful and alike venerable to me. Be it what it may, it is ideal to me so long as I cannot try the accuracy of my senses.... The presence of Reason mars this faith.⁵

What Emerson is claiming here is that if we insist always upon deliberating about what actually *is*, our lives will suffer from a 'paralysis' of sorts. Instead, we ought to proceed as our will directs until the occasion arises where new and sufficient facts are brought to light for our intellect to be effectively re-engaged.

For Emerson, as with James, this precursive

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, Modern Library, 1968), p. 150.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

James and Emerson by William Hoyt (continued)

notion of the will-to-believe is seen to be intertwined with his conception of truth. Like James, Emerson acknowledged that while some truths, such as those in mathematics, are of an “eternal” nature, there are others that are relative, founded as they are only upon our experience. Of course, it must be noted that James viewed each type as serving the same purpose of fortuitously “leading” us in our lives. However, James also admitted that truths of the former type had, indeed, shown themselves to be more consistent, insofar as they transcended subjective experience. Similarly, Emerson noted in *Nature*: “Whenever a true theory appears, it will be its own evidence. Its test is that it will explain all phenomena.”⁶ In addition, we see a sympathetic attitude with James when he offers this qualifying remark: “But to a sound judgment, the most abstract truth is the most practical.”⁷ The belief that the importance of even eternal truths lies in their ability to “lead” is found in Emerson as well.

An affinity with James persists in what could be called Emerson’s ‘experimentalism.’ In his essay, “Circles,” he writes: “I unsettle all things. No facts [of experience] are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no past at my back.”⁸ He continues by saying that there is “no truth so sublime but it may be trivial to-morrow in the light of new thoughts. People wish to be settled; only so far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.”⁹ As James would have undoubtedly concurred, Emerson here is stressing the importance of looking to the future in respect to our beliefs and, accordingly, to our actions. In this light, our ‘truths’ of today are seen to be mere expedients—that is, they remain true so long as they continue to work for us, or possess “cash-value.” Simultaneously, Emerson is making an appeal for us to rid our lives of dogmatism and, in turn, adopt a strong sense of autonomy—an attitude which may have been detected earlier where he urged each of us to “trust thyself. . . .” And because we shall then be running by “our own lights,” the “will to believe” is crucial if to continue acting. It is risky, to be sure, but it is the essence of life and creation. In “Experience,” Emerson offers us these remarks:

So in accepting the leading of the sentiments, it is not what we believe concerning the immortality of the soul or the like, but the universal *impulse to believe*, that is the material circumstance and is the principal fact in the history of the globe.... Onward and onward!

In liberated moments we know that a new picture of life and duty is already possible; the elements already exist in minds around you of a doctrine of life which shall transcend any written record we have.¹⁰

If one were not sure of the authorship of this statement, he might well suppose that it were composed by James, so closely aligned are he and Emerson in their basic beliefs. At this point, let us pause to note these further parallels between them: both men stressed the practical significance of ideas; they held similar views concerning the “will to believe;” and each placed a strong emphasis upon autonomy, both in spirit and action.

“Of whatever temperament a professional philosopher is, he tries when philosophizing to sink the fact of his temperament,” said James.¹¹ Both he and Emerson were deeply aware of this fact. And, based upon their belief in autonomy and subjective validity, there can be little doubt that neither man tried to suppress this impulse when composing his works. Recognizing this, we may infer that the philosophical differences between the two men are due in so small part to the radically different character of their formative life-experiences.

As Emerson was reared in a rural environment that was highly conducive to both philosophizing and creative self-expression, it is not surprising that he acquired at an early age a heightened sense of the wonderment to be found in nature. In addition, since his father passed away when he was still young, he was required to assume a great deal of responsibility within his family circle at an early stage in his development. Having such a childhood as he did, it is hardly remarkable that he would grow to become a man with such an awareness of the interconnectedness of things in Nature as well as a strong sense of self-reliance. (Yet we do remark at his expressive powers!) Standing firmly on his own two feet while recognizing that he was merely a thread in the fabric of Existence, he was a man for grief could be regarded only as “caducous”—an astonishing admission as he did experience much grief as an adult. But, he was a part of Nature and Nature is regenerative. Thus, his unshakeable optimism.

On the other hand, James was a man whose life in large part failed to afford him such solace. Much of his development was characterized by conflict. And as his battles for self-expression were waged in his mind, unlike skinned knees or sprained ankles, his wounds were not so quick to heal. As a result, grief for him was

⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸ Ibid., p. 288.

⁹ Ibid., p. 289.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 358.

¹¹ William James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 11.

James & Emerson by William Hoyt (cont.)

felt with every other beat of his heart and autonomy was regarded by him as a hard-fought prize. In this light, with the aforementioned parallels withstanding, particular differences between his and Emerson's philosophy may be more rightly regarded as temperamental rather than substantial. While the systematic outline of each man was remarkably similar, each was filled in with the strokes of their respective natures.

And so, what we have seen is that James's life created a disposition for him to embrace Emerson's philosophy insofar as it contained the core beliefs that he both sought and needed to find. At the same time, he was forced to distance himself from Transcendentalism as it threatened to trivialize his long-endured feelings of anguish with its heartily optimistic spirit. However, in noting that the major themes in James's pragmatic writings were first treated by Emerson, we may say that it was Emerson himself who paved the way for his pragmatism.

Clearly, James was much more closely aligned with Emerson's views than he had supposed. As a parting suggestion, if one's inclination is to emphasize the differences between the pragmatic philosophies of James and Emerson, may he first apply the "pragmatic method" to them before he commences with such an undertaking. For, as James remarked in "What Pragmatism Means," its purpose is to prompt us in such cases

to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion is true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right.¹²

—William Hoyt is a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at the Catholic University of America. His e-mail address is WLHoyt@aol.com

¹²James, Pragmatism, p. 28.

Membership Information

by Randall Albright

Although the Society continues to grow, the amount of money that people have sent me is far less than a corporate entity, which I had hoped could file for tax-exempt status, can justify at this point.

The Society still exists, however. I am happy to sponsor it for at least another year, and would be happy to stay involved beyond that time. To join, please send a check to:

Randall Albright
423 Marlborough Street
Boston, MA 02115

In the memo area of your check, please write:
William James Society

Basic membership remains as before:
\$15/1 year, \$25/2 years for an address in the USA;
\$20/1 year, \$30/2 years for an address outside USA.

New members during this first year of publication will receive all newsletters published to date.

Higher levels of support are still appreciated, such as those suggested in the first newsletter, and can be recognized in a future copy of the newsletter, if wanted. They defray production costs, preliminary copies sent to Advisory Board, copyright fees, complimentary copies sent to James scholars with the hope of both increasing membership as well as asking for articles to be submitted for publication, and other matters.

Eventually, I would like to see the Society reincorporate with truly pluralistic financial as well as corporate-duty support.

And an Invitation

The content of this newsletter is driven by those who actively participate in its creation.

To send a verbal contribution for consideration to be published, either e-mail me directly with the article or idea in the e-mail body, send as an attached file, or send via the regular mail.

To send a visual contribution for consideration to be published, either e-mail as an attached JPEG or GIF (no larger than 200K), or send via regular mail and I can scan in. (Color images must be reduced to black and white, for reproduction reasons.)

In both cases, I will work with you to make sure that you are happy with the final copy or imagery before publishing.

—Randall Albright = albright@world.std.com

The Polysemiality of the Concept of “Pure Experience”

by Michel Weber

The assertion of a primordial experience, both in the sense of a temporal primacy and of a semantic or existential primacy (“original or pristine character”¹) is extremely important for the operationalization of “radical empiricism”. When the *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (hereafter ERE) introduce the concept of “pure experience”, they do so in the rough. And it is indeed a major characteristic of James’s works that they propose more willingly a cluster of convergent intuitions only roughly systematized rather than a full-fledged “theory of everything”. It is the fate of philosophical speculation to be everlastingly “in the making”.

Before diving into the debated question—the polysemiality of the concept of “pure experience”—, it is worth to quickly refresh the philosopher’s overall perspective. According to the late James, what especially matters is the intrinsic unity of the World as well as its dynamic, variegated, character: there is no room for the inveterate dualism in a philosophy that champions an *open* universe. More precisely speaking, ERE is particularly concerned with the status of consciousness—and its motto is: “consciousness” stands for a *function*, not for an entity. It is nothing less than a categorical mistake to appeal to a “trans-experiential agent of unification” (ERE23). The main speculative difficulty is to understand the witness of the subjective and the objective, to delimit the differences of degree that separates-yet-binds them. To do so, James devises “the principle of pure experience”, which claims that “nothing shall be admitted as fact [...] except what can be experienced at some definite time by some experient; and for every feature of fact ever so experienced, a definite place must be found somewhere in the final system of reality. In other words: Everything real must be experienceable somewhere, and every kind of thing experienced must be somewhere real” (ERE81). This is exactly what, in some other circles, has been called a “panexperientialism”².

The understanding of the implicated order of the

panexperientialist working hypothesis necessitates the distinction of three complementary perspectives: subjective, objective and unitive. The analysis itself belongs to the domain of abstractions: for the sake of a wider understanding of the various levels of connections every being enjoys with its environment, the philosopher wagers on the pulling apart of what is intuitively given to us as an immediate unity. By doing so, it is hoped that each layer of meaning will disclose fruitful speculative nuances.

I. From the subjective, or “inner” point of view, pure experience is the “immediate flux of life” in which feelings inflame the whole experiencing being. It is the pre-predicative experience of new-born babes (or intoxicated adults) who intuit a “*that* which is not yet any definite what” (ERE46). One could speak, in other words, of a bare sense of presence characterized by a state of primordial innocence ignorant of (hopefully fruitful) distinctions. In the penumbra of “pure” or “direct” experience, experience is just as it is, without the least addition of deliberative discrimination, to say it with Nishida’s words³.

What this perspective uncovers is twofold. First, it shows the centrality of the subject of experience in general, and of the subjectivity of the philosopher in particular: our own experience is the unavoidable ground of any speculation. This has been acknowledged, reluctantly or not, by every philosophy. Second, it sketches the construction of reality by language. Out of a perceptual *chaos* (a concept James is fond of), we bring forth a *world*. It is worth quoting once again PU113’s apophthegm: “when we conceptualize, we cut out and fix, and exclude everything but what we have fixed. A concept means a *that-and-no-other*.” And here is the obvious conflict—exploited *ad nauseam* by *deconstructive* postmodernism⁴—between the radical eventfulness of a truly open universe, and the static profiles conceptual understanding cannot but provide. This apparent unreconcilability of the torrential cosmos with the necrosing conceptualization process has led, for instance, the late Heidegger to advocate a “poetry of thinking”. Pushed to the hilt, such a philosophical approach claims only to utter eventful concepts, in the very same way reality is a weaving of never-recurring *events*.

1. Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James. As Revealed in Unpublished Correspondence and Notes, Together with his Published Writings*; Volume I, *Inheritance and Vocation*; Volume II, *Philosophy and Psychology*, Boston, Little, Brown, and Company, 1935.

2. Griffin coined the term in his “Whitehead’s Philosophy and Some General Notions of Physics and Biology”, in John B. Cobb, Jr. & David Ray Griffin (eds.), *Mind in Nature. Essays on the Interface of Science and Philosophy*, Washington D. C., University Press of America, 1977.

3. Nishida Kitaro, *An Inquiry into the Good [Zen no Kenkyu, 1911]*. Translated by Masao Abe, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990, pp. 3-4. See the remarks on the difference between James and Nishida.

4. Griffin makes a useful distinction between “deconstructive or eliminative postmodernism” and “constructive or revisionary postmodernism”. See David Ray Griffin (ed.), *The Reenchantment of Science. Postmodern Proposals*, Albany, New York, State University of New York Press, SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought, 1988, p. x.

II. From the objective, or "outer" point of view, pure experience is the "primal stuff" or "materia prima" of the world. With that regard, it is to be noticed that James uses the concept of "stuff" in various analogical ways: positively as well as derogatorily. Positive occurrences (see, e.g., ERE4, 19, 38, 69) aim at the full thickness of the concrete, at its overall structure; derogative occurrences (e.g., ERE4, 14) denounce the understanding of reality's core as a permanent *substance* underlying changes. "*Experience as a whole is self-containing and leans on nothing.*" (ERE99) Everything that is real is experiencing, full stop. James is not only saying that a non-experiencing or non-experienceable "something" would institute an awkward enclave in the uni-verse, but that such an ontological pocket is purely and simply impossible: it is logically inconsistent and totally incoherent with the key-categories of radical empiricism.

The question of the "primal stuff" is the one of (realistic) pluralism; without some "objective something" standing out there, we end up willy nilly with a more or less solipsistic idealism; the "many" collapses, once and for all, into an all-embracing "one". James's vision speaks for a pluralism that does not insulate the different actors of the ontological scene. There are co-dependant yet possess their intrinsic "weight".

III. From the unitive, or "in-between" point of view, pure experience is the "ineffable union" (ERE121) that sees the unison of the experiencing and the experienced. The immediate flux of life is dissolved in the universal experiencing tissue; one undifferentiated whole reaches consciousness. In a typically Bergsonian fashion, James asks to put ourselves "*in the making* by a stroke of intuitive sympathy with the thing" (PU117), i.e., to reach an "ontological intuition, lying beyond the power of words to tell of"⁵. The *Will to Believe* has even more adventurous utterings: "The key-note of the experience is the tremendously exciting sense of an intense metaphysical illumination. Truth lies open to the view in depth beneath depth of almost blinding evidence. The mind sees all the logical relations of being with an apparent subtlety and instantaneity to which its normal consciousness offers no parallel [...]. The center and periphery of things seem to come together. The ego and its objects, the *meeum* and the *tuum*, are one." (WB218) The world of pure experience is the world in which occurs an immense emotional sense of reconciliation, it is the world in which every opposition vanishes to the benefit of the law of togetherness of things in a common world. This

emotional awareness embodies the fact that "there are no differences but differences of degree between different degrees of difference and no difference." (WB220)

A closer look at this third layer of meaning reveals that the concept necessitates a complementary analysis in terms of levels of consciousness. If "the principle of pure experience" holds, how is it, indeed, that it is totally denied by common-sense? In other words: if pure experience describes the ultimate feature of our world, if, *per se*, it is the awareness brought about by an ineffable union, why is it so foreign to everyday life? The very first thing to notice is that "pure or direct experience" does not mean direct *sensorial* experience. Buddhism has heavily insisted on this, but the question is not foreign to Western philosophy at all. Because of textual evidences, Plato's concept of "theoria" can be said to be the starting point of a built-in contemplative trend in philosophy, trend that will be later exploited, through its Neo-Platonic interpretation, by the entire Medieval philosophy. But the problem these speculations face is the (ab)use they make of the metaphor of vision: Jonas has shown very straightforwardly the inevitable bias of the theoretic concept, mainly in terms of the neutralization of time and causation. To say it in one word: the metaphor of vision imposes the idea of the *spectator-subject*, i.e., of a totally passive onlooker factually unaffected by the scenery⁶. Anyway, the 20th century has seen three major thinkers—James, Bergson and Whitehead—clarifying the issue of experience, acutely distinguishing (but not bifurcating) sensory perception from its ontological roots. Sense perception is actually a very simplified (though sophisticated) projection established on the wealth of data in which the subject is immersed—better, that *constitutes* the subject.

It is now possible to rephrase our earlier question: how can a world conditioned by opposites be the surface effect of a reconciliated world? The fundamental law of sharing (if any) must belong to a level of consciousness that has not been selected for everyday purposes, and various reasons can be put forward: from a "natural" perspective, the everyday level of consciousness is determined by the features of human beings' habitat and embodiment; from a "cultural" perspective, it is determined by contingent habits of language and ritualization. On the one hand, the biological evolution of humanity has selected some particular ways of relation and awareness in a sharp competitive context with other species; on the other, sub-evolutionary processes have led groups of humans

⁵. William James, Review of "The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy", *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 1874, Volume 33, No. 205, pp. 627-628.

⁶. Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1966.

to adopt their own languages and rituals to "customize" the world. As a result, two complementary filters stands out of this quick analysis: sense perception and education. Any individual's perspective is moulded by the peculiarities of his/her perceptual system and cultural interpretative grid. In conclusion, the obliteration of the unitive world by its partition into a subject and various objects has proven to be a necessity for survival and for action purposes. And the link can now be made with a last difficulty: why should we "translate experience from a more concrete or pure into more intellectualized form"? (ERE96)—and thereby install bifurcations in the natural tissue. The paradoxical answer is: to attain to dwelling.

Before reaching the epilogue, a little clarification is in order. The present note has used, explicitly or not, contrapunctive parallels with Nishida's interpretation of James's concept of pure experience. It is now time to define how far such a conceptual togetherness with the immediate envisioning of being in its "suchness" and "thusness" is fair. To go to the core of the matter, we have to acknowledge that experience is simply *not* understood in the same way by the two philosophers: James understands it as a "plenum", whereas Nishida sees it as a "vacuum"⁷. The fullness, full-bodiedness, of the Jamesian universe is replaced by the emptiness of the latter. Now, from a speculative point of view, one could frame an argumentation bringing the two conceptual extremes closer, but it is to be feared that such an abstract exercise will never do justice to the idiosyncratic experience—in the strong sense of the term—of our protagonists. To take a more "concrete" exemplification: even when he understands consciousness as a function, James acknowledges some sort of egoity to the subject. Nishida, on the contrary, pushes as far as possible the negation of any dichotomies. It is the case indeed that "Zen does not teach absorption, identification, or union, for all these ideas are derived from a dualistic conception of life and the world. In Zen there is a wholeness of things, which refuses to be analyzed

or separated into antitheses of all kinds."⁸

Having said this, let us go back to the tripartition of the concept of pure experience in order to close our discussion. The three steps used to depict the facets of pure experience highlight the epicenter of James's symbolic space: his subjectivist method. The claimed ground of his speculations is his own experience, generalized first to other human beings, and second to the rest of reality—the trick being, naturally, to frame concepts elastic enough to endure such a stretching without installing gaps in the cosmic tissue. Furthermore, at the epistemological level, that method allows the dismissal of a conclusion for the very motive that it contradicts our intimate feelings and desires⁹. Quite obviously, this is a *radical empiricism*.

Bibliography

ERE: James, William, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* [Posthumously published by Ralph Barton Perry], Edited by Fredson Bowers e.a. ; Introduction by John J. MacDermott, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press, 1976.

PU: James, William, *A Pluralistic Universe*. Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy, Edited by Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, Introduction by Richard J. Bernstein, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press, The Works of William James, 1977.

WB: James, William, *The Will to Believe, And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt e.a. ; Introduction by Edward H. Madden, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press, 1979.

—Michel Weber has a PhD in Philosophy from the Université catholique de Louvain (Belgium), where he is currently "chercheur coopté". His research deals mainly with process thought in A. N. Whitehead, H. Bergson and W. James. A forthcoming article will make explicit the potential synergy existing between, on the one hand, the polysemiality of the concept of "Pure Experience" and, on the other, the contiguism the author of these lines has advocated in the previous issue of *Streams* of William James.

E-mail: mweber@philosophers.net

Home address for correspondence:

35 rue de Marsannay-la-Côte, 5032 Mazy, Belgium

⁷ Cf., e.g., David A. Dilworth, "The Initial Formations of "Pure Experience" in Nishida Kitaro and William James", *Monumenta Nipponica*, XXIV, 1-2, Tokyo, Sophia University Press, 1969, pp. 93-111

⁸ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, "An Interpretation of Zen Experience", in Charles Alexander Moore (With the Assistance of Aldyth V. Morris), *The Japanese Mind. Essentials of Japanese Philosophy and Culture* (East-West Philosophers' Conference), Honolulu, East-West Center Press, University of Hawai'i Press, 1967, pp. 122-142, p. 139.

⁹ "Repousser une conclusion par ce seul motif qu'elle contrarie nos sentiments intimes et nos désirs, c'est faire emploi de la méthode subjective" (James, William, "Quelques considérations sur la méthode subjective", in *Essays in Philosophy*, Ed. by Frederick H. Burkhardt e.a. Introduction by John J. McDermott, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1978, pp. 23-31, p. 23.)

Robert Frost's Dramas of Desire and James

by Richard Wakefield

In 1911, when he taught at the Plymouth, New Hampshire, Normal School, Robert Frost assigned William James's *Psychology* and *Talks to Teachers* as texts. Within a year he would decide to move to England to pursue his career as a poet, and his teaching thereafter rarely involved any texts but those of his own composition; but Frost's interest in James's thought never diminished. There is no knowing how much Frost was directly influenced by James or how much he discovered a kindred spirit in him. Poetry happens at a confluence of education, experience, and temperament that defies quantitative analysis. But if we think of Frost's poetry and James's philosophy as similar beliefs finding different expressions, as one idea extended in two dimensions, so to speak, then each is enriched by the other.

Many of Robert Frost's poems are fundamentally questions. What difference does it make which road we choose, and does our believing it makes a difference *make* it make a difference? Why do we persist in mending a stone wall that nature continually ruins, and is our desire to express our creative impulse reason enough to do so? How can I balance my desire to pause and admire nature against my obligations to society? We can say that Frost often writes in the voice of a person seeking or discovering the circumstances in which our desires make a difference; often, these are the very circumstances in which the speaker's desires are revealed, and the discovery, therefore, is also self-discovery.

In "The Will to Believe" William James asserts that "a passionate affirmation of desire" cannot itself be verified as true until we have acted in such a way as to make it true. He gives the example of a man who refuses to believe a certain woman cannot love him, and who therefore finally wins her love: "The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about the special truth's existence; and so it is in innumerable cases of other sorts." Think of James's own decision that his first act of free will would be to believe in the existence of free will. Although Linda Simon's new biography revises the story in which James, because of his decision, triumphs once and for all over his depression, there can be little doubt that the cornerstone of his life's work was his belief in the power of will to create the world and the self.

Frost's poem "The Wood-Pile" was first published in *North of Boston*, his second book, in 1914, too late for James to see it. Yet it reads very much like an account of a man's triumph, through will, over incipi-

ent depression. It is a drama of desire in which a man chooses to assert an interpretation that he prefers, and in which he enables himself to persevere because of that assertion.

A man walking in a "frozen swamp" finds he has left familiar territory. The desolate landscape is disheartening, and he debates whether to turn for home. He decides, entirely on impulse, to push on. "The view was all in lines / Straight up and down of tall slim trees / Too much alike to mark or name a place by / So as to say for certain I was here / Or somewhere else," he writes, discovering that he has left the world where the collective experience embodied in language can help him find his way.

With nothing "to mark or name a place by," how shall he find his way? He sees a small bird that flies before him, leading his eye as it perches or takes to the air. This may be an allusion to James's famous comparison, in *Psychology*, of "the wonderful stream of our consciousness" to the movement of a bird, "an alternation of flights and perchings." (James goes on, in fact, to say that these alternations are expressed in the rhythm of language itself; his claim that the rhythms of speech organically express the stream of consciousness closely parallels Frost's theory of poetic diction, which he called "the sound of sense.") Of course, because poetry pools the separate rivulets of words and world, it is entirely possible that the bird in the poem is both an allusion to James's *Psychology* and an actual experience of Frost's.

The bird leads the man's eye to a woodpile. We learn something about the man by his observations, as he notices that "It was a cord of maple, cut and split / And piled – and measured, four by four by eight." So we know he has at least some experience with wood cutting, enough to know that there is a mystery here, for all the evidence suggests that this pile of wood, which represents a significant investment of effort, has been abandoned: "And it was older sure than this year's cutting, / Or even last year's or the year's before. / The wood was gray and the bark warping off it / And the pile somewhat sunken." He sees nature reclaiming the wood. By extension, he could see nature reclaiming all the works of man.

Here is the circumstance in which belief can make a difference. The man can choose to believe that the abandoned woodpile symbolizes nature's destruction of all man's best efforts. Since anyone who has chopped woods knows that one doesn't merely forget to bring in a cord of maple, it would be easy to believe that nature claimed the woodcutter himself before he could bring it in. What but death would cause a man to invest so much work and yet forgo the benefit? Everything in the situation suggests a bleak interpretation – everything, that is, except the man who discovered the woodpile. He has the power to choose another inter-

pretation, and his choice will make a difference to him. If he chooses the obvious meaning he may well succumb to despair; if he can discover another, positive way of seeing the woodpile, he may find his way out of the woods, both literally and figuratively. This is his conclusion:

... I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

The woodpile has indeed warmed the frozen swamp, made the desolate winter world a little less threatening. More accurately, however, we should say that the man's choice to believe this particular (and particularly unlikely) interpretation is the true source of the warmth. The evidence that weighs so heavily against this interpretation only adds to the moral force of the man's choice for, in James's words, "If a brief definition of ideal or moral action were required, none could be given which would better fit the appearances than this: *It is action in the line of the greatest resistance*"¹ (James's italics).

¹ William James, *Writings, 1878-1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 412.

² William James, *Writings, 1878-1899*, 425.

Getting It Right

by George Cotkin

A few years before I published my book on William James in 1990, I was lucky enough to meet and to have lunch with Henry May, Emeritus Professor of History at University of California, Berkeley. At one point May inquired about the nature of my research. I told him that I was then writing a book on William James. May hesitated a moment before responding: "How wonderful it must be to spend your time with a fellow such as James." May hit the nail on the head. Thinking and writing about James was made easier by the personality of the subject. Even when I found myself in disagreement with a position of his, I was able to maintain my fascination for, and appreciation of, the man. Perhaps if the game I had been talking had been less enticing personally, then my interpretations would have been more pointed. In any case, the years I spent with James were satisfying.

Although I no longer work with James, his presence occasionally intrudes, in a pleasant manner. In recent years debates among historians about the elusiveness of representing the past, about the ubiquity of narrative, about the social construction of reality have raged. Sometimes to good effect, sometimes not. At one point I published a minor intervention

The following passage, from *Psychology*, reads like a synopsis of William James's own emotional recovery, and it can also serve as an abstract of Frost's "The Wood-Pile":

If the 'searching of our heart and reins' be the purpose of this human drama, then what is sought seems to be what effort we can make. He who can make none is but a shadow; he who can make much is a hero. The huge world that girdles us about puts all sorts of questions to us, and tests us in all sorts of ways. Some of the tests we meet by actions that are easy, and some of the questions we answer in articulately formulated words. But the deepest question that is ever asked admits of no reply but the dumb turning of the will and the tightening of our heart-strings as we say, 'Yes, I will even have it so!'²

In "The Wood-Pile" the huge world has asked a question, and a man has answered with a turning of his will toward the world as he would have it. William James would recognize his counterpart in Frost's verse.

—Richard Wakefield teaches American literature at Tacoma Community College/ The University of Washington, Tacoma. He is also a poetry critic for the Seattle Times. His e-mail address is rpwakefi@aol.com

into the disputes about the nature of hypertext. In working on that piece, my thoughts returned to William James. I had recently learned that in one of the *Seth Speaks* books, Seth apparently relates a conversation with James across the great divide. I rushed down to the bookstore to look at what James had to "say," especially to see if he was upset with my interpretations of him. Of course James did not say anything about my book (no doubt he has better things to do with his time in the spirit world). But thinking about this concern drove home to me a simple fact, often lost in the heated debates about historical knowing: that in our attempts to represent the past, or a figure from the past such as James, we have a responsibility to get it right, or to get it as right as we can. We can, as Foucault once stated, make the subject "groan under the weight of our interpretation," but to do so is, in point of fact, not to represent, not to attempt to get it right. And the getting it as right as can be, no matter how naive that may seem in our age of theories about social construction and post-modernism, still strikes me as a moral and professional imperative.

—George Cotkin is professor of history at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. His book, *William James, Public Philosopher (Johns Hopkins, 1990)* is now available in paperback through University of Illinois Press. His e-mail address is gcotkin@calpoly.edu

Trapped in Limbo with an Analytic Philosopher

by Randall Albright

Pluralism, Rescher, and James

by Randall Albright

I see more William Jamesian ramifications to the thought of Nicholas Rescher in *Pluralism, Against the Demand For Consensus* (1993) than the author indicates, as he refutes both Habermas and Rawls, while also paying them homage. The following quote, for example, could have been used to good advantage in the book, where Rescher talks about *acquiescence*, not consensus:

“In the last analysis, then, we believe that we all know and think about and talk about the same world, because *we believe our PERCEPTS are possessed by us in common*. And we believe this because the percepts of each one of us seem to be changed in consequence of changes in the percepts of someone else. What I am for you is in the first instance a percept of your own. Unexpectedly, however, I open and show you a book, uttering certain sounds the while. These acts are also your percepts, but they so resemble acts of yours with feelings prompting them, that you cannot doubt I have the feelings, too, or that the book is one book felt in both our worlds.”¹

1. William James, from “The Function of Cognition” chapter, *The Meaning of Truth* (1911) [Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books Edition, 1997] p. 36-37

“So did James believe, finally, in God?”

“I’d say that he found significant use-value in various forms of the concept.”

“But what did *he* believe?”

“Well... he asked his wife to have him buried according to the customs of the time.”

My acquaintance held onto his book by Davidson, pleased with the progress which that man had made since the days of Quine. Eventually, we parted company after further non-productive interchange. I’m sure he pitied me as much as I pitied him.

Later, I saw Sargent’s “Triumph of Religion” murals at the Boston Public Library, with a flyer that noted how he allied his thinking with people like Ernest Renan, James Frazer, and William James. But this series of murals was a misunderstood effort from many sides, I regret to say. Something about the triumph of the person over dogma, but how his representations got blasted from all sides of public opinion.

Something about the devastation of World War I made Sargent re-think his own merely private versus common values in that mural series. One of his nieces had been killed in a bombing of a church in Paris. So much for “people,” much less his own “art,” some of which also got demolished. Between that and the original controversy, he stopped work on the project.

It made me wonder why William got so fascinated with the subject of war at the end of his life. Lines like:

“History is a bath of blood....

“Alexander’s career was piracy, pure and simple, nothing but an orgy of power and plunder, made romantic by the character of the hero. There was no rational principle in it, and the moment he died his generals and governors attacked one another....”¹

No rational principle...

“What we conceptually identify ourselves with and say we are thinking of at any time is the centre; but our *full* self is the whole field, with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can only feel without conceiving, and can hardly begin to analyze.”²

Can hardly begin to analyze...

“Pluralism... is neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but melioristic, rather. The world, it thinks, may be saved, on condition that its parts shall do their best. But shipwreck in detail, or even on the whole, is among the open possibilities.”³

If only the parts could do their best...
The war against war never stops.

1. William James, from “The Moral Equivalent of War” (1910) [*William James, Writings 1902-1910*, 1987, New York: Library of America], 1282.
2. William James, from *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), 289.
3. William James, from *Some Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1911), 142.

An Appearance of Vehemence

by Mark Scott

On November 18, 1898, William James wrote to the pro-imperialist Mack Salter, a friend, that imperialism means killing, presumption, international hates and jealousies. "Against all this there is nothing to urge, it seems to me, but the vague hope that where motion and action are, success is always among the possibilities" (Perry 1935, 2,309). What did James mean by "success" here? The "success" of "empire"? The success, despite imperialism, of what James saw as the counterparts of killing, presumption, international hates and jealousies? James tells Salter that he is writing "with great haste, and an appearance of vehemence which in me is inseparable from the writing act." This said, James then admits to "being unable to distinguish in practice, as you seem to do so beautifully, between the lofty and elevating appropriation of the Philippines for their future freedom and the appropriation of them *sans phrase*. Our outward acts must be the same in either case" (310).

James comes close here to urging "the writing act" as his version of "success": it can distinguish no difference, finally, between "appropriation" with phrase ("for their future freedom") and "appropriation" *sans phrase*. ("With me," he says elsewhere, "to conceive is to execute.") James's famous "pragmatic test" ("Our outward acts must be the same in either case") applies here as much to American military action in the Philippines as to James's writing in this letter. His "outward" act of writing manifests the "vehemence" of "motion and action" that he sees manifested in the "outward acts" of American imperialism.

James's writing here can be seen as both part and counterpart of imperialism. A writing act informed by pragmatic sanctions renames killing, presumption, and international hates and jealousies as "motion and action." It abstracts and categorizes them. For James, writing itself becomes a "moral equivalent of war," the stress falling on the adjective "moral." To an out-and-out imperialism, that is, James opposes a radical imperialism: the vehement motion and action of writing that, in its "great haste," disposes of fine phrases and cuts to the chase.

James understands the appropriative "urge" of imperialism only too well. In 1890, he laid down for "The Stream of Thought" and "Consciousness of Self" a fundamental principle of appropriation (he called it "attention"). What the self chooses to attend to it appropriates, and what it appropriates is what it is known as. In 1898, James chose to attend to American imperialism. He chose at the same time to reform philosophy by announcing and advocating "the principle of pragmatism": "that the effective meaning of any

philosophic proposition can always be brought down to some particular consequence, in our future practical experience, whether active or passive; the point lying rather in the fact that the experience must be particular, than in the fact that it must be active" (in his 1898 essay announcing pragmatism). This letter to Salter is one of those "particular" consequences to which James refers.

While James has been praised (by Frank Lentricchia, among others) for his anti-imperialist stance, the difficulty he had in doing something about it bears looking into. That difficulty raised for James the old problem of reform: is it possible, and how? In the period when James was attending to American imperialism—between 1898 and 1903—he was also coming to terms with Emerson, the writer for whom reform was, in James's disparaging terms, "a purely literary ideal."

James didn't quite buy reform as "a purely literary ideal." But because he felt vehement when he wrote, James couldn't dismiss it altogether. Emerson arrived at his purely literary ideal of reform by proposing, in "The Poet," that the reformer be indifferent to the age-old maxim that words are not deeds. Emerson's reformer sees a difference of degree, not of kind, between the two. "Words and deeds," he writes, "are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words" (Porte 1983,450). Emerson never resists the prudence that knows actions are not words; he is simply not interested in it, since it is what every man has "foretold." The poet, on the other hand, "announces that which no man foretold. He is the true and only doctor; he knows and tells; he is the only teller of news, for he was present and privy to the appearance which he describes" (450).

Emerson's point of view here is radically physiological—and attractive to a man who felt that conception and execution were one and the same. In the chapter on "Will" in his *Principles of Psychology*, James notes just how airy this physiology can be: "...from the physiological point of view a gesture, an expression of the brow, or an expulsion of the breath are movements as much as an act of locomotion is. A king's breath slays as well as an assassin's blow; and the outpouring of those currents which the magic imponderable streaming of our ideas accompanies need not always be of an explosive or otherwise physically conspicuous kind" (James 1890,2,528). Over and over again Emerson has been criticized because his efforts at reform were not "of an explosive or otherwise physically conspicuous kind." Yet the same Emerson, upon returning young Oliver Wendell Holmes's essay criticizing Plato, could say: "If you strike at a King—you must kill him." Emerson was no more interested than James was in expulsions of breath *per se*; but in those expulsions as

words, Emerson and James had a vital investment.

What I'm suggesting is that James was no more committed to worldly political reform than Emerson was. They were both determined, rather, to justify the life of writing.

In 1589, George Puttenham published a treatise on poetry. He named a figure of thought "pragmatographia, or the counterfeit action." What was merely one among many figures of thought and speech was to become, in early twentieth-century poetics, the reigning figure. In Kenneth Burke's term, literature is "symbolic action." Emerson didn't concede as much to the practical world: for him, literature was "action." Emerson took to extremes what had been latent in Shakespeare and Montaigne and Bacon—the proposition that writing was an equivalent of action, a political and legal force. Writing was not merely a "counterfeit action," a symbolic or representative action; it was an actor, an agency; what it promised it performed, and what it performed it promised. Writing bridged the gap between rest and motion.

Like "pragmatographia," James's pragmatism names that bridge, or that illusion of a bridge. Like Emerson, James would no longer be "cowed by the name of Action," as Emerson says in "Spiritual Laws" (1841). "Action" for Emerson was "a trick of the senses." Emerson simply laid it down "that the ancestor of every action is a thought." Further, since the mind itself was most sensitive to the tricks of the senses, it was the mind (Shakespeare's, in *Hamlet*) that invented "the name of action . . . to testify that it is somewhat."

Emerson used the ancient economic dualism of "rich" and "poor" to bolster his thesis. The mind is "poor"; "action" is "rich"; and, like the rich, "The rich mind lies in the sun and sleeps, and is Nature. To think is to act" (Porte 1983, 322). Action was "an outside badge" for "the poor mind [that] does not seem to itself to be anything" (322). The claim that the mind should need nothing beyond its poverty, with the implied persuasion that this in itself is what it means to be "rich," is precisely "the false note in Emerson" that jarred William James and John Jay Chapman, and jars us still.

Is writing, then, the "outside badge" of poverty? To Richard Poirier, one of Emerson's best critics, this argument yields Emerson's peculiarly American genius. But it reverses what can be called the common-sense position—often taken up by Robert Frost in his discussions of poetry—that the ancestor of every thought is an action, and that poetry is the afterthought of action, a reflection on, a regard for, action. The argument is eminently reversible in Emerson, too, as in Frost and William James. Nor does it prevent Frost—who said that in writing, "the escape is from actions into words"—from naming poetry "action."

Perhaps Emerson's greatest service to American

literature—to literature in general—is his insistence that writing is action, and therefore "work." He never tired of the metaphor. It informs his saying that he wrote his essays as "an apology to my country for my apparent idleness," and it deepens the pleasure he took in the (relative) commercial success of Hawthorne's writing—since, as he put it, Hawthorne's writing was "useless."

Literature is where things happen that don't. For Chapman, Emerson's false note came from harping on literature's sublime form of contact. Emerson's indifference to the more ordinary forms of contact—politics, for example—was nonetheless a form of action. That action, as in James's letter to Salter, took the form of writing, vehement writing. But the principle informing such writing is the highly ambiguous imperative attributed to Jesus: "Resist not evil." On the one hand, it spells the doctrine of non-resistance, passive disobedience, civil disobedience; on the other, apathy and futility, and the better world to come.

Not long after Jesus saw that people found it difficult not to resist evil, Juvenal saw that it was difficult for writers not to write satire. Did William James see, in 1903, that reform, as a purely literary ideal, would take the form of satire? He certainly had a penchant for the satirical—as when he wrote to a friend in 1909: "To be a real philosopher, all that is necessary is to *hate* some one else's type of thinking, and if that someone else be a representative of the 'classic' type of thought, then one is a pragmatist and owns the fulness of the earth."

As an anti-imperialist, James wanted nothing so little as that; as a radical imperialist, he wanted nothing less.

—Mark Scott's first collection of poems, *Tactile Values*, will be published by New Issues Press in September 2000. Poems from the manuscript are forthcoming in *Raritan*, *The Paris Review*, and *The Kenyon Review*. He lives in Snowmass, Colorado. His e-mail address is mscott@rmi.org

Bibliography

- Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, 1935)
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983)
William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1950)

Notes on William James

by Mark Scott

In William James's writing, definition and description coincide. They press against previous definition, previous description. There is little or no difference between description and definition, since what is essential from one point of view may be accidental from another, and even this distinction may have nothing to do with it. All accounts are *ad hoc*, never exhaustive.

When James asks the pragmatic question, "What difference does it make?" he means, what does it make possible *in addition to* what it is, what it was, and what it will definitely already be, thus stated or put. He means, what possibility will it make? What *right of supplement* can I claim?

How can you tell a pragmatist? By his or her sentence openers: "It is nevertheless true that"; "the fact is"; "the truth is"; "it isn't true to say"; "clearly"; "absolutely"; "for my purposes here"; "I confine myself for the time being"; "but that is another story."

When James got tired of explaining and defending pragmatism's theory of truth, in about 1906, he sought out earthquakes and spoke of wars "having their way." He saw that when humanism hasn't been making war, or justifying war, it has been a moral equivalent of war.

For James, the practical is always *for* the ideal. Passivity is sometimes practical, sometimes ideal. James insisted that any vocabulary of action and work existed in a world in which we are more acted on and worked on than acting and working—just as our cars spend more time parked than on the road.

James's voice is plaintive, passionate, patient, passive.

The literal for James always figured something words couldn't get at, the given.

Too much has been made of James's influence on poets without taking into account what he wrote to C.E. Norton in 1907: "I had always supposed myself to 'hate' English poetry, because I had never been able to finish reading a poem. You have shown me that the fault lies with the poets, and not with me—they can't finish their own poems. That lets me out, and I agree with you perfectly! I don't know Quillier-Couch's collection, but I think the *Golden Treasury* a dreadful thing in the main (I don't mean that there is no good in it!)—it is so inhuman. Have you seen a little book, *Les cent meilleurs poemes francais?* It seems to me, objectively speaking, superior to any English collection. . . . But I have to admit at the outset that I am *poetry-deaf*" (TC 1, 427).

The higher, the better, the more: these are the pieties of William James; these are his values. He makes them outstanding through repetition. He likes the figure of polyptoton in particular, the repetition of

words derived from the same root. He repeats by typography and punctuation. He further repeats by varying prepositions. He repeats different verbs in the same syntactical position (see *Pragmatism*, 133)—all for the more, the better, the higher of the same.

James blamed the writing act itself for uneasiness, distortion, falsification, omission, obscurity, hollowness, haste, and incompetence. James could not separate the writing act from vehemence. He was an animal about writing, by turns ant, cuttlefish, coyote, crab, bird. "Our mental life," he wrote, "like a bird's life, seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every sentence closed by a period" (*W* 13:143—7/21—7/27/1883). This view of language is practically obscured by everything outside of the essay it's expressed in, and refuted by what James goes on to say in "On Some Omissions from Introspective Psychology," where his view of grammar is fairly traditional. Alexander Bain: "Speech is made up of separate sayings, each complete in itself, and containing several words; and these sayings are SENTENCES" (*Higher English Grammar*, 1863; 2nd ed. 1879, 8). James's idea in this essay is that "immense tracts" of our bird's life have not been expressed in sentences by the people who attend to such things, "our most approved psychological authorities." They overlook, and falsify in doing so our mental life.

James took his image of "the stream of thought" from Bain's *The Emotions and the Will*. But Bain's interest is in the "number . . . of distinct ideas that pass through the mind at any given time." James looks at the entire stream as it seems to rest or run, wade in itself or wash itself away, pool, float, rip, run counter to itself, or seem to.

Isn't everyone a pragmatist in literary criticism? Doesn't the critic come out saying how it works and what it's known as and what it amounts to—practically, but not quite? Ideally, ideas are actually true and literally endless wellsprings of properties. In practice, practically, ideas terminate in us; we are the tone they take; they are the phantom of an attitude of ours. (Hume said that "all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation.") Pragmatism, James said in 1904, is "a method of conducting discussions," nothing more or less. But this is what he didn't say in 1904: that he liked to end discussions; liked to say the word that came home, went home, drove home, hit home, struck home—the last word.

Bibliography

- Ralph Barton Perry, *Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, 1935)
William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Meridian, 1974)
William James, *The Works of William James*, vol. 13 (Cambridge: Belknap Press)
Alexander Bain, *Higher English Grammar*. (London, 1879)

Pragmatism, A Look Ahead

by Randall Albright

“You see that pragmatism can be called religious, if you allow that religion can be pluralistic or merely melioristic in type.” (William James, P, 132)

In his famous *Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* lecture series, James notes that pragmatism comes from a Greek word, “meaning action, from which our words ‘practice’ and ‘practical’ come.” (P, 23-24) After giving credit to Charles Sanders Peirce for developing the term philosophically, James goes on to note that “Ostwald, the illustrious Leipzig chemist” said that “All realities influence our practice.... and that influence is their meaning for us.”

“All realities” contain experiences that cannot be adequately explained in words, formulas, or other constructions. The main question that James asks, to me, is this: how does our practice influence our selves, our loved ones, and others?

One subject that is not used as a topic heading in *The Revival of Pragmatism* (1998) is the relationship between pragmatism and religion. I find this strange because, despite Friedrich Nietzsche’s madman’s cry of “Whither is God?... I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers....”¹, polls in the United States continue to indicate that over 90% of the people say that they believe in God, and also that many of them believe there is a Heaven. A pragmatic, humanistic question is simply this: Does one’s religion help one’s self, one’s immediate friends and family, one’s community? Or does it hinder, intimidate, and, at the worst, destroy either the one who believes it or any of those whom the person touches? James warns that in reading a poem by Walt Whitman, for example, one must respect a “monistic” interpretation because of its “massive historic vindication.” (P, 121) There is massive historic *significance* to simply living in Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, or in other places throughout the world. Religion, like science, means nothing in and of itself. However, one must ask how religion is being used *in practice* by individuals.

James says that pragmatism “will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences. She will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact—if that should seem a likely place to find him.” (P, 38) I might talk about getting maximum “bang for the buck” for an idea, and not care if it is a Big Government or Corporation, a dogmatic church, single-mindedly-obsessed psychological theoretician, or other

people acting either singly or through groups that are rigid, wasteful, and inattentive to individual or group needs as they sometimes try to enforce well-intentioned decrees from above. Or I may say that I simply do not “buy” aspects of someone’s story.

One could speculate about the value of a religious as well as political writer, such as John Milton, who had profound influence on the development of the American Revolution with his epic, *Paradise Lost*², or why the Dalai Lhama had two hardcovers on the New York Times Bestseller List on September 19, 1999. What aspects make sense, for me? What aspects do I disregard as being outdated or simply inappropriate? William James gave “a study in human nature” as he explored people of various temperaments in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) through time.

At one point of *Pragmatism*, James talks about an object that we call a symbol of a star “as two big triangles crossing each other, as a hexagon with legs set up on its angles, as six equal triangles hanging together by their tips, etc.” (P, 110) What he does *not* say, pragmatically speaking, is that I as a reader can see that some in his time could also treat this symbol as *The Star of David*, with which they identify their Jewish faith or ethnicity. Since he wrote the lecture series, some have used this symbol to literally brand people as the first step in mass murder. In cases such as this, or other more recent examples of ethnic cleansing, it is indeed “astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence.” (P, 25)

Religious traditions are not going to simply vanish. I suggest that so-called “scientific” traditions, such as Marxism, can carry religious fervor and have pragmatic consequences, too. One must pay attention both to one’s own practice and possible interference with the practice of others, as John Stuart Mill had argued so brilliantly in *On Liberty* (1858), however, and to whom this lecture series was dedicated. James is right to warn that “[t]he most violent revolutions in an individual’s beliefs leaves most of his old order standing.” (P, 29) He is also prescient to say that “[t]heories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest.” (P, 26)

A person that James mentions in *Pragmatism* as “the paragon of Vedāntist missionaries” is “Swami Vivekananda.” (P, 68) What James does *not* say in the lecture series, but is pragmatically important, is that Vivekananda (1863-1902) believed Hindu spirituality and Western material progress were complementary.

¹. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882) [translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage, 1974], 181.

². Lydia Dittler Schulman discusses these issues well in *Paradise Lost and the Rise of the American Republic* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1992).

He worked to eliminate child marriage and illiteracy, as well as to spread education among women and the lower castes. Although James does not mention these achievements, these aspects of Vivekananda's biography were available to members of the audience, and continue to be available to people through a number of sources.

In "Lecture Eight: Pragmatism and Religion," James offers two interpretations of a poem by Walt Whitman called "To You." Although he prefers his "pluralistic" interpretation, he also offers a "monistic way" to see it, and then goes on with this paragraph:

In either way of taking the poem, it encourages fidelity to ourselves. Both ways satisfy; both sanctify the human flux. Both paint the portrait of the you on a gold background. But the background of the first way is the static One, while in the second way it means possibles in the plural, genuine possibilities, and it has all the restlessness of that conception. (P, 121)

Restlessness was a trademark of William James, and it has deep resonances in various religious traditions. However, not everyone wants to see God that way, if they care to even consider the concept. Perhaps because they feel unstable themselves, or see the world as such a *danger* of instabilities, they prefer "the static One" instead. James does not deny that security, but he is still prescient to encourage his preferred view, the "plural, genuine possibilities... [with] all the restlessness of that conception" because it may be in some people's own restlessness that things can either be made better or worse.

Jürgen Habermas once wrote about "certain branches of Jewish and Christian mysticism (represented by Isaac Luria and Jakob Boehme)" in which

man, left alone in history with the work of his own redemption and the redemption of nature along with it, must also manage the redemption of the fallen God; he becomes a Christ in the Promethean role of Lucifer. In man, God, while still God, has nevertheless ceased to be divine in the strict sense. He has given himself over completely to the risk of an irretrievable catastrophe; it is only at this price that he has initiated the world process of history.³

What did a Promethean role mean for those mystics? And what can it *continue* to mean for those interested in social or spiritual growth, while responding to dogmatists of any persuasion? I compare the Habermas quote with this by James:

³ Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics, A Reader edited by Steven Seidman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 49.

The prince of darkness may be a gentleman, as we are told he is, but whatever the God of earth and heaven is, he can surely be no gentleman. His menial services are needed in the dust of our human trails, even more than his dignity is needed in the empyrean. (P, 34-5)

I would suggest that some of the Christ/Promethean/Lucifer blur happens on an epic scale in the English language with *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, which James was able to casually quote in letters to friends.⁴ James spoke frequently about individual responsibility for either retrieving or continuing to improve what some in his father's generation knew as "the human form divine."⁵ As he also says:

Does our act then create the world's salvation so far as it makes room for itself, so far as it leaps into the gap? Does it create, not the whole world's salvation of course, but just so much of this as itself covers of the world's extent?

Here I take the bull by the horns, and in spite of the whole crew of rationalists and monists, of whatever brand they be, I ask why not? (P, 126)

This passage is a look ahead. "Innumerable chambers open out of it." (P, 27) It may invoke the Promethean myth, or remind me of the ethically-minded fictional doctor in *The Plague* by Albert Camus. Perhaps it is a Christian who does good deeds, an atheist whose works bring joy to others, a parent who resists merely beating a child in favor of acting gently, or a Buddhist who believes in helping others on the road to Nirvana. James calls upon actions to at least *try* to save the world "so far as it makes room for itself," and I would suggest that James has allies in some of the "crew of rationalists and monists" (such as Vivekananda, in James's own time) than James appears to represent in this quote.

—Randall Albright = albright@world.std.com

Bibliography

P: William James, *Pragmatism* (1907) [Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books edition]

⁴ Examples are well indexed in *The Correspondence of William James, Volume 7* (U of Virginia Press, 1999).

⁵ "The Idea of Man in America" chapter of *American Heralds of the Spirit* by John Fentress Gardner (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992) is a good source for background terminology on this. I believe it is also related to "The Divine Image" poem by William Blake in *Songs of Innocence* (1789), which was first promoted in the United States by J. J. Garth Wilkinson, close family friend of Henry James, Senior. See, for example, *Blake and Swedenborg, Opposition Is True Friendship* edited by Harvey F. Bellin and Darrell Ruhl (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc., 1985).

Neglected Centennial: The Birthday of Pragmatism

by Bill DeLoach

“Philosophers are after all like poets. They are pathfinders. What every one can feel, what every one can know in the bone and marrow of him, they sometimes can find words for and express.”

—William James, 1898

Q: What’s the best way to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of an important historical event?

A: To me, the answer is obvious: C-SPAN! What’s not to like? You can watch actors in period costumes re-enacting (for instance) the Lincoln-Douglas debates, all seven of them, at the original sites. A band plays period music on authentic brass instruments. Before and after each three-hour debate, writers, professors, and living descendants of the famous debaters chat with Brian Lamb or another C-SPAN host, filling in the human details of great moments in American history. And no commercials.

If you love books and ideas, it’s television almost too good to be true—living up to and beyond the medium’s potential to educate—without boring—a mass audience. Then there was a season of revisiting DeTocqueville’s tour of 1831 America, preparing to write his classic *Democracy in America*. And currently, to celebrate C-SPAN’s 20th anniversary, they are covering all 41 Presidents—one a week—with their unique blend of site visits, historians, biographers, and viewer call-ins. It’s Travel Channel meets History Channel, plus a web site loaded with further information, including book lists and lesson plans for teachers. No wonder so many of us are becoming self-confessed C-SPAN junkies.

And if you know of an event that should be covered, you can send your ideas to C-SPAN by phone or e-mail.

Quest for a Centennial

Well, about a year ago, in mid-1998, I thought of an important centennial event worth commemoration—the 100th anniversary of the birth of Pragmatism, the only American philosophic movement known worldwide. To quote Max H. Fisch’s essay on “American Pragmatism Before and After 1898”:

“The epoch-making address was by William James. It was the annual address before the Philosophical Union at the University of California in Berkeley on

August 26, 1898. It was published in September. The title was ‘Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results.’ The members of the Union were, as usual, prepared by having devoted the preceding academic year to critical study of the speaker’s philosophy, as represented in this case by James’s *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, fresh from the press in 1897, dedicated to his “old friend” Charles Sanders Peirce. At the last meeting of the year, in May, the president of the Union, George H. Howison, had presented his own criticisms of the title essay”

—Max H. Fisch, *Peirce, Semiotic, and Pragmatism: Essays* (Indiana UP: 1986), 283.

If anyone, anywhere, was planning to do a re-enactment and/or a conference on the Centennial of Pragmatism, it would be easy to ask C-SPAN to send one of their mobile studios, those famous C-SPAN School-busses, as they are called, to cover the event.

Q: Is there to be any such event? And “Who Ya Gonna Call?” to find out? I had seen a *Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy* listed on Peter Suber’s extensive Philosophy website. But: it was a listing only, not (then) hyper-linked to an actual SAAP website. Hmm.

After a bit of library work and internet sleuthing, I had an e-mail address for SAAP. The reply to my inquiry was friendly and to the point.

“No, I’m not aware of any celebration of this centennial,” wrote the Secretary-Treasurer. “If you have a paper, you might want to submit it to SAAP.” Well, I don’t have such a paper. Someday I’d like to write a biography of Young William James, because that was my dissertation topic in American Literature back in 1973. But right now I’d rather see a re-enactment of this famous lecture, and hear it discussed by historians, philosophers, and other experts on James and Pragmatism.

That was 1998; and I’ve heard nothing further in 1999. So much for Actuality; but what about Possibility? What *would be* the ideal Conference on the Centennial of Pragmatism? At least four questions come to mind:

1. Why a re-enactment? And who should play Professor James?
2. Who should be invited to comment, to interpret and extend his ideas?
3. What is the biographical/historical context for this talk by James?
4. The Audience Issue: Does *any* philosophical topic hold enough broad, general interest to hold the attention of the C-SPAN audience?

Let’s glance at these four issues.

(1) Why a Re-Enactment?

William James, more than most philosophers, was a literary writer. It's no coincidence that a committee choosing the "Best 100" works of nonfiction written in the twentieth century ranked James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* at #2. (*The Education of Henry Adams* came in at #1.) His sentences, styled for spoken performance, were well-written not just for the reader's eye, but also for the listener's ear. When he gave a series of public lectures, either on Religious Experience (1901-2) or on Pragmatism (1906-7), his audiences were large, attentive, and steadily growing. To reproduce his works in written but not in spoken form is to overlook a genuine part of his achievement.

By the way: Please don't think I'm criticizing California or Harvard or any other Department of Philosophy. Universities generally are not in the historical commemoration business. It usually takes some lucky combination of local interest and outside funding to succeed in pulling academics away from their customary professional chores. Whether philosophy at large is well-served by current arrangements, whereby Higher Education holds a near-monopoly on its care and feeding, is a question for another day. [But: see John E. Smith's critique of "the failure of philosophers... to communicate their results more effectively to non-philosophers..." (*America's Philosophical Vision*, U Chicago Press, 1992; p. 88)].

To play William James, we might seek someone about 56 years old, 5'8" in height, and "light and buoyant, so that he seemed to spring as he walked" (Simon, *William James Remembered*, p. 77, U of Nebraska, 1996). In watching how C-SPAN went about re-enacting the Lincoln-Douglas debates, however, I formed the impression that literal resemblance is less important than command of the words spoken and conviction in their delivery. A poet might be good—Gary Snyder comes to mind; or an actor with the range of Patrick Stewart. Who would you cast?

End of Part I; Part II will appear in the next issue.

— Bill DeLoach earned his Ph.D. in English (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1973) by writing a dissertation on *The Vocation of William James: An Essay in Literary Biography*. He can be reached by e-mail at wdeloach@memphis.edu; by snail mail at 2895 Young Ave., Memphis TN 38111

What did WJ Believe?

by Greg Stone

I read the "The Will to Believe" essay recently, having previously read *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *Pragmatism*. William James championed the value of religious faith in a culture and to an audience that viewed religion as an anachronism. But was William James religious? Did he believe in God? Well, not in the conventional sense. What, then, did William James believe?

I take WJ at face value. What did he believe? That to be open spiritually does not require a specific vocabulary or rationale. That these things are secondary to the real "meat" of spirituality but are valid as the means that many people employ to obtain spiritual insight. That these various paths serve to advance our humanity. That the lion can find his courage serving the great and powerful Oz, even if the wizard turns out to be a fake.

What did he believe? That we can describe the window dressings of spirituality but the essence defies description, lies beyond the power of words. Even a great poet can only point towards it, sometimes evoking an understanding that transcends the words. WJ pointed towards this understanding.

What did he believe? Everything and nothing. Did he believe? Yes.

-Greg Stone has read more James since he wrote this initial reaction to "The Will to Believe." His e-mail address is gregpstone@worldnet.att.net

