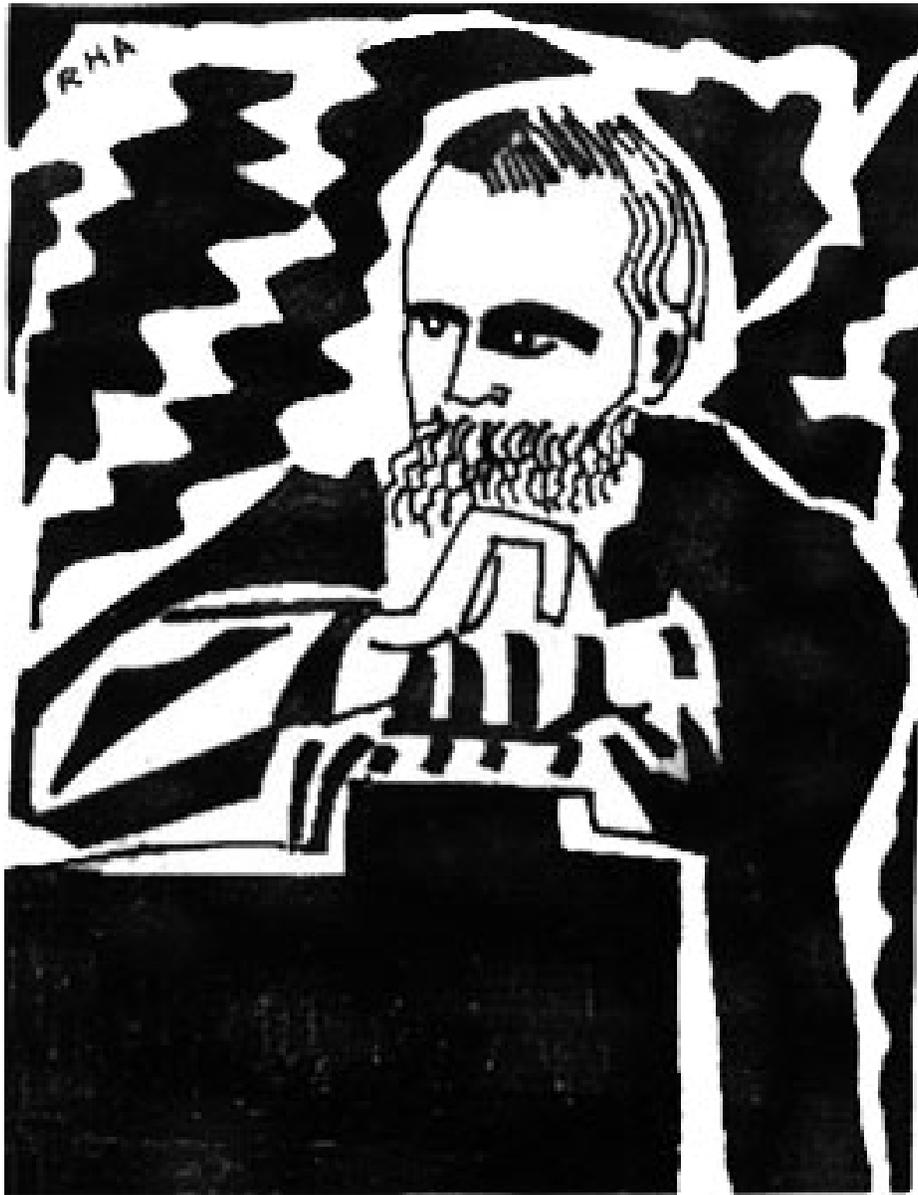


*Streams
of
William James*

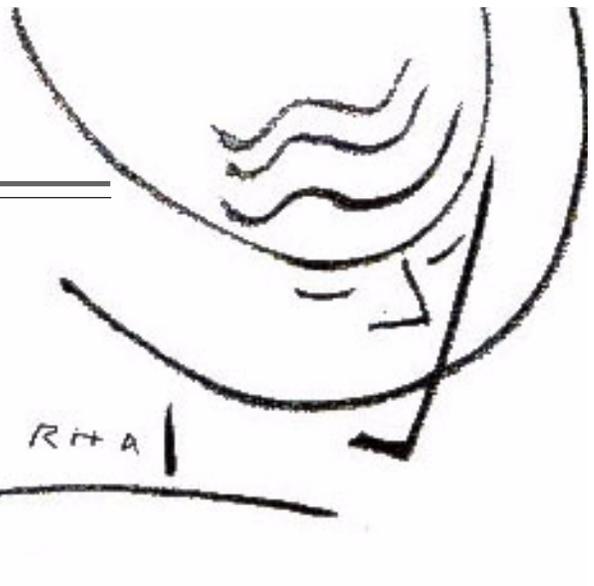
*The Newsletter of William James Society
Volume 1 • Issue 3 • Winter 2000*



*Streams
of
William James*

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Garth Wilkinson James hard at work by William James (circa 1863)

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Of Jamesian Interest

by Randall Albright

- An article in the November 29, 1999 *New Yorker* magazine by John Updike is called "The Future of Faith." William James figures prominently in Updike's article.
- Although John Horgan makes erroneous conclusions about James, I believe there is some truth to what he says in *The Undiscovered Mind, How the Human Brain Defies Replication, Medication, and Explanation* (Free Press, 1999), which I think James would have appreciated.
- *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* by Robert Conquest (W.W. Norton, 1999) speculates on what went wrong in the 20th century, with an eye toward the future that is worth considering.

There is now an e-mail discussion group devoted to the works and ideas of William James. Jerry Shepperd is the list-owner.

To join, send a message to:
LISTSERV@austin.cc.tx.us

In the message area, write:
SUBSCRIBE WILLIAMJAMES-L [Your
First Name Your Last Name]

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Frost's Poetic Drama of the Will to Believe

by Richard Wakefield

Robert Frost believed that James's "will to believe" is a definitive part of human nature. We live not by rationality alone, perhaps not even primarily by rationality. Instead, as James put it, we obey – or desire to obey – our "passional nature," that faculty within us that accepts facts but is not limited to facts. We aspire to some higher plane, but for both Frost and James we make our ascent not despite or against the physical world, but through it. Hence in Frost's poem "After Apple Picking" we read, "My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still." It is through the things of this world that we move toward heaven, through work and nature, both of which provide the facts from which our passional selves create metaphor, meaning.

Frost did not expect that the specifics of our various acts of belief would always be identical; that is, the precise meaning of the metaphor one creates of the raw facts might never match perfectly with another's meaning; if the meanings matched precisely, after all, we'd be dealing not with metaphor but simply with more raw facts. What we recognize is not another person's conclusions, but his aspiration. We are united by desire, not dogma. Ironically, to insist upon an interpretation, therefore, to coerce another's belief, is to violate the most basic terms of community; as if in forcing unity we sacrifice community.

Frost's poem "The Most of It" is but one example of the enactment of the desire for meaning. Both the story the poem tells and the way the poet tells it honor the delicacy of the process. It is a poem of desire, not of fulfillment. A man in a time of loneliness cries out across a mountain lake, shouting for "counter-love, original response." What would such a response look like, sound like? From across the lake he hears a crashing about in the trees, then something (the poet calls it an "embodiment") splashes into the water and approaches his standing place. Another person? No: "Instead of proving human when it neared / And someone else additional to him, / As a great buck it powerfully appeared." He watches and listens as it reaches the shore nearby, where it "landed pouring like a waterfall, / And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread, / And forced the underbrush – and that was all."

We have the story of a man enacting his desire for meaning, and the story is told in a way that allows us to experience just what he does: the aspiration and the possibility of discovery, but not a specific, articulate conclusion. The word "embodiment," based on the

matter-of-fact Anglo-Saxon *bodig*, or "body," has few connotations. Frost, who knew his Latin, could have translated it and thereby coerced our conclusion – the Latin equivalent is "incarnation." But of course the two words are not equivalent except to the most tone-deaf translator. "Incarnation" is a conclusion. The word insists upon the transcendent meaning that the man in the poem can only desire, not fully reach. Moreover, the word would shift our attention away from the man's enacted desire for belief, and onto a specific belief. The reader might or might not share that specific belief, but now the whole process has been sacrificed in favor of familiar dogma. Similarly, Frost refers to the buck as "it" as it gradually takes shape in its swim across the lake. Like the man, the reader goes through a process of interpretation as the facts become more clear: embodiment, it, buck. Only when it is close enough to be unmistakable, only, that is, when we are coerced by the facts, do we learn exactly what "it" is. Then, after the buck's overwhelming physical presence is gone, we and the man in the poem are back in the realm of interpretation. Was the animal's advent mere coincidence, was the animal simply frightened by the man's call, or was the animal a sign, a reply, an indication that the man is not truly alone? It might be all three. His connection with nature, his life in nature, after all, could be the antidote for his loneliness, could even be a sign of some special harmony between man and nature. So the last four lines of the poem – "and that was all" – thrust us all back into the possibility of belief. Is "all" the disappointed complaint of someone who finds he's eaten the last cookie, or is "all" the great inclusive word that brings the believer into unity with nature and with whatever lies above and beyond nature? Faithful to the story it tells, the poem insists upon neither meaning but allows both. Having lived with this poem for nearly thirty years, I can say that for me it sometimes means one, sometimes the other, and often both. Robert Frost, like William James, does not care for dogma or doctrine; he does not even care merely about how it feels to believe. His focus is on how it feels to want to believe, what the human heart does with the shifting, shifty facts of this physical world.

—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

A Pluralistic Universe *draft manuscript page by William James*
(later released in book form in 1909)

Why I Took WJ to The Emergency Room

by Randall Albright

There are times in one's life when one knows one is going to have to do a great deal of waiting. Being with my other half, by then unhappily ensconced in the fetal position with a nearly 105° degree fever, intravenously fed, totally uncommunicative but wanting me there in the Emergency Room of a hospital last summer—I knew this would be one of those times. And so I had grabbed for a book that could perhaps give me solace before we stepped into the cab to take us to the hospital: *A Pluralistic Universe*.

First, I love the way either James or his original publisher set up his Table of Contents. Broad brushstrokes add up to a kind of conceptual shorthand that does not particularly match what I expect on the pages to which they refer. From Lecture One, for example, I saw intriguing topics. Philosophers seek to make the world less strange, picking this, discarding that, along the way. There is, however, a nasty tendency to get overly technical, which at times makes me feel like “Is it worth it?”

The abuse of technicality is seen in the infrequency with which, in philosophical literature, metaphysical questions are discussed directly on their own merits. Almost always they are handled as if through a heavy woolen curtain, the veil of previous philosophers' opinions. Alternatives are wrapped in proper names, as if it were indecent for a truth to go naked. (PU, 15)

Also in the Table of Contents, James talks about how pantheism identifies man with God. So I opened to that page (PU, 25). I see underlines and squiggles from times before, and move on:

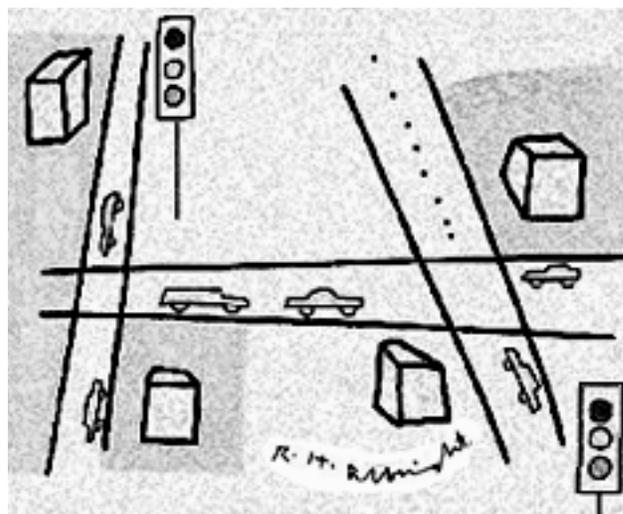
Page upon page in scholastic books go to prove that God is in so sense implicated by his creative act, or involved in his creation. (PU, 26)

Further along I meet this:

I have been told by Hindoos that the great obstacle to the spread of Christianity in their country is the puerility of our dogma of creation. It has not sweep and infinity enough to meet the requirements of even the illiterate natives of India. (PU, 29)

William's sense of humor between sharp, serious barbs comforted me in the Emergency Room, somehow taking me outside of the crisis of the moment, seeing the Divine Comedy of it all.

Men are once for all so made that they prefer a rational world to believe in and to live in. But rationality has at least four dimensions, intellectual, aesthetic, moral, and practical; and to find a world rational to the maximal degree in all these respects simultaneously is no easy matter. Intellectually, the world of mechanical materialism is the most rational, for we subject its events to mathematical calculation. But the mechanical world is ugly, as arithmetic is ugly, and it is non-moral. Morally, the theistic world is rational enough, but full of intellectual frustrations. The practical world of affairs, in its turn, so supremely rational to the politician, the military man, or the man of conquering business-faculty that he never would vote to change the type of it, is irrational to moral and artistic temperaments; so that whatever demand for rationality we find satisfied by a philosophic hypothesis, we are liable to find some other demand for rationality unsatisfied by the same hypothesis. (PU, 112)



The preceding picture is a view of my old hometown of Los Angeles. Let me now try to analyze it according to the at least four dimensions which James defines. The “intellectual” dimension produced an efficient mechanical intersection in this and countless other examples of functional urban planning. “Aesthetically,” I find it tasteless. “Morally,” I note how everyone is in their own isolated car, getting from this place to that, unencumbered by the nuisance that may be entailed by getting involved with each other. However, they may be going somewhere where they will be needed, and this transition is but a necessary flight toward that destination. “Practically,” I have seen this system work, world-wide, particularly if everybody obeys the streetlights, and nobody gets jumped by a frustrated terrorist who may interfere with the rules of the road.

In short, my own view of intersections such as this remind me of one of my favorite poems on progress by Arthur Rimbaud: “Ville” from *Illuminations* (circa 1875)

Why I Took WJ to The Emergency Room by Randall Albright

super-imposed with a film called *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance* (1983), produced and directed by Godfrey Reggio¹, which had music by Philip Glass moving at such high motion that I could never bear to see it again. Superstition may be eliminated, at last. However, these lives of people must be a million times smaller now that the modern world has gotten to them, and to which they have unwittingly submitted, riding some escalator of life and watching the waterfalls in an indoor shopping mall, thinking that this is living. Henry David Thoreau once commented that most “live their lives in quiet desperation.” But that is merely one point of view. Aren’t many quite happy, merely driving through the grids, without even knowing how un-grid-like their *real* lives are, as well as to others with whom they are connected, or could possibly be connected?

If there be no outside witness, a thing can appear only to itself, the eases or parts to their several selves temporarily, the all or whole to itself eternally. Different ‘selves’ thus break out inside of what the absolutist insists to be intrinsically one fact. But how can what is actually one be effectively so many? Put your witnesses anywhere, whether outside or inside of what is witnessed, in the last resort your witnesses must on idealistic principles be distinct, for what is witnessed is different. (PU, 202)

Niels Bohr and Albert Einstein had at least one disagreement, despite agreeing on other matters, as documented by Tor Nørrestrand (UI, 307). No matter if it is merely a part of myself, or a part of my larger environment to which my self is reacting, both Bohr and James ask that I somehow account for my presence in the experience. What was I looking for? What did I find? If I looked at it from another point of view, would my contempt for one side of an experience be eroded by my appreciation from another? Am I merely a spectator or an actor on the stage?

I fear that I am expressing myself with terrible obscurity—some of you, I know, are groaning over the logic-chopping. Be a pluralist or be a monist, you say, for heaven’s sake, no matter which, so long as you stop arguing. It reminds one of Chesterton’s epigram that the only thing that ever drives human beings insane is logic. But whether I be sane or insane, you cannot fail, even tho you be transcendentalists yourselves, to recognize to some degree by my trouble the difficulties that beset monistic idealism. What boots it to call the parts and the whole the same body of experience, when in the same breath you have to say that the all ‘as such’ means one sort of experience and each part ‘as such’ means another? (PU, 202-3)

Back in the Emergency Room, a spinal tap had been ordered, and was now being analyzed, in part because of my friend’s complaint that he could not stand the light, all of which seemed green. They were checking for bacterial meningitis, a very serious disease. However, I also knew that fear of light is something that happens whenever he simply comes down with a bad case of the flu. To this date, my other half blames the disease on Amtrak, which he had been taking back from New York City, and which had overly air-conditioned cars that day while also being several hours late for arrival in Boston. To me, his symptoms seemed to tie in with his almost clock-like summer flu symptoms, this time driven to an extreme.

Perhaps the funniest part of that late evening was when he was curled up, with several blankets on top of him because he was so cold. An orderly came by and pointed to him, asking one of the doctors in a heavy foreign accent, “Coffin?” This was finally enough for my beloved to pull the T-shirt off from over his head and say, “No! I’m not dead!” The orderly then simply continued down the hall and went about his business.

We live forward, we understand backward, said a danish writer [Kierkegaard is the usual suspect]; and to understand life by concepts is to arrest its movement, cutting it up into bits as if with scissors, and immobilizing these in our logical herbarium where, comparing them as dried specimens, we can ascertain which of them statically includes or excludes each other. This treatment supposes life to have already accomplished itself, for the concepts, being so many views taken after the fact, are retrospective and post mortem. Nevertheless we can draw conclusions from them and project them into the future. (PU, 244)

Finally, the vaguely conclusive test results were interpreted as “probable viral meningitis,” a much less serious disease, and one that indicated only a generic antibiotic prescription, which was filled and taken as prescribed. My other half was *lucky*. He did not have to be admitted to the hospital. He did not die that very night.

The bill for the Emergency Room visit was \$2,500. *Luckily* we have health insurance, so my other half only had to pay \$25. Still, I was frankly appalled at the “sticker price.”

—Randall Albright lives in Boston. He is particularly concerned with deteriorating subway service on the MBTA Green Line and lack of bicycle racks on Mass. Ave. these days. His e-mail is albright@world.std.com

Bibliography

- PU: William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909) [Bison Books reprint edition, 1996, keeping the original Longmans typesetting]
UI: Tor Nørrestrand, *The User Illusion, Cutting Consciousness Down to Size* (1991) [Translated by Jonathan Sydenham, 1998; Penguin Books 1999 edition]

¹ Special thanks to Thom Carlson for director/producer info.

William James Assn. in CA

by Randall Albright

There is a *William James Association* in California, which honors James as the name for their organization of various community involvement activities for young people. I found out about the existence of this association over the Memorial Day weekend, when Sara Holmes Boutelle passed away, and was eulogized in a front-page obituary of the Santa Cruz Sentinel. Boutelle was a member of the Association.

Boutelle wrote *Julia Morgan, Architect* (1988), and had devoted almost fourteen years to researching, writing, and lecturing on Morgan previous to the publication of the book, as well as continued work on popularizing the works of Morgan after the book was printed. While Morgan is best known for her work as the architect of William Randolph Hearst's San Simeon, now open to the public as a property of the State of California, she was also the first woman to earn a certificate in architecture from the prestigious Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1901, and did other work such as buildings at Mills College in Oakland. Both Boutelle and Morgan remind me of this quote, which I sometimes use to refute Foucault:

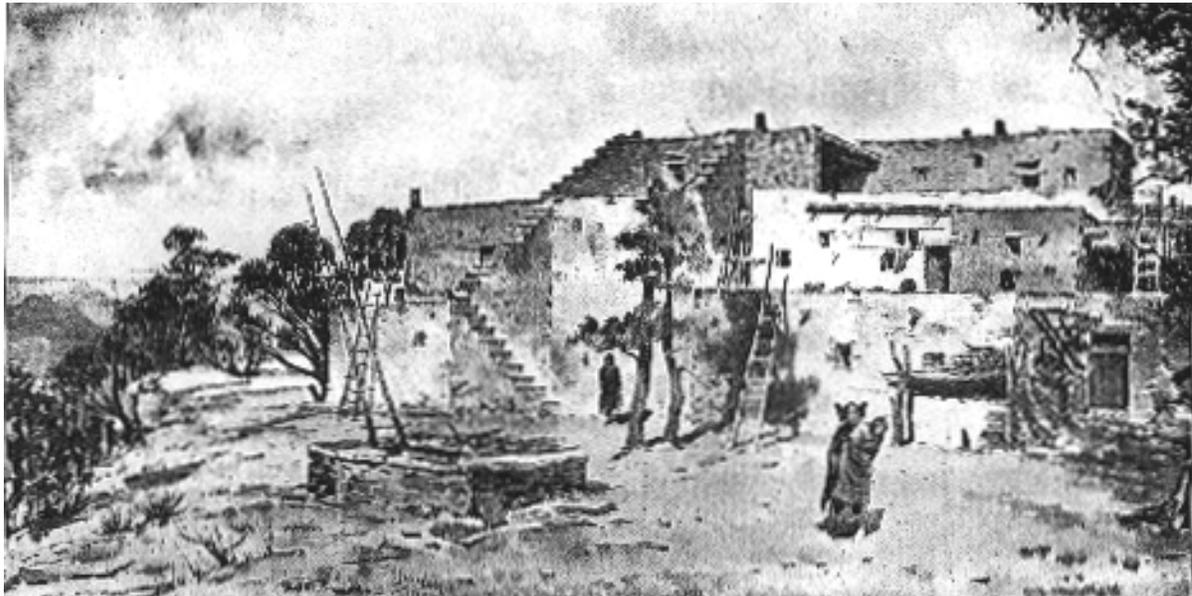
To conclude: The evolutionary view of history, when it denies the vital importance of individual initiative, is, then, an utterly vague and unscientific conception, a lapse from modern scientific determinism into the most ancient oriental fatalism.

—William James from the “Great Men and their Environment” essay, p. 245 in *The Will to Believe and other essays in popular philosophy* (1897, Longmans)

Morgan was a friend of Bernard Maybeck. Maybeck was an admirer of Ralph Waldo Emerson, to whose works he was introduced in high school. He and a group of architects found a mentor in Joseph Worcester, Swedenborgian minister of the Church of the New Jerusalem in San Francisco during the early 1890s. The architecture of the Church, designed by A.C. Schweinfurth for Worcester in 1894, displays a rustic charm which Maybeck also used in much of his own work.¹

For information on the Wm. James Assn., who seem to know sadly little about William, their address is 303 Potrero, Suite 12B, Santa Cruz, CA 95060. E-mail = wja@cruzio.com

¹ Sally B. Woodbridge, *Bernard Maybeck, Visionary Architect* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992), p. 16, 24-25



Grand Canyon Jan 4. 06

Dearest A — After mailing my package of cards to you last night, I went on to this Hopi or Moki lodge, and found it most delicious. Four strong faced small footed men danced to a weird chant, stomping their feet on the ground & shaking rattles in their hands while the wives sat round spinning, and the babies looking on. Their civilization was evidently a very harmonious and stable one. I wish that we had all been there, and for evening purposes lived in a Hopi lodge. For day time the windows are too small. W.J.

(William enclosed a flyer with this letter to his son Alexander, which included the drawing above, called “The Hopi House, Grand Canyon, Ariz.” The artist, as best as I can figure out, was T.P. Sauerwey, dated 1904. — RHA)

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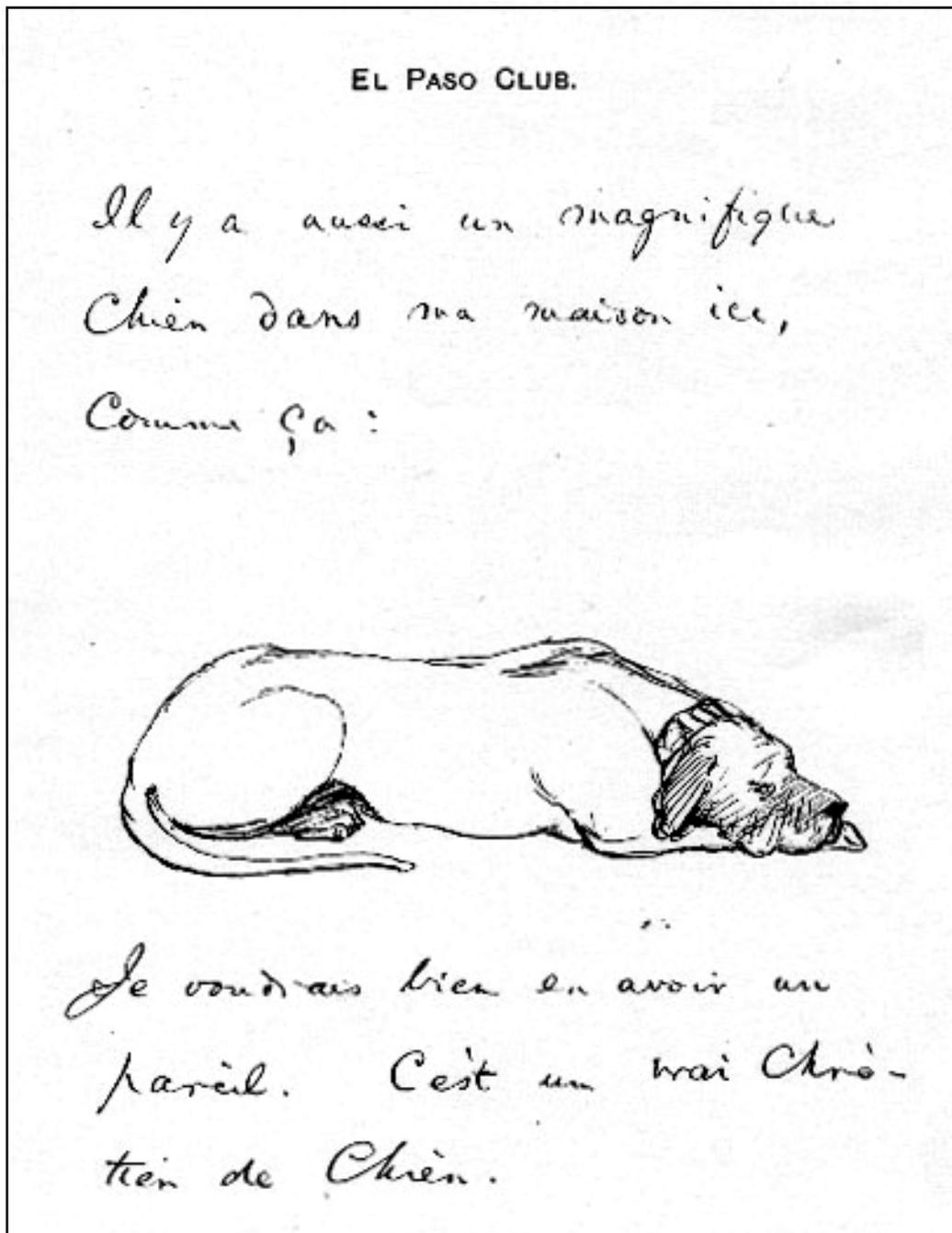
Un Vrai Chrétien de Chien

*Page of a Letter from William to his son, Alexander
dated Aug. 8, with postmark received in Chocorua, N.H. looking like Aug. 12, 1903*

Suggested translation:

There is also a magnificent dog in my house here, which looks like this:
I would very much like to have a dog like this. It is truly a good citizen of a dog.

Note: Although the literal translation of "chrétien" is "Christian," my *Langenscheidt Standard French Dictionary* (1988) gives "good citizen" as a figurative second definition. Although both the original French and James's usage can imply, to my early 21st century ear, anti-Semitism as well as other anti-other-religious (and non-religious) beliefs, I prefer to think of the term as a mere vestige of an earlier, less inclusive era. —RHA



Jorge Luis Borges and WJ

by Jaime Nubiola

The year of the centennial of the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges is probably the right time to exhume one of the links that this universal writer had with William James. In 1945, Emecé, a publisher from Buenos Aires, printed a Spanish translation of William James's book *Pragmatism*, with a foreword by Jorge Luis Borges. The book had a limited distribution. Years later, for unknown reasons, Borges refused to include that foreword in his compilation of prefaces.

The foreword, under the title *Nota preliminar (Preliminary Note)*, was scarcely four pages long, and was followed by a short biography of James and a list of his works. In this text Borges described James as an "admirable writer"¹ to the point that he was able to make attractive such a reasonable way of thinking as the pragmatism of the first two decades of our century, with "halfway solutions" and "quiet hypothesis". I want to excerpt two paragraphs from that foreword, the first and the last.

Coleridge observes that all men are born Aristotelians or Platonists. The latter feel that ideas are realities: the former, that they are generalizations. For the latter, language is nothing but a system of arbitrary symbols: for the former, it is the map of the universe. The Platonist knows that the universe is somehow a cosmos, an order; that order, for the Aristotelian, can be an error or a fiction of our partial knowledge. Across the latitudes and the epochs, the two immortal antagonists change their name and language: one is Parmenides, Plato, Anselm, Leibnitz, Kant, Francis Bradley; the other, Heraclitus, Aristotle, Roscelin, Locke, Hume, William James. (...) From 1889, this lucid tradition is enriched with William James. Like Bergson, he fights against positivism and against idealist monism. He advocates, like Bergson, in favor of immortality and freedom.²

The lucidity of the analysis of the history of philosophy contained in this paragraph —whose first part appears also in his *El ruiseñor de Keats*³— is truly impressive. In that ancient controversy Borges gives an undeniable advantage to the Platonists because "the conjectures that they propound are singular, incredi-

ble, and unforgettable". Those who battle against them run the risk of appearing to be representatives of mere, insipid common sense, but James avoided brilliantly that danger: he was, Borges writes, as astonishing as the Hegelians Bradley or Royce, but much more readable: "Like Schopenhauer, like Hume, like Berkeley, like Descartes, James was an admirable writer."

Nevertheless, these praises do not lessen the conviction of the reader that Borges places himself in the other stream. The last paragraph is a solid ground for this conviction:

The Universe of the materialists suggests an infinite sleepless fabric; the one of the Hegelians a circular labyrinth of vain mirrors, jail of a person who believes to be many, or of many who believe to be one.

while the Universe of James is a river that grows incessantly. "Pragmatism —it is said at the end of the *Nota preliminar*— does not want to restrict or to lessen the richness of the world; it wants to grow as the world"⁴.

What is the reason for this fundamental discrepancy between Borges and James? It seems to me that, following William James, it can be traced back to a basic difference of opposite temperaments or types of mental make-up: while a radical metaphysical pessimism nourishes all the Borgesean work, the work of James and with it all the American pragmatism is nourished by a radical metaphysical optimism.

Perhaps Borges, as one of the Immortals, could now raise up his voice and answer to me that no, that he was not a pessimist, but merely a well-informed optimist. With great respect, I would try to reply to him in turn that his skepticism in a philosopher would be an abdication of our personal responsibility towards humankind and its future.

—Jaime Nubiola is professor of philosophy at the University of Navarra, Spain. In the preparation of this text he is indebted to Sara F. Barrena, Ruth Breeze, and Mónica Lesaca. His e-mail address is jnubiola@unav.es

1. J. L. Borges, "Nota preliminar", en W. James, *Pragmatismo. Un nombre nuevo para algunos viejos modos de pensar*, Emecé, Buenos Aires, 1945, p. 10.

2. J. L. Borges, "Nota preliminar", p. 10.

3. J. L. Borges, *Other Inquisitions (1937-1952)*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1964, p. 123.

4. J. L. Borges, "Nota preliminar", p. 12.

lady in our house has two little dogs, - also females. One looks like this:



the other like this:



They are both very small and however had 2 months old, bigger than themselves, thus:



Daiach is English

superior,

being the finest dog to be had in Boston. I liked to know that story you wrote about buying the breed. It shows that the grand father was a wolf or a coyote or a pack of or some other kind of

would dog - for they buy themselves so as to be able to go to it again, but our tame dogs get so much food from the kitchen that they don't need to hunt it, and soon outgrow the habit. They call such Rabbits "sistincts." When you are older you can read all about them. - This life that we lead here is a town life, and makes me long for the country where I can lie on my back on the grass.

Dogs and Instincts

2 pages of a letter from William to his son, Alexander, dated Aug. 7, 1899, from Nauheim (a German Spa), less the end of a sentence at the beginning and other stuff at the end. —RHA

Nature and the Sacred: An Open Question

by Phil Oliver

(adapted from an August 1999 address to the Greater Nashville Unitarian Universalist Congregation)

Does a naturalistic, evolutionary understanding of life allow room for the sacred dimension of experience? The pragmatic tradition of William James and John Dewey suggests an answer very much in the spirit of Unitarian Universalism.

Thank you for this opportunity to clarify my own thinking about the connections between the subject of my formal expertise, American Philosophy, and that of my *other* instinctive spiritual sympathy, Unitarian Universalism. I'd never really *studied* the commitments of Unitarians, and had only begun to declare myself one a couple of years ago when—inspired by a sermon—I impulsively “signed the book.” Then a little later, in all innocence, I professed my new allegiance on Belmont University's application form. The consequences of my candor were appalling but instructive. Belmont's administration rescinded the teaching position its philosophy department had offered, on the shamelessly explicit grounds of my Unitarian affiliation. It shouldn't have surprised me to be reminded that school and church politics, like all politics, can deflate the spirit; certainly they can mock the spirit of impulse and innocence. But this episode had a happier ending than it might have: the student newspaper reported my situation and many students responded, in tones of outrage and embarrassment. The spirit of openness and diversity is alive and well among students, if not administrators.

My wife is the churchgoer of longest habit in our family and, as the bumper sticker on her car affirms, “[her] heart belongs to Unity.” Unity and Unitarianism share much in common, but the differences are striking too. *My* heart belongs, if ambivalently, to philosophy; and my intuition has been that Unitarian philosophy comes pretty close to my own. But as I say, I'd never really looked into that hunch very deeply. This occasion was just the push I needed to do some serious soul-searching and reflecting about the sources of my attraction to *this* wisdom tradition, and in the process make explicit my unexamined sense of important connections between American Philosophy and Unitarian Universalism.

By American Philosophy I mean preeminently that of William James (1842-1910) and John Dewey (1859-1952). Jeanne mentioned having known Dewey's granddaughter Joanna at Harvard Divinity School, and

described her as put off by her grandpa's “terrifying atheism.” In fact I wouldn't describe Dewey as an atheist at all, still less as terrifying. He was reared in the tradition of New England Congregationalism and Emersonian individualism, which he filled out with a spontaneous communitarian sensibility and “natural piety” of his own. If you've never read his little book *A Common Faith*—just about his only *little* book, out of dozens— I hope you will someday (it's just been reissued by Yale U. Press for \$10). Read it together with Buehrens and Church's *A Chosen Faith*, and see if you don't agree with me that Dewey had the soul of a Unitarian. His was a long life of heroic devotion to ideals in action; his perception of our mutual ties was profoundly spiritual. The epitaph on his gravestone, on the campus of the University of Vermont in Burlington, comes from the concluding paragraph of that book. *A Common Faith* concludes:

“The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it.”¹

Dewey believed that our happiness is best secured by a vivid, conduct-informing consciousness of our inherent ties to one another and to organic nature, ties which impose very definite limits but open as well onto a vast prospect capable of firing the imagination with the renewal of hope. Dewey wrote:

“The community of causes and consequences in which we, together with those not born, are enmeshed is the widest and deepest symbol of the mysterious totality of being we call the universe... the matrix within which our ideal aspirations are born and bred.”²

The spirit of social service in Dewey is tightly bound with his natural piety, the feeling that despite our considerable differences we all share a fundamental humanity with everyone who ever has or ever will tread the earth. We've received a precious inheritance of invaluable learned lessons, instructive insights, and celebrated enjoyments. We're links in a chain, strands in a web, integuments of an expanding circle of life, overlapping shingles of the human abode.³ The family

1. *A Common Faith* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1980), 87. Originally published 1934.

2. *Ibid.*, 85

of humankind may be only a metaphor, even granting the universal relatedness of the human genome. But it's our most powerful metaphor. "We are at least all in the same boat traversing the same turbulent ocean."⁴

Like Emerson, and like most UUs, James and Dewey thought "each of us a potential harbinger of meaning,"⁵ affirmed "the inherent worth and dignity of every person" and "respect for the interdependent web of all existence,"⁶ (we're all "syllables in human nature's total message," said James) and they too found "no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge; religion and the world; the sacred and the secular."⁷

Philosopher Tom Alexander echoes James⁸ in saying that "all our philosophies begin with a great aversion and subsequently we find what we are constructively for. I don't know that a philosophy that begins with either an aversion for religion or for 'the secular' can come to grips with what experience is about." So many of our aversions are really confusions based on unfortunate, uncritical linguistic convention. The definition of "secular" as "mundane and everyday," for instance, rather than as earth-centered and communitarian in the sense indicated by Dewey's epiphany, is just such a convention, a bad intellectual habit that tricks us into opposing the secular or worldly to spiritual life.

James liked to point to the example of the old romantic Wordsworth as one who found a "limitless significance in natural things" just as did Whitman in all things human. "Think of Wordsworth's description at the beginning of *The Prelude*," prompts Alexander: "he is describing the natural environment of his boyhood, especially the music of the little stream Derwent that ran by his house and one escapade in particular, stealing away in a rowboat at night and coming upon the mountains which intimated to him the presence of divine things in nature. How could we ever grasp such experience as 'secular'?"⁹ We never could, if authentic spirituality must exclude all experiences of exceptional personal significance and spiritual resonance not already confidently assigned to supernatural sources; if, in other words, the secular must not be sacred.

But why must it not? As Wordsworth character-

ized his own "everyday" experiences they clearly held a significance of the highest value for him, and would only appear "mundane" to an unimaginative, unsympathetic external observer. Each of us can notice and cherish a similar relation to our own "worldly" experiences whether we imagine a supernatural explanation for them or not. For James and Dewey, so-called secular life-- life in nature and society, day by day-- is intrinsically spiritual. The recognition of this quality of our natural lives, the life-quicken perception of meaning or significance in the world at our feet-- not literally in Wordsworth's lakes or mountains, necessarily, but for each of us in something or other-- is a spiritual awakening.

I want to mention two other points which elaborate James's and Dewey's philosophical approach and which I think mirror a Unitarian spiritual sensibility: One is the attitude of meliorism, a cast of mind which rejects both simple optimism and desperate pessimism and which carries a sense of life's parts and moments as all vitally connected but still radically insecure and "externally related," their "interdependence" or ultimate unity depending more on our volitional exertions than on any impersonal Rational Necessity. This felt imperative to try and make things gradually but progressively better in a world so acutely in need of improvement and so uncertain of it is the core of a pragmatic faith, a "religion of humanity." In theological terms it rejects, like Voltaire's *Candide*, the strange Leibnizian theodicy which pretends that nothing in God's creation *could* be better. If the optimist believes this and the pessimist fears it, the meliorist reviles it as "spiritual chloroform." And meliorism rejects the idea of universal salvation in advance of our efforts. "The world may be saved," said James, "on condition that its parts shall do their best. But shipwreck in detail, or even on the whole, is among the open possibilities."¹⁰ Safe steering is not guaranteed; passengers, skipper, and crew are only human. Those who take comfort in the thought of a supernatural or transcendent God at the helm are welcome to their consolation, but the prudent course is to paddle our own canoe. That's why we find so much emphasis in Dewey on the "continuous human community in which we are a link," and in James on the image of life as a stream or chain. "To begin with, how can things so insecure as the successful experiences of this world afford a stable anchorage? A chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and life is after all a chain..."¹¹ James means this on several levels, beginning with our most elemental momentary awareness of the chain of our breathing, to the chains of generations, to the most sophisticated cosmic and

3. Annie Dillard invokes the shingle metaphor to good effect in *For the Time Being* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

4. *A Common Faith*, "The Human Abode," 84.

5. Buehrens & Church, xxi (intro)

6. *Ibid.* (1986 General Assembly statement), xxiv-xxv

7. *Ibid.*, xxii

8. Tom Alexander, Dewey list, August 6, 1999

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 73 [WJ II, 1054]

11. *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 116 [WJ II, 128-9]

evolutionary speculations on the millennial human prospect. "The really vital question for us all is, What is this world going to be? What is life eventually to make of itself?"¹² That's the biggest *open question* of all, *conscious* nature's question, as much *ours* as anyone's past or future. We personify nature, and personalize her. Our lives are intensely and richly personal, built on our respective and shared cares and hopes. Nature is personal, too. That's an Emersonian and a Unitarian conviction, is it not? (snide criticism notwithstanding, "Unitarian conviction" is not an oxymoron). Life is personal, is best lived at first-hand with trust in our own perceptions, confidence in our own capacities, fidelity to our own dreams. But "personal" doesn't have to mean *selfish*. Nothing's more personal to parents than the welfare of their children. Don't we all have a personal stake in the welfare of our successors in the great chain of life? In itself, evolution cannot make us care about the long-term human prospect; that's a result of subjective factors like temperament. But it's an indispensable condition of our caring if we mean to relate it to purposive action such as parenting, itself a fertile ground of transcendence for some of us. Philosopher Daniel Dennett makes this fundamentally humane point: "One thing that does make us unique as a species is that for the last five or ten thousand years we have been the beneficiaries of conscious planning by our parents and their parents and the cultures in which we've resided. Today we are actively concerning ourselves with what the world is going to be like in the future. We have strong beliefs about this. They play a role in what *Homo sapiens* is going to be like a thousand years from now."¹³

So the open question about life's grand denouement is inspiring for those of us who share James's sense of earthly things as moving into the unsettled new country of an undecided future, of a universe in which possibilities and choices are not illusory. Like Dewey, James was convinced that individuals acting together and alone contribute-- sometimes decisively-- to unfolding reality.

The uplifting prospect of a cooperative, responsible, yet finite intelligence, ours, caring deeply enough about the faraway fortunes of remote posterity to identify strongly with them makes evolution, biological and cultural, the *sine qua non* of transcendence for some. The impact of the idea of evolution on humanity's self-image, to date and to come, cannot be overstated; nor can its influence on James and American philosophy in general. It's a big part of what is meant by the "cultural transmission" of values, inviting us to imagine

that the influence we succeed in spreading among contemporaries and immediate successors-- including our children-- may ripple through the ages and make a difference for more distant descendants. The coeval reflection that we have been shaped by the past is perhaps more unsettling, but James shares Dewey's enthusiasm for the speculation that "acts engaged in by individuals who are mere specks on the cosmic scale can have an infinite reach'...because the small effort which we can put forth is in turn connected with an infinity of events that support it."¹⁴

In *Pragmatism* James referred to his earlier *Varieties of Religious Experience* as making a case for God, but he himself was no traditional theist. The case he made was for the idea of God in the lives of others, for others' right to claim God's reality as they perceived it. But on his view it's the quest "not [for] God, but more life" which is the most natural human impulse, and the ultimate source of religious variety. And, as James informed a correspondent in 1901, his own sense of life was most inspired by what he couldn't help regarding as the progressive epic of evolution. "I believe myself to be (probably) permanently incapable of believing the Christian scheme of vicarious salvation, and wedded to a more continuously evolutionary mode of thought."¹⁵ And, "if there be a God, he is no absolute all-experencer, but simply the experencer of widest actual conscious span... [this is] essentially a social philosophy..."¹⁶ Here is real commitment to the communion of human ends: a commitment not unlike that of Emerson and Whitman, which dares speak the name of God in the most worldly of temples. For James, we may all aspire to be experiencers of wide conscious span. That does not mean that we can each be God ourselves, in the derisively anti-humanistic sense; but that we can throw off the narrow egoism of a constricted self-conception and choose a wider identity, one which celebrates the links in life's chain. Like the poet Edwin Arlington Robinson, James seems to have believed the earth a "spiritual kindergarten in which we're trying to spell 'God' with the wrong blocks." But he was too much the pluralist and democrat ever to instruct others in what they ought to believe about God or anything else. That's "personal."

James considered philosophies "religious" which reflect and support a personal style of confronting life and enable their possessors to act, hope, and dream instead of withdrawing in resignation and despair. These may be supernatural but they may just as well not be. So may his ubiquitous talk of subliminality and "a wider self through which saving experiences come."

¹² *Pragmatism* [WJ II, 540]

¹³ Wim Kayzer, *A Glorious Accident: Understanding Our Place in the Cosmic Puzzle* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1997), 240.

¹⁴ Boisvert, *Rethinking Our Time*, 141

¹⁵ Letters II, 149

¹⁶ *Meaning of Truth*, 72 [WJ II, 891-2]

The surface spookiness of such talk is much alighted when we recall that for James the “self” is substantially, naturally constituted by relations including not only those already established and recognized but significantly by others both anticipated and unforeseen. “Every bit of us at every moment is part and parcel of a wider self, it quivers along various radii like the wind-rose on a compass, and the actual in it is continuously one with possibles not yet in our present sight.”¹⁷

There is a more pointed open question, the question not only of nature’s destiny on the grand scale and in its personal instantiations in you and me and our descendants. It’s the question of what, in a dynamic, evolving nature of undetermined possibilities-- a nature whose products include persons, hence (ex hypothesi) choices really still to be made and outcomes really still to be affected by them; a nature, *Time Magazine* told us last week (8/23/’99), in which “human intervention” may now succeed natural selection as the great motor of evolutionary movement-- what in such a nature is sacred? Professor Dennett’s answer, in *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*¹⁸, is that life itself is sacred. I’m sure all of us here agree with that, but we can be more specific. We have to be. We don’t all venerate the same things, not everything is venerable, but each of us cherishes something or someone; the more, and more varied, our passions, the richer our lives. Experience is sacred, the days (said Emerson) are Gods: for they keep churning up new passions, fresh perceptions, unforeseen possibilities of connection with others and within.

The short message is that *we* make the meanings of our lives, sometimes with the sublimity of a Wordsworthian ramble or the seeming absurdity of what may strike others as a small and useless passion. In *Manhattan* Woody Allen made a list of things that for him made life worth living, things like Louis Armstrong’s recording of “Potato-head Blues,” Cezanne’s “incredible apples and pears,” and Willie Mays. “The heart wants what it wants,” poor Woody would say in another context years later. It *wants*, not always appropriately, sometimes scandalously, but inexorably. We all ought to make our lists, and to recognize that others have theirs, too. Are such things sacred? Not in absolute terms, but in terms of how we actually live: *personally and concretely*. Is that sacred enough? Philosopher Ray Boisvert has an answer for those who would sequester our spiritual devotions on an impersonal, airy pedestal: “In *The Brothers Karamazov* Father Zossima tells us about his brother who died young after a religious conversion. The brother’s last words

to Zossima were not, ‘make sure you go to church,’ or ‘make sure you become one of the special people who can come into direct contact with the sacred,’ or even ‘pray for me.’ Rather, he said, quite simply ‘run and play now, enjoy life for me too.’ This was consistent with what he had earlier said to others: ‘Let’s go straight into the garden, walk and play there, love, appreciate, and kiss each other, and glorify life.’”¹⁹

Pragmatic spirituality, like Unitarian Universalism as I understand it, is all about enjoyment and celebration, not exclusion and solemnity. Traditional religious language can be misleading in this context, but still there’s something potentially sacred in the secular that each and all can hope to enjoy.

When we say that life itself is sacred, don’t we mean that life on this planet, in the “secular” world, spools endless lists of things-- existent or as yet only dreamed of--we can each consent to live for? This evolving, pluralistic world is full of sacred objects and enjoyments; in such a world the wisest words-- directed to those who would sanctify a single short list of admissibly-sacred forms-- are James’s: “Hands off: neither the whole of truth, nor the whole of good, is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands.”²⁰ What in nature is sacred? In our open universe, that’s a gloriously open question. Thank you.

—Phil Oliver originally adapted this from an address made on August 29, 1999. His e-mail address is POliver826@aol.com



Ireland Sun Rays by Bay James (1999)

¹⁷. *Pluralistic Universe*, 131 [WJ II, 762]

¹⁸. Daniel Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (NY: Touchstone, 1995)

¹⁹. Ray Boisvert, post to Dewey list, August 10, 1999

²⁰. *Talks to Teachers*, 149 [Writings, 645]

The Possibility For Tragic Obligations

By D. Micah Hester

Duties, obligations, normative claims, moral imperatives: these words fill the pages of philosophy/ethics texts, particularly since the beginning of the so-called “modern” period. Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Mill, Ross, Rawls, and so forth, argue over these terms, concepts, and activities. According to many of these historical figures, ethical activity must be based on “following the good,” “protecting human rights,” or “doing one’s duty.”

Of course, lived experience is often more complex and difficult than much of what ethical theory would suggest. Decisions we confront everyday have their overt and covert ethical components, and the formulae suggested by ethicists rarely come into play. Shall we go out to eat with friends or stay at home and save money? Should we save all our spare money or give to charity? Must we give to charity or help our friends and family? Ethical theory rarely comes to mind when weighing our options, trying to answer these and similar questions. Quite simply, we “muddle through.”

Bioethics, as a of sub-discipline of ethics, attempts to do on paper and in the hospital what we rarely do in daily practice—viz., bring to bear ethical theory on specific problems of lived experience. Bioethicists reformulate the great thoughts of Kant, Mill, Rawls, and others in order to cover moral questions in the field of medicine and related human endeavors. What can we take from Aristotle in order to help with organ resource allocation? How might G. E. Moore’s ethical theory inform us in relationships between physicians and patients?

My focus in this brief paper is on issues at the end of life which present moral concerns for those who, for reasons of disease, injury, or basic degeneration, find themselves contemplating their deaths. Confronted with strains on relationships, activities, and economics, it is not unreasonable for some to contemplate the question of whether, at a certain point, living actually poses a moral problem and, therefore, whether there might be an actual *duty* to die. Is it the case that some (if not all) persons who are nearing the ends of their lives are at some point in the process obligated to die? Can there ever be such a duty?¹ It is the exploration of these questions which will occupy the balance of this paper.

Before proceeding to the heart of the matter, however, we need to establish some definitions. The con-

cept of “duty” has a long and varied history in ethics, and it is best to establish the sense which will be used herein. By “duty” I do not mean what Kant had in mind. That is, duty is not being driven by some categorical imperative.² Nor do I have W. D. Ross’s qualitative reconstruction of Kant. In general, deontological ethics places a premium on the concept of duty as not just *a* moral concept, but *the* moral concept. Too much, I say, but I will not take up space herein to argue my point.

Rights theorists from Locke to Dworkin also have a concept of duty which might be better stated as “obligation,” so as not to confuse it with the deontologists’ concept. According to these ethicists, obligations are intimately related to rights—viz., where there is a right, there comes a corresponding obligation. However, much hangs, then, on what counts as a right. Are there “inalienable” rights, basic “natural” rights, only legal rights, what? These are questions long debated, and while important, I do not so much wish to discuss them as to put forth an alternative approach to ethical questions concerning obligation and duty.

In lieu of other ethical formulations of duty and obligation, philosopher William James offers his own take on the issue. In his famous essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James says, “[*T*here is some obligation wherever there is a claim... [E]very *de facto* claim creates in so far forth an obligation.”³ According to James, constitutive of a personal claim is a corresponding request that this claim be satisfied in the context in which it arises. James makes no appeal to “rights” nor is his sense of obligation equivalent to deontological duty. He is *not* here using the term “obligation” to denote the *outcome* of an adjudication of claims nor as a that which follows from a moral imperative. That is, he is not saying that simply because I request a car and you have one, you *must* give it to me. Instead, James’s “claim” is descriptive of lived experience wherein individual activities (i.e., claims) place into the conversation of the community the need to recognize said-claims. As pragmatist John Dewey explains, we do in fact deal with claims arising from our activities implicitly:

Some activity proceeds from a man; then it sets up reactions in the surroundings. Others approve, disapprove, protest, encourage, share and resist. Even letting a man alone is a definite response. Envy,

¹ Take as an example comments by former Colorado Governor Richard Lamm defending such a duty.

² Actually, for the devout Kantian this question is moot since there could never be a duty to die. Such a duty would on Kantian terms both violate the concept that all human beings have “intrinsic worth” and have to be the result of a “self-defeating” imperative.

³ William James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” in *The Writings of William James*, John J. McDermott (ed.). (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977), 617.

admiration and imitation are complicities. Neutrality is non-existent.⁴

In a different voice, under a different guise, Dewey and James are saying the same thing. People make claims, perform actions, express desires, and others are, in the broadest sense of the term, obligated. They are obliged to recognize, reconstruct, redirect, and respond to the claim in conjunction with their own activities. This is not “obligation” in the sense proposed by rights theorists, nor is it duty as the deontologists conceive it. This obligation is more basic and pre-critical—I shall call them “*de facto*”—for the pragmatists. In order to move from *de facto* obligations to “ethical” obligations, however, takes critical reflection upon our present and anticipated obligations in order to determine which obligations to fulfill and which to let drop. While *de facto* obligations arise with every expressed desire, a truly ethical obligation only results from the reflective process of weighing competing claims and their corresponding obligations—e.g., an investigation of my desire to have a car versus your desire to keep your money or car.

Ethics then begins with concrete claims that produce existent obligations, but the “moral philosopher” (which we all are) cannot rest there. His/her task is to “invent some manner of realizing your own ideals which will also satisfy the alien demands.”⁵ James implies that in order to arrive at an ethical outcome, we adjudicate the existent obligations, intelligently and imaginatively devising a way to fulfill as many of the obligations as possible. In other words, we must responsibly decide in light of all existent obligations, which to satisfy and which to let slide.⁶

So once more: What James is saying is that there are, *de facto*, obligations placed on us with the manifestation of each new claim. *Every* expressed claim places us in a position which demands we recognize it and react to it. And it is our task to decide which to pursue and which must fall away.

I wish, then, to start with this Jamesean understanding of *de facto* “obligation,” this basic kind of responsibility which arises from everyday desires expressed by ourselves and others. We cannot end there, of course, for we must press on to the end of

moral inquiry in the realization of “ethical” obligation. But from this starting point, *de facto* obligations begin to bring to light a very interesting perspective.

Certainly in the Jamesean sense of the term, we have many obligations. Since we are caught up in social relationships, it would be virtually impossible not to have them. People constantly have desires and make claims which demand our time and energies. Furthermore, we might even extend the notion of a “claim” to “nature” itself—i.e., to the environment at-large.⁷ Natural resources become depleted, species near extinction, and these issues call out for our intervention. Given all this, we could scarcely avoid having *de facto* obligations of one form or another even at the ends of our lives. However, none of this tells us whether there exists any specific obligation to die. That is, simply because we are confronted with a wide variety of claims which demand our attention, this alone does not determine what the resulting obligations actually will be. *That* they are is true enough. *What* they are is still in question.

While this concept of “obligation” can be applied to the lived experience individuals in the full-bloom of health, it too applies equally in the experiences of dying persons. What, then, would be necessary for the existence of an obligation to die? Recalling James, this question is easily answered: The obligation to die can only arise from some concrete claim whose fulfillment entails someone’s death. That is, in order for such an obligation to exist, someone (or something in nature or the environment) must have a desire which in its consequences eventuates in a person’s death. For example, insurance companies cut off payments; hospitals need bed-space; health care staff are stretched to the limit; families suffer emotionally and financially. Each one of these situations can call forth a very real, albeit sometimes cautious, desire for the patient to pass on. Of course, desires that someone die which are set forth by “heartless” insurance companies or “greedy, selfish” relatives may be easily dismissed, but note that even these desires are already post-critical, and not simply *de facto*, in that they are already negatively determined to be “heartless” and/or “greedy.”

For those in the throws of a terminal illness or injury, obligations arising from the claims of loved ones, professionals, and even institutions are acutely felt. Dying persons often clearly recognize the pressures that bear on them concerning their continued

⁴ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, vol. 14 of *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, JoAnn Boydston (ed.). (Carbondale, IL: So. Ill. Univ. Press), 16.

⁵ James, 623.

⁶ I will not herein give any further account of moral inquiry. This is best left to another paper. I might direct the reader, however, to the ethical and logical writings of John Dewey for a more complete account of these deliberative activities. For example, see Dewey’s books *How We Think*, *Human Nature and Conduct*, and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* to name but a few.

⁷ James himself would most likely not extend the concept of *de facto* obligation to include claims by the environment. More precisely, the environment, for James, cannot make claims. However, in light of a great deal of environmental theory and my own prejudices, I will assert the possibility of a claim-making environment in order to make the point that *de facto* obligations are with us in virtually every aspect of our lives.

existence, pressures from family, HMOs, nurses, economics, etc. And still others who are (for whatever reason) incapacitated to the point of not being able to process such demands (the neurologically demented, permanently vegetative state patients, etc.) may, nonetheless, be the focus of even stronger claims on their lives (or, should I say, deaths).

It seems quite clear, then, that many individuals have, at least, a *de facto* obligation to die. However, this fact alone does not settle the *moral* issue. As a matter of fact, this fact actually helps to highlight the need for moral deliberation because while many individuals have an obligation to die, it is not yet clear whether in the fullest ethical sense of the term they “ought” to die. This fuller sense *begins* with Jamesean-type obligations *but does not fully take hold* until it is shown to be the end of a complete, reflective inquiry into all standing and anticipated obligations present to the individuals who are affected by these obligations.

The tasks at this point then are to evaluate any *de facto* obligations to die in light of other existing obligations. Claims on bed-space, for money, or by insurance carriers compete with the desires of loved ones, not to mention the historical obligations of physicians to “do no harm.” However, to the extent that no over-riding obligations trump an existing obligation to die within the context in which it arises, someone might find him/herself “ethically” obligated, in the deepest sense of that term, to do so. That is, we may find very real cases where patients upon thorough reflection are better taking a path which leads to a quick, immanent death, than one that lets them “hang on.” On the other hand, if other conflicting obligations prove to be more important, more worthy of pursuit—i.e., more valuable—no ethical “duty” (if I may use that word) to die will exist.

Now, unlike Kantian moral theory, the pragmatic sense of obligations does not presuppose a categorical duty to which desires and actions must conform in order to be considered ethical. Nor does it contain any prohibitive restrictions on “acceptable” or “unacceptable” obligations *a priori*. Thus, an obligation to die is a very real *possibility* (though its *probability* may still be dubious). And the decision as to whether a particular obligation to die is an ethical obligation will be based primarily on consequences and not intentions. However, contra the utilitarians, these consequences need not conform to a pre-defined teleological “good” narrowly defined where it becomes simply a matter of “greatest good for the greatest number.” These terms need a great deal of reconstruction and naturalization if they are to function pragmatically. The context in which any specifically felt obligation to die arises will help dictate the uniquely defined good that only comes to exist as the outcome of our reflective activities.

Thus, to come back to our original question of

whether there exists a duty to die, the answer is a qualified “no.” There may be many different kinds of *de facto* obligations to die, and it is possible that *some* of these may be reconstructed into a variety of ethical obligations to die. That is, each obligation is itself unique to the situation in which it arises, and the inquiry which transforms that “mere” obligation into an ethical “duty” will itself create a uniquely felt duty to die.

However, it is important that my point not be misunderstood. My argument does not entail the necessary existence of an “ethical” obligation or “duty” to die, but neither does it entail its necessary prohibition. Given the virtually infinite number of situations in which dying persons find themselves, it is quite possible that many are obligated to die in the Jamesean, or *de facto*, sense and some, though fewer, of them find themselves obligated in the fuller, “ethical” sense.

In other words, my argument here is that we cannot rule out the very real, yet tragic, possibility that some people in their unique situations in this world may have an ethical obligation to die. For anyone to pronounce *a priori* that a duty to die does or does not exist is foolhardy, at best, and bad ethics, at worst. We limit the possibilities within the human condition whenever we make such pronouncements. This is not to say that such an ethical obligation would not be tragic, but in our limited, finite existence with our limited, finite powers, tragedy is all too much a part of our lives, and it cannot be eradicated by ethics. Every decision which leads us down one path permanently bars others; they are forever lost to us. This is tragic indeed. Analogously, every death wrenches from the community a unique participant, leaving a hole in his/her place, but this fact alone does not prevent the very real possibility that some individuals may find themselves obligated to die in the very deepest, ethical sense of that term.

Having discovered the possibility of the existence of an, albeit tragic, obligation to die, what then are we to do? Should we legislate activities in light of this new ethical insight? Can we bring societal pressure to bear on persons in the throws of such an obligation? What are our possible avenues of conduct? It does seem clear that we should tread lightly here; the “tragic” nature of the obligation highlights this fact. Unlike any other obligation, the fulfillment of an obligation to die is a final act. It results in the death of a human being, and as such, we should always keep a cautious eye out for the possibility of abuse—a rush to judgment, prejudice generalizations, etc. Also, “blanket” responses to such obligations are not only fraught with danger, they run counter to the particularity of the obligations themselves. Thus, simply to discover that a specific ethical obligation to die exists in a given situation *does not entail* the need to create social policy to enforce

said-obligation. That is, we should not *legislate* that these ethically obligated people be killed, either through their own means or at the hands of another. Though we may wish to act in such a way that implies that one “ought” to die, legislating activities to bring about the fulfillment of such obligations may not be in our best interests as a society. And it is not unusual to make this kind of distinction between ethical obligation and legally demanded enforcement. Clearly, there are many cases where economically well-to-do people have ethical obligations to distribute their wealth to those who are not as well off. Some people simply have more than they could ever use, and others obviously do not have nearly enough. After an inquiry into the many cases that exist of this kind of economic imbalance, it is quite plausible that some “rich” should give to the “poor.” However, we do not legally enforce that obligation favoring at the social policy level, instead, to protect individual wealth and property. And yet, this does not preclude grassroots organizing to bring pressure to bear where ethical obligations are not fulfilled. Though to a much higher degree, an ethical obligation to die, like the obligation to distribute wealth, burdens particular individuals who are obligated in very unique and vital ways. However, it is the extreme nature of an obligation to die which precludes the use of not only legislative but general social pressures in order to “force the hand” of the one who is to die.

Death, though it can affect many, is still very personal, often intimate. Thus, in light of some specific obligation to die, the conduct towards that end should account for the sensitive nature of the situation. Rather than legislation or institutional demand, personal counseling, friendly advice, family support can all help to make the burden easier to bear. Of course, at least two things should be noted.

(1) There is a fine, and often difficult to define, line between counseling and coercion. Family and friends who look to gain personally have conflicts of interest that may negatively affect the process of reflection on *de facto* obligations as well as the actions of persons who do find themselves ethically obligated to die. In no way am I advocating such coercive, conflicting behaviors.

(2) It may be the case that truly ethically obligated individuals refuse to satisfy or avoid fulfillment of their obligation to die. And in the face of something so extreme and final, it should be no surprise that some are unable to muster the moral courage necessary to have their lives end. In these cases, like so many others, we who look on are entitled to our moral disappointment or even outrage, but it seems wrong in a society which values individuality and individual expression to turn such disapproval into force or coercion.

Finally, if we as a society do not like the possibility

that concrete ethical obligations to die might exist for some people and, therefore, ought to be fulfilled, then clearly our only recourse is to act in such a way as to make the claims that create such obligations disappear. Analogous to the pragmatic idea that no ethical obligation exists *a priori* is the equally pragmatic idea that *de facto* obligations can be diffused if the circumstances in which said-obligations arise change. Thus, we can remove a *de facto* obligation to die by reconstructing the situation that helped cause its corresponding claim to be expressed. In other words, we should eliminate, as far as possible, the pressures experienced by patients that arise in difficult, chronic cases. We must attempt to abolish economic factors that plague medical treatment options, particularly for chronic-care patients. We should redesign the insurance industry to help support the necessary economic changes. We can work with patients and their families to offer a support structure that makes their participations more important and vital to their care. In sum, we must work to strengthen life-sustaining experiences within a life-sustaining environment. We must enact our hopes that no one is ever faced with such an obligation. We must also realize, however, that the day may come when such an obligation to die, tragic as it is, may arise and “ought” to be fulfilled. We can and should mourn the loss, and work towards a future where it *never* “has to” happen again.⁸

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8. Only after writing this paper did I get a chance to read through John Hardwig's 1997 essay in the *Hastings Center Report*, v. 27, n. 2: 34-42, entitled “Is There a Duty to Die?” Hardwig and I agree on a great many points, though his “non-theoretical” approach seems unable to ground effectively his emphasis on a “burden to others” as the primary measure of when a “duty to die” might arise. Also, though he and I agree that the contexts of specific cases is necessary to determine the existence of a duty to die, we differ in that Hardwig believes that the existence of this duty for particular individuals is much more widespread than I believe it to be. I assert that without a concrete claim, no obligation exists. Burden, though often difficult to bear, does not itself constitute a claim to end a life; thus, burdens that do not lead those who are burdened to make claims that entail someone's death cannot, on my account, ground an ethical duty to die. Finally, Hardwig's article is much more ambitious than my own, and therefore attempts what mine does not—viz., to support strongly the duty to die. My more modest argument is that it is entirely possible, even probable, that there are particular individuals whose universe of concrete claims and *de facto* obligations does entail, upon reflection, an ethical obligation to die.

Is Life Worth Living?

by Randall Albright

William James faced depression and nervous collapse on more than one occasion, although the most famous period is that which Linda Simon calls the "Descent: 1866-1870" chapter of her 1998 book, *Genuine Reality*. She notes that he "confided to his father that he had recurring thoughts of suicide"¹ in 1866, while putting up a good front for others outside the family. Simon and others have pondered this low point of James's life. William wrestled with inner demons, and others may speculate on what it must have felt to be "on the continual verge of suicide", as William wrote to Tom Ward in a January 7, 1868 letter, looking back on the previous winter.

Later, William would write to Shadworth Hollway Hodgson from Newport, on December 30, 1885, including these lines:

Indeterminism is the only way to *break* the world into good parts and into bad, and to stand by the former as *against* the latter.... For life *is* evil. Two souls are in my breast: I see the better, and in the very act of seeing it I do the worse. To say that the molecules of the nebula implied this and *shall have implied it* to all eternity, so often as it recurs, is to condemn me to that dilemma of pessimism or subjectivism.... & to which all talk about abstractions erected into entities, and compulsion *vs.* freedom are simply irrelevant... What an insignificant difference then the difference between impediments from within and impediments from without! between being fated to do the thing *willingly* or not! The point is not as to *how* it is done, but as to its being done at all.

James is passionate in this writing, and there are a few key points here that reflect back on his own continuing battle to fight for the "good parts" of life, as well as toward the essay on which I want to focus this article.

James addresses the subject of suicide in a lecture later published in the *International Journal of Ethics* for October 1895: "**Is Life Worth Living?**"

To come immediately to the heart of my theme, then, what I propose is to imagine ourselves reasoning with a fellow-mortal who is on such terms with life that the only comfort left him is to brood on the assurance, You may end it when you will. What reasons can we plead that may render such a brother (or sister) willing to take up the burden again? (ILWL, 38)

It is worth noting that Alice, William's sister, also considered suicide and talked to her father about it. Her father's answer was not nearly as unequivocal as James is going to

be in this essay, which is to try to talk people back from such thoughts and possible action, and which in lesser forms still affects his thoughts and actions from time to time in the form of depression. He warns from the outset that "with perhaps the majority of these [suicides] my suggestions are impotent to deal" (ILWL, 38), leaving open the door to other approaches and facing the reality that some may still choose to either commit the act or otherwise continue with such thoughts. The following are some of his suggestions.

"Too much questioning and too little active responsibility lead, almost as often as too much sensualism does, to the edge of the slope, at the bottom of which lie pessimism and the nightmare of suicidal view of life." (ILWL, 39) This quote ties in with James's other call for "the strenuous life." It continues to be used in psychology as a way to get people outside their macabre thoughts and into modes of action that a mere prescription of Prozac will not provide. Exercise alone releases endorphins that fight depression, now clinically proven. Responsibility and other techniques to get out of the house as well as one's depressed mind are powerful antidotes to apathy, a divided self, and, at worst, a self that could possibly want to be eradicated by its owner.

"Need and struggle are what excite and inspire us; our hour of triumph is what brings the void." (ILWL, 47) And so what is to be had, for those who have merely triumphed, who may have nothing to look at, now, but their shadow of a former achievement, and are now *back* in a void? More need, more struggle. James delivers a number of examples from history. He also brings in the concept of "evil" at work in this battle to fight for life:

If you surrender to the nightmare view and crown the evil edifice by your own suicide, you have indeed made a picture totally black. Pessimism, completed by your act, is true beyond a doubt, so far as your world goes.... But suppose, on the other hand, that instead of giving way to the nightmare view you cling to it that this world is not the *ultimatum*. Suppose you find yourself a very well-spring, as Wordsworth says, of--

Zeal, and the virtue to exist by faith
As soldiers live by courage; as, by strength
Of heart, the sailor fights with roaring seas.

Suppose, however thickly evils crowd upon you, that your unconquerable subjectivity proves to be their match, and that you find a more wonderful joy than any passive pleasure can bring in trusting every in the larger whole. Have you not now made life worth living on these terms? (ILWL, 60)

These, then, are my last words to you: Be not afraid of life. Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help to create the fact. The scientific proof that you are right may not be clear before the day of judgment (or some stage of being which that expression may serve to symbolize) is reached. But the faithful fighters of this

¹ Linda Simon, *Genuine Reality, A Life of William James* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 101

Is Life Worth Living? by Randall Albright

hour, or the beings that then and there will represent them, may then turn to the faint-hearted, who here decline to go on, with words like those with which Henry IV. greeted the tardy Crillon, after a great victory had been gained: Hang yourself, brave Crillon! we fought at Argues, and you were not there. (ILWL, 62)

The key concept for me here is to *believe* that your life is worth living. James calls for courage here, and it is important to note how in his own life he fought courageously over a number of complicated psycho-physical factors in himself. He defended under-dogs, championed peace in a time of increasing American imperialism, and rose to the defense of pragmatism against people like Bertrand Russell while basically on his death-bed. This is all from a man who had had been "on the continual verge of suicide" earlier in life.

While this essay itself suggests that a loved one or friend try to *talk people back* from this "evil" thought, there are, however, other options.

The Samaritans in the United States and United Kingdom post toll-free phone numbers try to *talk people back* from considering suicide. In metropolitan Boston, I see the Samaritans Suicide Prevention Hot-Line in the Business section of my "White Pages," staffed by professionals in this area of psychology, 24 hours a day. They are non-profit, and the crisis line is free of charge. The organization was founded, at least in the United Kingdom, in 1953, "to provide confidential emotional support to any person, irrespective of race, creed, age or status, who is suicidal or despairing; and to increase public awareness of issues around suicide and depression. This service is provided 24 hours every day by trained volunteers, and relies upon public donations."²

For longer term treatment of depression, James himself again offers the suggestion of getting exercise in "The Gospel of Relaxation" essay in *Talks to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*. I do not think he would be averse to psycho-pharmaceutical drugs, herbal solutions such as St. John's Wort, as well as talking to a trained professional over a period of time, such as a psychiatrist, about some of the underlying temporal causes for such thoughts. James, pluralist that he was, tried various "cures" himself, with various degrees of success, but would be more mindful of whether the individual person was actually *feeling that life is significant*, using the "cures" as means toward that end.

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ILWL: "Is Life Worth Living" in *The Will To Believe and other essays in popular philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956, reproducing the original 1897 Longmans, Green & Co. typesetting)

² from <http://www.samaritans.org.uk/sams.html/home2.html>, viewed on November 18, 1999

Membership Information

by Randall Albright

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New members will receive all newsletters in Volume 1, of which this is the last.

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. They defray production costs, preliminary copies sent to Advisory Board, copyright fees, complimentary copies sent to James scholars with the hope of increasing membership and getting new articles, as well as other matters.

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

And an Invitation

This newsletter can only be as good as more than the sum of the parts of those who actively contribute to it. Spring 2000 begins Volume 2. Please send submissions soon, and no later than March 15th, after which we move to a June 15th deadline for Summer.

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.

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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

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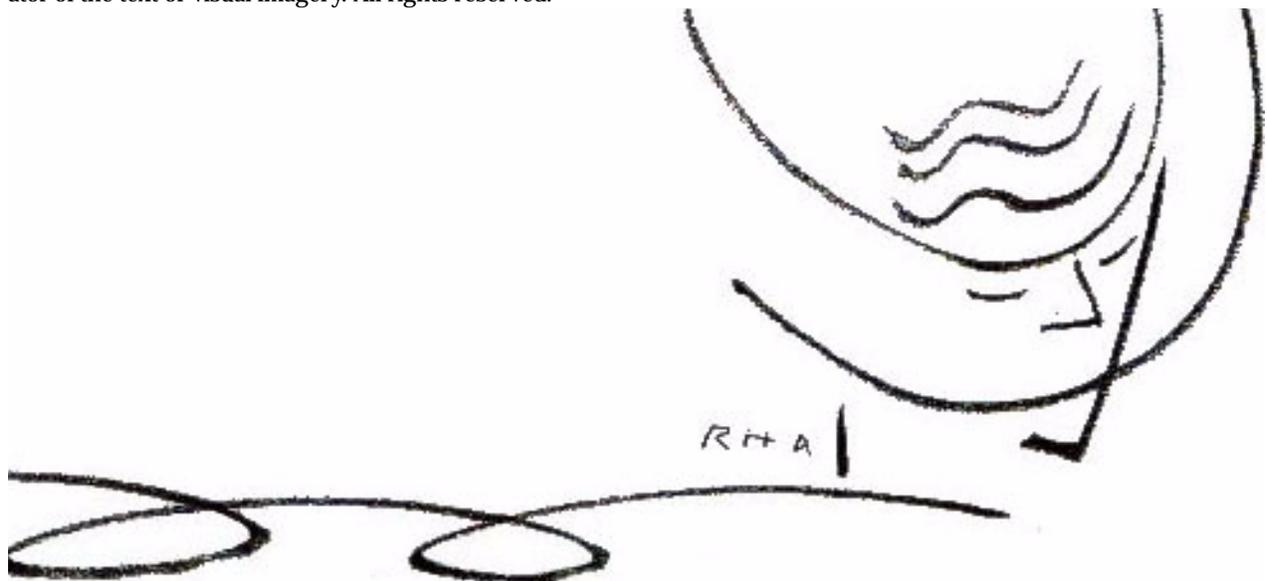
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James's Contiguism of "Pure Experience"

by Michel Weber

The first two issues of *Streams of William James* have featured each a speculative inquiry into the roots of James's philosophical intuition. "An Argumentation for Contiguism" has questioned the continuous-discontinuous dialectic in James's prose; whereas "The Polysemiality of the Concept of 'Pure Experience'" has organized the main semantic layers of his notion of "pure experience". The attentive reader will have noticed that the various moments of these two separate arguments bear an intended family resemblance; it is now expedient to exploit it.

We will do so in the following manner: first, the key points of our past twin arguments are contextualized; second we specify two epistemological questions underlying the threefold structure activated in both papers; third, we examine the announced synergy between the concepts of pure experience and of contiguism.

I

1.1. Let us contemplate once again the polysemiality of the concept of "pure experience". Wrestling with the status of the marrow of experience, James coins the concept in order to name what cannot bear names, or better: in order to point *to* what remains of the order of bare factuality, i.e., of pre-predication. Out of the intricacy of the various meanings he confers to the concept, three dimensions can be isolated for the sake of analysis, and articulated for the sake of synthesis.

On the one hand, pure experience is the "subjective"—or inner—immediate flux onto-logically (not temporally) preceding the institution of differences between subject and object. It is appropriate to hyphenate "onto-logical" in order to underline that the primacy belongs to the primordial structure of the Whole itself, as understood from a certain logical outlook. On the other hand, pure experience is the "objective"—or outer—primal stuff that embodies the thickness acknowledged in practice by everyone. Realism is not a vain word for James. From a unitive—or in-between—perspective, the concept puts the ineffable union between subjective and objective mundane features in the hot seat. This latter perspective opens furthermore the speculative horizon in the direction of a ladder of levels of consciousness.

What really matters here is James' *panexperientialism*: every feature of the World is either an "experiencing" or an "experienced". Pure experience names the radical eventfulness (i.e. a substantial) of the inner

and outer worlds, as well as their unison. Experience is what actually holds the world together: not only are relations *experienced*, but they are themselves *experience*. Since everything is experience, there is no more dichotomy between, on the one hand, a substance that is experiencing and unextended and, on the other, a substance that is unexperiencing and extended (remember Descartes's bicameral substantialism). Radical empiricism is first and foremost a radical constructionism.

1.2. A fruitful set of parallels disclose itself when the categories evoked in our argumentation for contiguism are actualized for the circumstance.

On the one hand, there is in James' psycho-phenomenological inquiries an emphasis on the continuity of experience: from a subjective—or inner—point of view, each and everyone of us has indeed the strong feeling that experience is a *stream*, i.e., that it has no breach or cracks. Although the existence of "resting places" is granted as well, it is subordinated to that all-embracing and everlasting flux. On the other, when the late James digs further into the epistemological field and—especially—into ethnological one, he is *ipso facto* displacing his focus point from the weaving of phenomenological facts to the systematization of their rational requirements. Reason is the means by which one comes to a decision on the status of the objective—the price to pay for the intended level of "generality" or "objectivity" being precisely to sail away (carefully or not) from the evidences of common experience. The continuity in the flux is then replaced by a tempered discontinuity: there are breaches, but no gaps. The "places of flights" have become the superficial effect of a temporal (or historical) trajectory of ontological *drops*. The unitive moment sees the synergy of the phenomenological (psychological if you like) discontinuous *continuity* and the epistemo-metaphysical continuous *discontinuity*. Here again, the question of the possibility of the awareness of such a structure is profiling itself.

What matters here is that, out of the somewhat conflicting respective interests of experience and reason (or individuality and universality), the need for *both* continuous and discontinuous categories remains insistent. To lock a speculative system featuring only one of the two aspects would be to de-nature mundane eventfulness, and *especially* to undermine the very possibility of a meaningful existence. Authenticity or ethicality asks for the stability of the cosmic figures as well as for the possibility of revolutionizing them. Since the Greeks, it is commonly accepted that only one principle ("arche") should be evoked to understand reality. The metaphor of the "source" is very explicit in that regard.¹ Through the insistent influence of Scholastics² in our culture, it is furthermore

the hydra of all possible heresies—and especially of Manicheism—that has been fought. Neither the regression *ad infinitum* nor the ambivalent counter-tension of two co-eternal principles are rationally acceptable. But is it *reasonable* to do so?

II

Before envisaging the mutual insemination of the two litigious categories, it is enlightening to linger over two interdependent logico-epistemological questions lying in the background of our respective arguments. They will help us to reach a conclusion.

2.1. First, we have encountered in both summaries the concept of bare factuality and its complementary, reason. As Kant saw very clearly, both poles are necessary to gain access to "objectivity": on the one hand (roughly speaking), there are raw sensory experiences, and on the other, rational categories that coat them, so to speak, with an understandable form. But it is too obvious that what is rational from the perspective of a given system of thought, might not be from the perspective of another one—and hence, objectivity varies for different cultures³ and even for different subcultures: not only a Melanesian does not have the same "world" as a Bantu or an Asian-American, but among the latter, there are various *Weltanschauungen* [world views]. A golf player does not work with the same mental picture as a nuclear scientist; a high school kid does not sympathize in the same way with the world as a gardener or an agricultural engineer. What becomes apparent here is *precisely* the scattered world view in the "civilized" West: on the one hand the world of life, on the other, the world(s) of science. There is no mystery as to why meaning was *given* in "traditional" societies, and is *pulled apart* in "modern" ones.

To be as straightforward as possible: the way an individual *cuts out* reality depends on his/her way of positioning him/herself in front of the Totality. It depends, in other words, on a metaphysical decision that can be reduced, from the perspective of the history of (Western) philosophy, to "substance or flux".⁴ Needless to say that substance ontology has so far installed itself as the paradigmatic world view, more precisely setting into movement Modernity and its trail of pitiful bankruptcies. Hence the baffling claim that

can be found in some "Nietzschean" thinkers—and especially in Nishida and Whitehead, who will intervene soon enough in our dialogue: the substance-predicate ontology is at the root of all *evils*, in the *strong* sense of the term.

Now, a very simple distinction between rational, irrational and arational enables us to name that relativity while preserving a healthy realism. Is *rational* what is congruent with a set of given rules of relevance; is *irrational* what is not congruent, but could become so, once some fixing-up is provided; is *arational* what is definitely incommensurable with reason.⁵ The simplest way of discussing this is to give a quick look at Aristotelian logic, which is traditionally defined by three principles. The principle of *identity* states simply that we come to know all things in so far as they have some unity and identity.⁶ It has naturally to be linked with the substance-attribute ontology granting permanence amid flux. The principle of *contradiction* is somewhat the negative side of the principle of identity: it claims that the same attribute cannot, at the same time and in the same respect, belong and not belong to the same subject.⁷ According to the principle of *excluded middle* (or "tertium non datur"), there cannot be an intermediate between contradictories: of one subject we must either affirm or deny any one predicate.⁸ There is no third possibility: *either* it rains *or* it does not.

Consequently, any proposition that does belong to the territory marked out by these three principles is, from an Aristotelian perspective, rational; if it does not, it is irrational. A contradiction is not irrational, since it possesses a clear status in the system: it is a statement that is always false (and *everybody agrees* that it is so because some mistake must have occurred in the chain of reasoning). A paradox, however, is irrational: as its etymology shows, is a contradiction that has the appearance of truth, with the result that there are numerous *opinions* regarding the way of understanding them; no consensus prevails. The arational is for him *matter* (the complementary of *form* in his hylemorphism). It is not the place to study the status of paradoxes, but they are relevant here because the paradoxicality of a given statement vanishes in a renewed logical atmosphere: the Theory of Types, for instance, proposes a solution involving no of either of the Aristotelian principles (it "simply" uses a sharp distinction between levels of language). The appeal to a contradictory logic, or the dismissal of the principle of

1. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book Delta.

2. The term is not used derogatorily.

3. Cf., e.g., Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, Paul K. Feyerabend, etc.

4. More fundamentally, the way the individual *trusts* the World should be pictured with the help of the Husserlian concept of *Urdoxa* and its Merleau-Pontian cartography.

5. See *A Pluralistic Universe's* concept of "non-rational".

6. *Metaphysics* Beta, 4.

7. *Metaphysics* Gamma, 3; *Posterior Analytics* I, 77a10-22.

8. *Metaphysics* Gamma, 7; *Posterior Analytics* I, 77a22-25.

excluded middle are other possible paths that have been variously paced as well: (Graham Priest promotes a *transconsistent logic* where some contradictions are true; the *quantic logic*, framed by Garrett Birkhoff and John von Neumann to cope with the advances in micro-physics, revokes, for its part, the excluded middle).

2.2. Second, both papers were looking for a third alternative, for an *included middle* lying beyond subjectivity and objectivity, beyond continuity and discontinuity. Beyond, ultimately, the verdict of rationality or irrationality delivered from the finite perspective of a given system of thought. We have to go back to the thickness of the concrete itself, to its arationality. It has been suggested that the keystone to dichotomies is the shared level of consciousness between human beings *qua* that level is locked by everyday language. With regard to the status of language, two simple complementary remarks need thus to be made.

One, by sharing a common language, human beings share a common world. We have just seen that the process of learning a language corresponds to the learning of a certain way of cutting out reality. Philosophers and theologians have repeatedly said that everyday language is more or less useless for the purpose of speaking of the Ultimate. Interestingly enough, it is only at the edge of the twentieth century that scientists have begun to hammer the very same point: Bohr, Heisenberg, and Einstein, to pin point some of the most known figures of the quantic and relativistic revolutions, came very quickly to realize that common sense language is totally overcome by their theoretical-breakthroughs. Bohr has even confided to Heisenberg that a *modification of the internal structure of thought* needs to be spurred if one wishes to grasp the full depths of quantic theory.⁹ It is a change of a rational system that is indeed required (cf. Birkhoff and Neumann).

Two, it is often forgotten that the semantic structure of language is intrinsically intentional. The words, as well as their organization in discourses, aim at *pointing* to a state of affairs. Fallacies quickly make irruption in arguments that claim a total abstractedness from stubborn facts. In such a case, language is no longer a vector, a shallow gauze through which the shimmering concreteness is still given, but a screen, whose opacity is mistook for a reassuring baroque cur-

tain. Adequately manipulated, however, language can direct our attention towards the arational.

III

It is now possible to fruitfully unfold, with the help of the same tri-partition, the co-belonging of pure experience and contiguism, and hence to see how pure experience structures itself, i.e., how the contiguum fleshes out itself.

3.1. A first analytic approximation would be the following. From a subjective point of view, the immediacy of pure experience phenomenalizes itself as a stream, i.e., as a continuum. From an objective point of view, the primordial tissue of the World is made of buds of experiences, i.e., embodies a discontinuum. From a unitive viewpoint, pure experience *qua* unisson of the subjective and objective worldly features is a contiguism. But this suggests simply a rapprochement, not a genuine union between the two poles. More argumentative flexibility is needed because the subjective stream gives precedence to the subjective drops once the ontological territory is explored. Specularly, the objective buds interlace a phenomenological continuum. In other words, only a synthetic perspective allows the richness of the cross-fertilization to disclose itself. One rediscovers then the debated concepts: *pure experience occurs in buds*; and since these buds occupy only a limited spatio-temporal slab, it is their uninterrupted succession that builds the continuous features of our world. Pure experience, in other words, structures itself in a contiguum.

Pure experience, in the strong sense of the term, names the event that is the unisson between the experiencing and the experienced. It is a bare ethereal experiential tuning in which subjectivity and objectivity have become irrelevant tags. Useful in everyday life, these complementary concepts have reached, together with the substantialism they properly speaking *materialize*, their breaking point. It is here that the unavoidable idea of a ladder of consciousness intervenes: the level of consciousness at which human beings are attending to their affairs is definitely not the level at which the awareness of pure experience's contiguity is possible; it is the *analog on* of the visible part of the spectrum. To insulate everyday consciousness would be a mistake as heavy as Kant's noumenalization of the ultimate concreteness.

3.2. All this is strikingly very close to the Buddhist image of moments of consciousness as a *string of pearls*, provided that the "string" is not understood as a support or medium (in the sense of the Greek "hupokeimenon" or the Latin "subjectum"), but as a way of suggesting the continuous discontinuity of the

⁹ Niels Bohr, in a conversation quoted by Werner Heisenberg in *Physics and Beyond. Encounters and Conversations*. Translated from the German by Arnold J. Pomerans [Der Teil und das Ganze. *Gesprache im Umkreis der Atomphysik*, München, Piper Verlag, 1959], New York, Evanston, and London, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971. Cf. also Niels Bohr, *Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge*, New York - London, John Wiley & Sons, Inc. - Chapman & Hall, Limited, 1958.

primordial experience. Now, it is quite amazing to remark that Nishida (1870–1945)—the Japanese scholar whose thought has been mainly influenced by James, Bergson and Husserl, together with a constant practice of Zen Buddhism—understands the “true self” as a *series of moments of pure experience*, i.e., as a continuity of discontinuity.¹⁰ The true self is the authentic or enlightened self; it is the awakening to the Buddha nature (“satori”). The unity of subjectivity and objectivity occurs furthermore at the “standpoint of emotion”, which reminds us of James’ immense emotional sense of reconciliation.

Directly relevant to the elucidation of James’ contiguism is also Whitehead’s epochal theory. One could argue, indeed, that all the major Jamesean ontological intuition have been systematized by his organicism. Space constraints oblige us nevertheless to postpone the expansion of our inquiry in that direction.

Conclusion

Among the various points of importance that have been sketched, let us emphasize the following.

Radical empiricism is neither a naive realism nor a naive constructionism. For the former, the absolute steadiness of being allows the quest for one single Truth; for the latter, it is doubtful that any escape from solipsistic/pluralistic “perception” is possible. The pragmatic conception of truth, for its part, realizes something like a processualization of the old correspondence theory of truth. By interpreting truth in terms of action and power of adaptation, it makes the “adequatio rei et intellectu” more subtle and powerful.

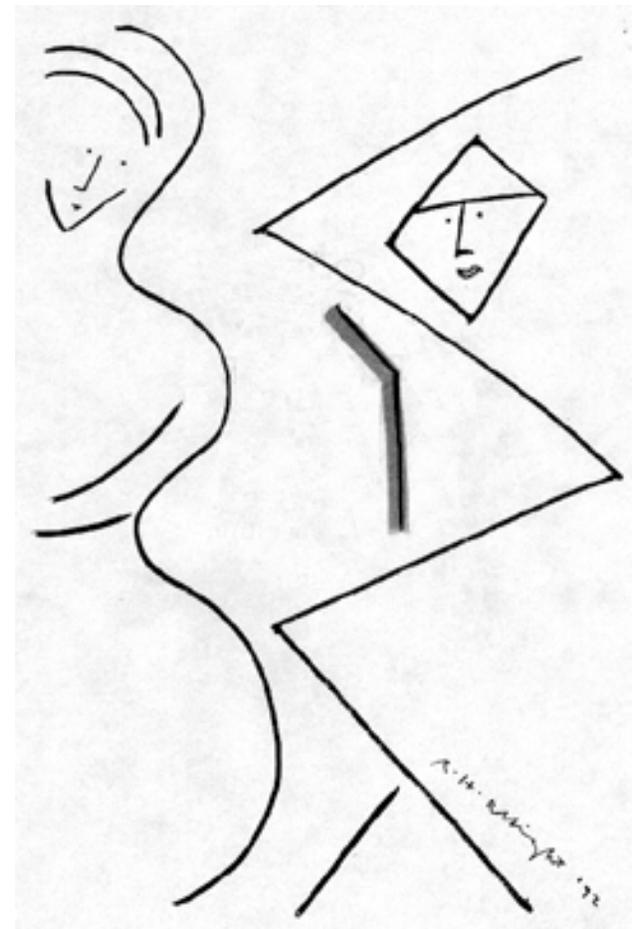
Ontology—one could even dare to say *lived* ontology—necessitates a thought bypassing the principle of excluded middle. The continuous-discontinuous dialectic does not ask for an “either-or” choice. Similarly, the polysemiality of James’ concepts is not a handicap. It is not only possible to organize (i.e., analyze) the various semantic layers involved, but it is through the activation of their synergy (i.e., syntheses) that we can make the concrete “speak”. The internal dynamic of the semantic nebulae that characterizes his major categories has the virtue of pointing to the ineffable. The rational womb has given birth to the arational.

When the commentators look for a strict univocality in James’ prose, they only carve a Procrustean definition destructive of the total cosmic experience imbedded in the texts. Pure experience is the emo-

tional vividness of the arational. Since there is neither distance nor distantiation involved in pure experience, language is nothing but irrelevant. (This is especially obvious from the perspective of its intentional structure.) James’s conceptual efforts to recover the integrity of experience, however radical, ask again and again for their experiential actualization. How and why the experiential contiguum does not belong to everyday consciousness still need further explorations. They are forthcoming.¹¹

For bibliographical references, see the two cited papers in *Streams of William James, Volume 1, Issues 1 and 2*.

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¹⁰ Kitar Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*. Translated by Masao Abe and Christopher Ives, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1990, chap. I. (The original title being *Zen no Kenkyu*, 1911.) Cf. Keiji Nishitani, *Nishida Kitar*. Translated by Yamamoto Seisaku and James W. Heisig. Introduction by D. S. Clarke, Jr., Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991.

¹¹ Forthcoming is a paper on “Whitehead’s systematization of the contiguism of pure experience”, preceded by a (prolegomenal) paper on “style, polysemiality and arationality”.

Neglected Centennial: the Birthday of Pragmatism

by Bill DeLoach

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

(2) Invited to comment...

If one could invite only two people, I would suggest that they be the current First Family of William James scholarship: Hilary and Ruth Anna Putnam. She, a Professor at Wellesley, edited the *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, the first such guidebook in the Cambridge University Press series to deal with an American philosopher (1997). (A similar volume is in the works for C.S. Peirce). He, recently retired from Harvard, and himself a Gifford Lecturer, has this to say about “The Permanence of William James”:

“I believe that James was a powerful thinker, as powerful as any in the last century, and that his way of philosophizing contains possibilities which have been too long neglected, that it points to ways out of old philosophical ‘binds’ that continue to afflict us. I believe that it is high time we paid attention to Pragmatism, the movement of which James was arguably the greatest exponent” (*Pragmatism: An Open Question*, Blackwell: 1995), 6.

Both Putnams are working together on a much-anticipated book about William James.

Other interpreters of pragmatism and James might be found by consulting, in addition to Ms. Putnam’s *Cambridge Companion*, such recent anthologies as Russell B. Goodman’s *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader* (Routledge, 1995) or Louis Menand’s *Pragmatism: A Reader* (Vintage, 1997). “The new pragmatic consensus that emerged in the 1980s,” writes Goodman, “has its sources not only in philosophy but in literary criticism, legal theory, feminism, and political theory” (p. 2).

Menand, a professor of English at CUNY and writer for literary journals like *The New York Review of Books*, aims his affordable anthology more at the general reader, while Goodman is clearly writing mainly for other philosophers. But anyone interested in either the classic or the contemporary pragmatic movement will want to read both.

Indeed, the pace of publishing in this field continues to grow. 1998 brought us *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, edited by Morris Dickstein (Duke UP, 1998). And 1999 brings *Classical American Pragmatism: Its Contemporary Vitality*, edited by Sandra B. Rosenthal, Carl R. Hausman, and Douglas R. Anderson (Univ. of Illinois Press). All of which is merely to suggest that there will be no shortage of commentators if anyone seeks to sponsor (or seek outside funding to sponsor) a Re-enactment & Conference on “The Birthday of Pragmatism.”

(3) Biographical/historical context...

We shouldn’t overlook what was going on in James’s life while he was writing “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results.” In 1896 he had been recommended to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion at the University of Aberdeen. He declined this offer, but recommended Josiah Royce, whose Gifford Lectures were later published as *The World and the Individual*. In 1898 the Lectureship was re-offered to James for his preferred site—the University of Edinburgh. That July, while hiking in his beloved Adirondacks, he experienced a Walpurgis Nacht on the slopes of Mount Marcy—a sleepless night of “spiritual alertness”—an encounter with nature mysticism. Traces of this experience show clearly in his talk to the Philosophical Union at Berkeley; and portions of that talk show up in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James had originally expected to cover both “experiences” and “philosophy” in his Gifford Lectures; but the philosophy material was crowded out by the wealth of religious experiences James wanted to discuss—so that his eight lectures on Pragmatism, given first in Boston (1906), and later repeated at Columbia University (1907), were to some extent the residue of his reflections on “natural religion.”

It would be nice to invite Huston Smith...or Marcus Borg...or Jaroslav Pelikan (author of the excellent “Introduction” to the Library of America Edition of James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*) to comment on the religious aspect of this talk; all three have written favorably on James as a spiritual author. And Ellen Kappy Suckiel, in *Heaven’s Champion: William James’s Philosophy of Religion*, has written a small but solid book of more than specialist interest (South Bend: Notre Dame UP, 1996; pbk. 1999).

Linda Simon, of course, wrote the most recent biography, *Genuine Reality: A Biography of William James* (New York: Harcourt, 1998). And Bay James, the great-granddaughter of William James, is the current literary executor for the WJ estate.

At the same time, we’ll need someone to help non-specialist viewers assess the significance of James’s views on philosophy: his preference for the English philosophical tradition in general, and David Hume in particular; and his hearty dislike of Immanuel Kant, whose mind he dismisses as “...the rarest and most intricate of all possible antique bric-a-brac museums...” (*William James: Writings 1878-1899*, New York: Library of America, 1992); 1096.

(4) Audience Issue: Is there enough broad, general interest?

We’ll never know if the experiment is not tried. James himself brought the emerging notion of pragmatism to a boil by his ability to stir up exactly this kind of broad interest. “There is, it must be confessed, a curious fascination in hearing deep things talked about,” he said, “even though neither we nor the disputants understand

them. We get the problematic thrill, we feel the presence of the vastness. Let a controversy begin in a smoking room anywhere, about free will or God's omniscience, or good and evil, and see how every one in the place pricks up his ears" (Pragmatism, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981, p. 8).

Certainly the central issue James raised in 1898—"Is matter the producer of all things, or is a God there too?"—continues to engage a great many Americans, on both sides of the question.

I can only say this about the centennial event I am proposing: C-SPAN is the medium for connoisseurs of talk. Sure, their mandate is for gavel-to-gavel coverage of both House and Senate proceedings. But that's not what makes the legions of C-SPAN junkies. No, it's when Congress is not in session that we get to hear experts who wear their learning lightly, guides who can walk you through Gettysburg as if the battle were just last week; or Mount Vernon as if the General would be back from his morning ride shortly. We know of no way to bring FDR or Jefferson back to life; but to hear the historians and biographers who can speak without notes of the lives and times of such American leaders is the next best thing to a time machine.

I just want C-SPAN to do for American ideas, American thinkers, a little of what they do for American elections; to regard the six "Classic American Philosophers" as specified by Max Fisch back in 1951—Peirce (1839-1914), James (1842-1910), Royce (1855-1916), Dewey (1859-1952), Whitehead (1861-1947), and Santayana (1863-1952)—with as much interest and respect as they give to our Presidents.

Of these six, it is James who has had, historically, the broadest appeal. And in today's media cornucopia, it is C-SPAN which has the best track record at delivering substantial intellectual content to the broadest possible audience. I take encouragement, for instance, from a recent experiment on C-SPAN 2's Book TV. I cannot do better than to quote a single paragraph from the web page describing this event.

"On Sunday, November 14th [1999], BOOK TV presents Plato's Republic, a special program on the ancient book about justice and government. Including author and professor Stanley Rosen, on the significance of Plato's philosophy through the ages, and the Classics Book Group of Politics & Prose, a Washington, D.C. bookstore. The program begins at 9:30am and 8pm ET."

Anyone with enough bandwidth and computer power can log on to <http://www.booktv.org/plato.asp>—and watch this event via "streaming video." The rest of us, with older browsers, can at least read the pages and schedules at "booktv.org".

More could be said, but enough is enough. Let me move along with a passage from Cornel West's excellent book on *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1989; p. 4)

"It is no accident that American pragmatism once again rises to the surface of North Atlantic intellectual life at the present moment. For its major themes of evading epistemologically-centered philosophy, accenting human powers, and transforming antiquated modes of social hierarchies in light of religious and/or ethical ideals make it relevant and attractive. The distinctive appeal of American pragmatism in our postmodern moment is its unashamedly moral emphasis and its unequivocally ameliorative impulse."

—Cornel West

Part III: Beyond Neglect? Further Centennials—1998-2010

August of the year 2010 will mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the death of William James. In the course of reading and re-reading his 1898 remarks on "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," I came across a passage that that gave me a bit of a chill:

"No one like the path-finder himself feels the immensity of the forest, or knows the accidentality of his own trails.... So I feel that there is a center in truth's forest where I have never been: to track it out and get there is the secret spring of all my poor life's philosophic efforts; at moments I almost strike into the final valley, there is a gleam of the end, a sense of certainty, but always there comes still another ridge, so my blazes merely circle towards the true direction.... Tomorrow it must be, or tomorrow, or tomorrow; and pretty surely death will overtake me ere the promise is fulfilled."

—William James, 26 August 1898

We now know that death did overtake James, at the age of 68, not in California but at his summer home on Lake Chocorua, New Hampshire. The date was twelve years later to the day: the 26th of August, 1910. The task, for those of us who read and write for this publication, is to clarify to the larger public the richness and depth of the path blazed by the life and writings of "the path-finder himself"; and thus to show, contrary to common opinions, how very much of "the promise" was "fulfilled."

It's not too soon to be thinking of how best to use the years between now and 2010 so that the other centennials that come along will be well-observed, and not neglected.

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