

*Streams
of
William James*

*The Newsletter of William James Society
Volume 2 • Issue 2 • Summer 2000*



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*William James
in Brazil, 1865*

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William James Society WebSite

by Randall Albright

John Shook, WebMaster of the
www.pragmatism.org
is currently also running the official
William James Society WebSite:
[www.pragmatism.org/societies/
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Anybody can currently do the following:

- download a version of our current Adobe Acrobat flier;
- click on the subpage for *Streams of William James* and see the Table of Contents from published issues; and
- click on a subpage for *Membership*.

I would like to see a more extensive Web presence for the Society in the near future. My own goals include non-profit incorporation, which would then allow people to join the Society with a credit card through a "secure site" on the WebSite, sale of T-shirts based on either the back cover of Vol. 1, #1 or the front cover of Vol. 2, #1 through the secure site to raise money for future activities, and creation of feedback forms about the WebSite or the newsletter. Other suggestions are welcome.

Anyone that is interested in helping with Web development, please contact both John and me at: <jshook@pragmatism.org> and <albright@world.std.com>. Thanks!

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Polysemiality, Style, and Arationality

by Michel Weber

Our first contributions have culminated in the thesis that James' pure experience structures itself in a contiguum (see "James' Contiguism of 'Pure Experience'"¹). Three major heuristic milestones have underlined our argument—the concepts of polysemiality, style, and arationality—; let us now examine this Ariadne's clew for itself.

I.

A polysemial concept—or "polyseme"—is simply a concept that carries various meanings. Instead of having a one-to-one relationship between the signifier and the signified, there is a one-to-many correspondence. One can speak of the leg of a human being, of a horse, of a table, or of a cooked lamb lying on one's plate, without generating much confusion. Polysemiality is indeed a very common—and harmless—feature of natural language as it is currently used (i.e., in everyday life): the contextualization of the actual utterances usually prevents any difficulties. But in philosophy, polysemiality requires some argument to ground its harmlessness, not speaking of its possible usefulness. The difficulty here, by definition, is far more abstract: the current contextual use of semantic associations within one single language has to be broadened to question the semantic power of language itself: how does it make sense, signify, direct our sight towards fully fledged concreteness while granting at the same time the possibility of abstract modelizations. This is made obvious with the help, e.g., of comparative studies: whereas some natural language use the word "salmon" to designate a whole set of fishes sharing a more or less obvious "family resemblance", the same set is carefully discriminated in another language—say, the language of an ethnic group relying heavily on fishing for its own survival, or marine biologists. The philosopher has to question why the referential mode that is fully acceptable in one case, is not in the other one—and the answer cannot be anymore *purely* pragmatic (in the non-technical sense of the word: what

works here does not work there for obvious contingent reasons).

We have seen that the concept of "pure experience" is factually used by James to signify various complementary experiential facets; the history of philosophy is full of similar examples, the most famous one being perhaps the polysemy exhibited by the Greek concept of "logos". Without claiming for exhaustiveness or even systematicity, let us pin point the following disseminated meanings²: (i) anything said or written, story or narrative; (ii) discussion, debate, thesis; (iii) cause, reason, argument, to give an explanation for something; (iv) calculus, measure, number, correspondence, relation, proportion; (v) worth, esteem, reputation; (vi) general principle or rule, universal order; (vii) the faculty of reason, holding a conversation with oneself; (viii) definition, idea, formulae expressing the essential *nature* of the facts, the truth of the matter. Each occurrence of the concept carries, willy nilly, the entire semantic nebulae, thereby disclosing the basic Greek ontological horizon. Now, particular speculations have both exploited that brute wealth of meaning *and* enriched it to meet the systematic requirements of philosophy. For instance, in the case of Heraclitus, the technical meaning of "logos" is mainly linked with the idea of measure, calculus and proportion. When used to understand the Whole, it sketches an *harmonious* universal picture. Furthermore, since the logos that frames everything also inhabits the human mind, it is not a mystery that the rationality of the latter understands the order of the former. There is a coalescence of the concrete and the abstract. On the top of it, the metaphor of the "universal fire" reminds us that the concept designates the ontological ground of beings as well as its immanent law of unrest. Reality's mode of being and becoming is *logical* ("kata logon"). To understand the logos, or to act with measure, is thus nothing less than putting oneself in unison with the cosmic inner activity.

Reading James confronts the philosopher with a particular form of the hermeneutical problem: how to make sense out of texts that champion polysemiality? The wager that has given the impetus to our interpretation is fairly simple: to give a true speculative weight to each occurrences of the debated concept ("pure experience"), and this requires first the gathering together of similar semantic occurrences under a given heading ("subjective", "objective", "unitive"), and second the systematization of the meanings organically linking these various headings—with the result that what appeared point-blank as a mere multiplicity totally blur-

¹ *Streams of William James*, Vol. I, N°3. *Errata*: please read, (i) in the text: "asubstantialism" instead of "a substantialism"; "into the ontological" instead of "into ethnological"; "involving no real modification of either" instead of "involving no of either"; "analogon" instead of "analog on"; "naive" instead of "nave" —and (ii) in the footnotes: Werner Heisenberg, *Der Teil und das Ganze. Gespräche in Umkreis der Atomphysik*, München, Piper Verlag, 1959; Kitaro Nishida, *Zen no Kenkyu*, 1911); Cf. Keiji Nishitani, *Nishida Kitaro...*

² Cf., e.g., William Keith Chambers Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*. Volume I. *The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1962, pp. 420-424.

ring the supposed univocality of the concept, is now a tight web made of the different semantic guises of the same signifier. Let us further notice that such hierarchized network *makes sense*, properly speaking, if and only if it generates a movement of overtaking, i.e., zeros in on some experience. In other words, a polyseme acts as a semantic cluster focused on one privileged experience synthesising “in the flesh” all the partial meanings constituting the cluster. There is a movement of overtaking, from the hierarchy of the various meanings to a “primordial” experience that is the author’s one, as purified (universalized, i.e., rationalized) from its personal contingencies as possible. That raw *experience* is, quite obviously, richer than the partial converging meanings: it embodies the ontological excess, or surplus, that lies at the centre of the cluster, constituting its nucleus. Solely the beatings of this experiential heart can nourish the hierarchized network’s dynamism.

Polysemiality occurs at the conceptual or lexical level. Of course, communication does not happen with the occasional uttering of single words, whose intrinsic richness would be sufficient to trigger the manifestation of an entire worldview. (This being perhaps the case in most animal forms of communication.) A similar semantic overtaking mechanism takes place at the propositional or syntactical level. It is embodied by what Quine calls the “interanimation of sentences”.³ The discursive concatenation of sentences introduces a semantic vitality that opens the text to the concrete (or at least to a “meta” level). There is, in other words, a prismatic virtue of propositional chains that explains how intentionality imposes itself so to speak *interstitially*.⁴ We have here the perfect transition with our next step.

II.

So far, we have evoked the conceptual and propositional levels; there is, from our simplified perspective, one last overlapping level: the level of the categorial system as a whole and of its exposition. It thus remains to be seen how the peculiar use of the polysemial and interanimative potentials generates what can be called the “philosophical style” of an author. Two main features can characterize James’ style: circumambulation and constructive discrimination. Uphill, we find his

radical empiricism—every single experience should find its interpretation within the speculative system—; and downhill, his *non dogmatism*—he does not pretend to impose a definitive scheme, only the best possible one given the present civilization’s state of affairs. The point is not to push rationality to the hilt, but to see how far we can go without endangering the meaning of existence. James, like Plato or Whitehead, is willing only to tell “the most likely tale”. The tale’s complexity is due to its innumerable experiential characters; its simplicity lies in the ultimacy of experience itself. Radical empiricism and panexperientialism are definitely not accidentally related.

We call circumambulation the fact that the unfolding of his texts is not linear but circular *and* converging: if he constantly carves waves of new concepts and starts again and again the argument, each time from a (slightly) different perspective, it is in the hope that the reader will come each time closer to his personal intuitive vision. The only thing that tempers this conceptual inflation is precisely the polysemiality of his concepts and the interanimative movement he masterly imposes on them. Moreover, James continually wavers between phenomenological descriptions and rational requirements, between “knowledge by acquaintance” and “knowledge about”.

Constructive discrimination refers to the holistic way he carves his concepts: the motto of true speculative philosophers is indeed “to distinguish in order to better unite”. (Destructive discrimination would be a partition of concreteness forgetful of the primacy of the organic whole.) Hence the idea of an *included* middle: bare disjunctions mislead thought by suggesting rigid categories destructive to the cosmic fluency. “Of course this *sounds* self-contradictory, —James remarks—but as the immediate fact don’t sound at all, but simply *are*, until we conceptualize and name them vocally, the contradiction results only from the conceptual or discursive form being substituted for the real form.”⁵ Nature has nothing like static watertight compartments, and since the whole point of speculative philosophy is to take the risk of adequacy, what we have to look for are “fluid concepts” (Bergson’s term). It goes without saying that such plasticity is precisely what is offered by polysemial concepts.

The two principles reinforce each other. Constructive discriminative conceptual carving is practised within the overall circumambulatory impulse; and the converging movement towards concreteness buttresses itself on the repeated creation of holistic con-

³ Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object*, Cambridge, Massachusetts - London, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1960. See also Ivor Armstrong Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. The Mary Flexner Lectures on the Humanities III, Delivered at Bryn Mawr College, February and March 1936, New York, Oxford University Press, 1965.

⁴ Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La prose du monde*. Texte établi et présenté par Claude Lefort, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1992, pp. 46-47 and 61-62.

⁵ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*. Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy, Edited by Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, Introduction by Richard J. Bernstein, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press, 1977, p. 121.

cepts. To multiply the polysemic concepts, to put them into networks, to hierarchize these networks and to operationalize them through adventurous stylistic innovations intend to preserve the ontological surplus; it is the baroque response given by the philosopher to the redundancy, overabundance and even wastefulness of nature.

III.

Polysemiality, interanimation and style have been described as parts of a global convergent movement towards the bare factuality of experience. The point was to suggest how language can open itself to something that remains, to a significant extent, *foreign* to it. Asking how does language prismaticize the ever-changing complexity of reality is to ask how its intentionality works, or: how, after all, can it be a prism—or a vector—rather than a screen? That latter question is not, as we shall soon see, purely rhetorical: language can be used in a moebian, self-referential, way that short-circuits its constitutive intentionality. It is time now to name the experiential pole that lures the three overlapping mechanisms evoked. Quite often philosophers have claimed that experience is purely rational, or, on the contrary, that it is intrinsically reluctant to a total rationalization. The concept of “a-rationality” enables us to make these incisive distinctions more supple. However, it is fruitful only if one reads in it the confluence of two meanings.

On the one hand, the prefix “a-” displays that we are talking about something incommensurable with reason. The distinction between rational, irrational and arational (introduced in our previous discussion) is here enlightening: since the immediacy of lived experience is such that its enjoyment will necessarily remain beyond any rational system, it cannot be simply qualified as irrational (a contingent judgment). To improve the applicability of our trinomial, a supplemental distinction can be introduced between rational and reasonable, i.e., between to convince and to persuade: one can be completely convinced by an argument, i.e., recognize its pure rationality, and nevertheless not being persuaded at all of its immediate implications for oneself. In such a case, the universal validity of the argument is acknowledged, but it is rejected on the basis of its irrelevance.

On the other hand, the presence of the term “a-rational” insinuates that there is a minimal rational expressibility of that foreignity, that there is an “adherence” of experience to reason—or better: that a talented use of reason can put the reader on the road of the ineffable. The dialectic of the three levels of intentionality exposed earlier strikes back at this stage, carrying with itself an additional twofold difficulty. One, it has been said that a given language is simply a particular way of “cutting” reality, of imposing tags on the per-

petual flux of events that is disclosed by sense-experience; how far is this a fair epistemo-linguistic account? Two, could it be the case that these linguistic categories are somewhat “prior” to the categories of thought?

To sketch an answer to these correlated puzzles requires a definition of language. Let us claim that a language is an organic system of signs investing the phonic substance with the intention to *signify*—and especially to communicate these significations—by drawing sets’ outlines through the opacity of events.⁶ A word belonging to a natural language, or a philosophical concept stratified in a categorial scheme, does not *reproduce* the concrete eventfulness, but *classifies* it by naming some of its recognizable features. It is thus more cautious to speak of “filtering through classification” rather than mere “cutting out”. Language reinvents the world, it does not picture it. With regard to the possible determination (in the strong sense) of thought by language (cf. Sapir-Whorf), no decisive evidence seems to be available. For instance, Aristotle’s ontological categories have been hypothetically deduced from some characteristics of the Greek language (cf. Trendelenburg), but such a feat of skill is quite obviously reductionistic. Discussing that issue, Derrida shows, among other things, that if the expression of philosophical thought heavily relies upon natural language, the philosopher implements choices, reappropriations, and conceptual creation.⁷ What we can *say* does not totally circumscribe or organise what we can think; first-class speculations always stretch language in a very imaginative way.

In conclusion, one last point has to be mentioned. Directly relevant to this paradoxical a-rational bipolarity is the question of the status of presuppositions in philosophical systems. Presuppositions are the conditions of possibility of the institution of the speculative endeavours; now, it can be shown that they are neither entirely explainable nor justifiable within the considered system.⁸ To make explicit its own presuppositions, a scheme should be capable of a total self-reflexiveness, i.e., each *presupposition* should become a meaningful *proposition* within the scheme. Alas, by reason of the structure of experience itself, this is

6. Definition adapted from Claude Hagège, *L’homme de paroles. Contribution linguistique aux sciences humaines*, Paris, Gallimard 1986, pp. 131, 143, 202.

7. See esp. Emile Benveniste, “Catégories de pensée et catégories de langue”, in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, I, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, pp. 63-74; and Jacques, Derrida, “Le supplément de copule”, in *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972, pp. 209-246.

8. Jean Ladrière, “Langage scientifique et langage spéculatif”, *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, tome 69, n° 2, 1971, pp. 93-132 & 250-282.

definitively impossible. From this perspective, what we have called “arationality” is the opening of the original horizon of comprehension, it is the ontological attractor that makes possible the transgression of the immediate givenness systematically operated by speculative philosophy. It is the place of a pristine donation, truly reachable only through “pure experience” (or “sympathy”, or “metaphysical illumination”, or “theoria”...), but whose *structure* is thinkable according to the requirements of reason.

IV.

The implications of our linguistico-ontological pilgrimage are various. It is especially interesting to say a quick word of the differences existing between the “speculative” and the “scientific” use of language. Although the distinction between “continental” and “analytic” philosophy is actually tremendously difficult to manipulate, from the perspective of the scanning of the meaning levels previously envisaged, one could cautiously argue the following. With regard to polyseme: the former is not bothered by polysemiality—it even actively uses it—, whereas the latter adopts as one of its major goal the logical destruction of every possible ambiguity. To the question “how to read texts that champion polysemiality?”, they answer that these texts—if they mean anything at all—will *speak* only when straightened by logical analysis. With regard to interanimation: according to the analytical stream, the goal is the rigid articulation of purely transparent concepts; there is no need for a mysterious synergy between ambiguous concepts. With regard to style: circumambulation is replaced by linearisation, and constructive discrimination by destructive discrimination. Uphill, radical empiricism becomes pure empiricism; and non dogmatism normative imperialism. Accordingly, arationality is forgotten to the profit of irrationality on the point of rationalization.

Each linguistic usage has its pros and cons; insuperable hermeneutical problems occurs only when one phalanx intends to impose its usage to the other. Speculative language is not glossolalia, it makes the most of what one has to transform the emotional vividness of experience into the concreteness of a *shared* world. The ideal of purification, clarification, pure transparency through analysis (if not mathematization) is of course coming from the successful scientific paradigm of the 19th century. Science strives for univocity, in its mathematico-experimental discourses, as well as in its possible global utterings. Having said this, we should not forget these two phalanxes have common roots in the emergence of Greek philosophy, that managed to keep room for physical and metaphysical mathematical lucidity.

Natural language is intrinsically ambiguous and intentional; it is far from being a pure logical entity, and

indeed, its countless equivocities have been very often disparaged. Of course, it is worth distinguishing the *faculty of language* (that can actualize itself in gestures, postures, screams, etc.) from *orality*, and orality from *literature*, and, within the literary corpus, prose from poetry... (A Porphyrian tree that can be reformed and complexified as one could wish). The same linguistic constraints do not hang over living speech and weighted writing. The former is truly eventful, its constitutive temporality explains its linearity (that can be of course modulated through repetitions and other rhetorical patterns). This paper has been mainly concerned with the latter, which is like the systematic thunder after the experiential lightning. Writing facilitates reflection, analysis, abstractions of all sorts. Making possible a very technical and variegated use of *style*, writing somewhat drags language away from temporality and linearity. Its multifarious semantic potential are directly correlated with the stylistic managing of polysemiality and interanimation. In other words, out of the three degrees of freedom that have been sketched on their way towards concreteness, style stands out as the catalyst of the semantic process. Solely style can make the reader fall under the author's spell and thereby lead him/her at the outskirts of an intuitive vision that remains nevertheless private. The intentionality opening the propositional entanglement to the world shields language from the danger of barren coherence. For instance, dictionary does not, properly speaking, define anything; it is just a tissue of mutual cross-references. To the contrary, the efficacy of language comes from its self-effacing ability in front of what it lures us. The organization of a conceptual network revealing the ontological surplus asks a peculiar gesture made of invocatory repetitions and daring crosscheckings; eventually, it is an art of the *void* that is requested. That evocative capacity is a sort of implosive capacity: language has to die to give birth to meaning. If it remains there, like an apathetic screen, meaning has not been conveyed. The intuitive grasping of the power of language is a nocturnal experience that sees the revelation of its faculty of making things rise from their absence. Semantic, the function of language is also apophantic, power of manifestation of total anthropo-cosmic experiences⁹.

—Michel Weber's e-mail address is
mweber@philosophers.net

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1927, p. 33 (on the concept of “apophansis”).

A View of Yosemite

by William James



(enclosed with the card for Glacier Point at left)

Berkeley, Cal.

Aug. 28- [18]98

Darling Old Cherubini:

See how brave this girl and boy are in the Yosemite Valley!

I saw a moving sight the other morning before breakfast in a little hotel where I slept in the dusty fields. The young man of the house had shot a little wolf called a coyote in the early morning. The heroic little animal lay on the ground, with his big furry ears, and his clean white teeth, and his jolly cheerful little body, but his brave little life was gone. It made me think how brave all these living things are. Here little coyote was, without any clothes or house or books or anything, with nothing but his own naked self to pay his way with, and risking his life so cheerfully — and losing it — just to see if he could pick up a meal near the hotel. He was doing his Coyote-business like a hero, and you must do your boy-business, and I my man-business bravely too, or else we won't be worth as much as that little coyote. Your mother can find a picture of him in those green books of animals, and I want you to copy it.

*Your loving
Dad.*

Note: An interpretation of this letter exists on on p. 54-55 in *The Renewal of Literature, Emersonian Reflections* by Richard Poirier (London and Boston: faber and faber, 1987)
—RHA

Cards from California

from William James

Dearest Tweedy — I am in California, 2000 miles away, and have been camping in the mountains with Mr. Bakewell and a guide named John Sax. I rode a mule called Kelly, and later a horse named Chipmunk. The others were called Boston, Jake, and Chinkapin, which last is named after a kind of bush that grows here, the Chinkapin bush. The trees are tremendous. When a dead one lies on the ground, a tall man can't see over the trunk, and if you walk along the top of it as it lies there, it is as long a walk as from the hole between our hedge and the fence, to the Royce's fence, or even longer. What do you think of that for a tree? — Our horses stood with lank necks and hanging heads, and high peaked saddles, with all sorts of things tied on to them, just like the horses in Frederic Remington's pictures, which you must learn to know. The stars at night were the same as your stars, & strange to say, seemed just as near. Good bye dear.

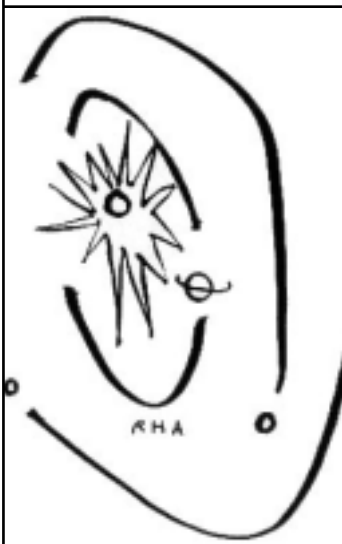
—William James to his youngest son Alexander
postmarked August 1898 (?) — RHA

WJ sent this with two business cards from San Francisco (see next page)

Frederic Remington

by Randall Albright

This watercolor by Frederic Remington of a U.S. Cavalry Officer In Campaign Dress (circa 1890) is an example of the sort of picture which WJ had in mind when he wrote this note.



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BEWARE OF FIRMS INFRINGING ON OUR NAME (© 1887)

Dearest Topsy - I am in Calif California, 2000 miles away,
and have been camping on the mountains with Mr. Balcanell
and a guide named John ~~Sax~~. I rode a mule called
Kelly, and later a horse called Chipmunk. The others
were called Boston, Jake, and Chinkapin, which
last is named after a kind of bush that grows
here, the Chinkapin bush. The trees are tremendous.
When a dead one lies on the ground, a tall man can see
of over the trunk, and if you walk along the top
of it as it lies there, it is as long a walk as from the
hole between our ridge and the fence to the Royce's fence,
or even longer. What do you think of that for a tree? - Our horses
stood with blank necks and hanging heads, and high pointed
saddles, with all sorts of things tied on to them, just like the
horses in Frederic Remington's pictures, which you must have seen. The
stars at night seem the same as your stars, & seemed
just as near. Good by dear Topsy

Simultaneous Worlds

quotes from William James

While I talk and the flies buzz, a sea-gull catches a fish at the mouth of the Amazon, a tree falls in the Adirondack wilderness, a man sneezes in Germany, a horse dies in Tartary, and twins are born in France.

—from a footnote in the “Necessary Truths and the Effects of Experience” chapter, *The Principles of Psychology* [1890] (1983 Harvard UP re-print edition) p. 1232

Note:

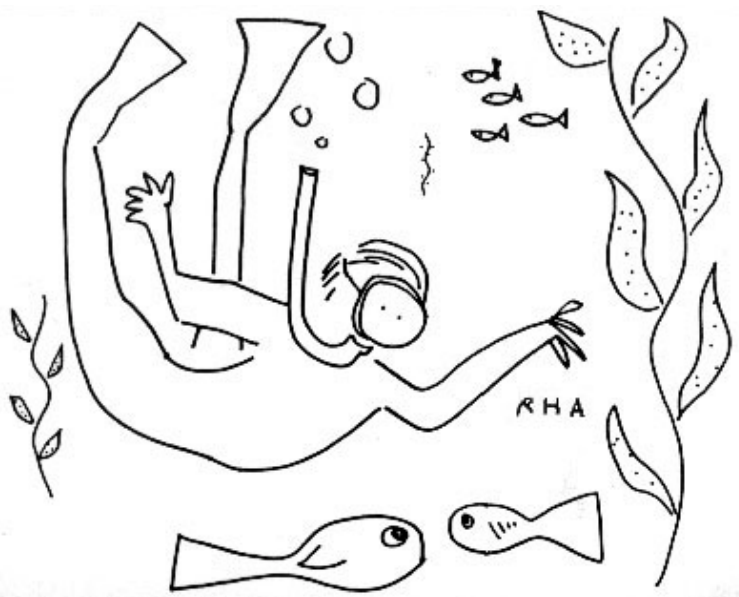
Frederick J. Ruf offers an interesting view of this quote in *The Creation of Chaos: William James and the Stylistic Making of a Disorderly World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 103



The artist notoriously selects his items, rejecting all tones, colors, shapes, which do not harmonize with each other and with the main purpose of his work. That unity, harmony, ‘convergence of characters,’ as M. Taine calls it, which gives to works of art their superiority over works of nature, is wholly due to elimination. Any natural subject will do, if the artist has wit enough to pounce upon some one feature of it as characteristic, and suppress all merely accidental items which do not harmonize with this....

Looking back, then, over this review, we see that the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities. Consciousness consists in the comparison of these with each other, the selection of some, and the suppression of the rest by the reinforcing and inhibiting agency of attention. The highest and most elaborated mental products are filtered from the data chosen by the faculty next beneath, out of the mass offered by the faculty below that, which mass in turn was sifted from a still larger amount of yet simpler material, and so on. The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it, and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. Just so the world of each of us, howsoever different our several views of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations, which gave the mere matter to the thought of all of us indifferently.

— William James, from “The Stream of Thought” chapter, *The Principles of Psychology* [1890] (1983 Harvard UP edition) p. 276-77



The Meaning of Truth *draft manuscript page by William James,*
later released in book form in 1909

Nørretranders and James

by Randall Albright

In reading *The User Illusion* (Penguin 1999) by Tor Nørretranders, I am often struck by similarities with what William James talked about.

Nørretranders pays homage to *The Principles of Psychology*, which “have a powerful contemporary ring, even after a hundred years. Against the background of the fertile period of the birth of psychology in the second half of the nineteenth century, James was able to describe a number of facets of the human mind that behaviorism and positivism removed from the psychological agenda for half a century” (UI, 176).

Nørretranders defends Gestalt psychology, which “had a tough time of it during the domination of the behaviorists at the start of the century, but today is recovering its honor and dignity, because it has become clear that sight can be understood only along lines of wholeness and hypotheses” (UI, 186). If Humpty Dumpty had a big fall, to put it metaphorically, it is hard to see what “Humpty Dumpty” once *was* or could have been seen *as*. James talked about what one may call “Gestalt” issues in *The Principles*, such as this apex in the “Sensation” chapter:

There are many other facts beside the phenomena of contrast which prove that when two objects act together on us the sensation which either would give alone becomes a different sensation (PP, 676).

Nørretranders counters “determinism” with “existentialism,” in which he names Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre (UI, 260). He describes these people as believing that man “is regarded as fundamentally a *maker of choices*, defined by his freedom, so to speak.” James clearly belongs in this company, too.

A few pages later in *The User Illusion*, when I read that “All the toil and labor behind a great performance is due to training, rehearsal, discipline....” as well as hear of the difference between the “I” and the “Me” that performs (UI, 265), I find myself thinking of both the “Habit” and “Self” chapters in *The Principles*.

It is not surprising to me to read this statement in “The Nonlinear Line” chapter: “There are practically no straight lines in nature” (UI, 377). “A raindrop on its way down a mountain will not follow a straight line. Of course, from an abstract point of view it will, because gravity will tug at it; but there is more in the world than the earth’s gravity. There is also the earth’s surface—and that is irregular” (UI, 378). James’s disdain for out-of-touch, cold, abstract thinking seems reinforced by a quote that Nørretranders takes from Benoit B. Mandelbrot:

“Why is geometry often described as ‘cold’ and ‘dry’? One reason lies in its inability to describe the shape of a cloud, a mountain, a coastline or a tree. Clouds are not spheres, mountains are not cones, coastlines are not cir-

cles, and bark is not smooth, nor does lightning travel in a straight line. More generally, I claim that many patterns of Nature are so irregular and fragmented that, compared with Euclid, Nature exhibits not simply a higher degree but an altogether different level of complexity.”

—Benoit B. Mandelbrot, *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1983 [orig. 1977]), p. 1, quoted on p. 380 of UI

As James wrote in the “Novelty and the Infinite” chapter of *Some Problems of Philosophy* about a master mathematician:

Mr. Bertrand Russell (whom I do not accuse of mystification, for Heaven knows he tries to make things clear!) treats the Achilles-puzzle as if the difficulty lay only in seeing how the paths traversed....

It seems to me however that Mr. Russell’s statements dodge the real difficulty, which concerns the ‘growing’ variety of infinity exclusively, and not the ‘standing’ variety, which is all that he envisages when he assumes that the race already to have been run and thinks that the only problem that remains is that of numerically equating the paths (SPP, 179-181).

In “The Sublime” chapter, Nørretranders says that “Many tiny activities in the right direction led to an enormous emergent transformation. Suddenly we dared to believe that nuclear war was unthinkable. And it became so” (UI, 405). He goes on to say that this is naive, but “not necessarily wrong.” Instead, he asks: “What is the consequence of this naive view?” (UI, 406) Nørretranders concurs with Niels Bohr that “we must have the courage to say naive things; do naive things, persistently and amicably over the decades, simply because we believe they are right and feel they are right and conscious that they are right” (UI, 407). “Experiencing the state of the planet can generate angst and disquiet,” he warns, but also asks that “we dare take our own experience seriously.... daring to experience what is, even if it is unpleasant” (UI, 415). To bring this back to James:

Let our common experiences be enveloped in an eternal moral order; let our suffering have an immortal significance; let Heaven smile upon the earth, and deities pay their visits; let faith and hope be the atmosphere which man breathes in;—and his days pass by with zest; they stir with prospects, they thrill with remoter values (VRE, from “The Sick Soul,” 141).

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- UI: Tor Nørretranders, *The User Illusion, Cutting Consciousness Down to Size* (Eng. trans. by Jonathan Sydenham, Penguin 1999)
PP: William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) [1983 Harvard UP edition]
VRE: William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) [Penguin 1982 edition]
SPP: William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911) [1996 U of Nebraska edition]

My Stroll with William James and Jacques Barzun

by David Dannenbaum

You may have read Jacques Barzun's *A Stroll With William James*¹, so I hope it is not presumptuous of me to encourage you to read Barzun's other works. Barzun's writings cover cultural history, education, and critical methods, and his essay, "William James and the Clue to Art"², led me to James's *Principles of Psychology*, which in turn led me to *The Varieties of Religious Experience, Essays on Pragmatism, Talks to Teachers...*, and other works in the Jamesian canon. That essay also led me to Barzun's *The Use and Abuse of Art, Darwin, Marx, Wagner: Critique of a Heritage, Teacher in America*, and his essays in a variety of collections, magazines, and newspapers.

As the dustcover on my copy of *Stroll* reports, Barzun was born in France in 1907 and came to the United States in 1920. He absorbed American language and culture quickly, according to his friend and colleague, Lionel Trilling: "Jacques ... entered Columbia College after two years of American high school, preceded by another year of tutoring with an American school-teacher. There was in his speech no trace of an 'accent.' In his bearing, in what one American sociologist calls 'the presentation of self,' there doubtless was something that ... might be called the intention of precision."²

Barzun's family life in France resembled James's in America. Both were filled with a joyful and lively intellectualism. E. W. Emerson recalled a visit to the James home in Newport in 1860 or 1861:

"The adipose and affectionate Wilkie," as his father called him, would say something and be instantly corrected or disputed by the little cock-sparrow Bob, the youngest, but good-naturedly defend his statement, and then Henry (Junior) would emerge from his silence in defense of Wilkie. Then Bob would be more impertinently insistent, and Mr. James [Senior] would advance as moderator, and William, the eldest, would join in. The voice of the moderator would presently be drowned by the combatants and he soon came down vigorously into the arena, and when, in the excited argument, the dinner knives might not be absent from eagerly gesticulating hands, Mrs. James, more conventional, but bright as well as motherly, would look at me, laughingly reassuring, saying, "Don't be disturbed, Edward, they won't stab each other. This is usual when the boys come home."³

Compare that to Barzun's growing up in Paris forty or so years later:

To be born near the beginning of the decade before the first world war and at the center of the then most advanced artistic activity in Paris is an accident bound to have irreversible consequences on the mind. The first pictures seen: Cubist; the first music heard: Stravinsky's *Sacre*; the first poetry and drama: Futurist, Simultanist, "experimental".... Anything but strange, the sights and sounds and ideas that would later make the bourgeois howl were seen as the usual domestic occupations of family and friends; it was Apollinaire interspersing his critical arguments for the grownups with stories for the child; ...Archipenko making Léger roar with laughter, Delaunay and Ozenfany debating. ... On view at close range were also Ezra Pound, Cocteau, Severini, Berard, Kandinsky, Copeau Unquestionably, art and the discussion of art were the sole concern of all who counted in that particular universe.⁴

Art and the lively discussion of art continued into Barzun's teaching. At Columbia College, Barzun and Trilling led a colloquium on selected great books of the modern period. According to Barzun, "[Trilling] was deeply interested in the great deterministic systems of Marx and Freud,... [while I] inclined to the radical empiricism of William James. [I] was finding in James, Nietzsche, Samuel Butler, Whitehead—the Pragmatic Revolution generally—a set of ideas by which to reconcile respect for natural science with a watchful sense of its limitations, and to discern in all materialisms and determinisms the illicit jump from empirical fact to arbitrary metaphysics."⁵ Their method—what Barzun calls a "methodless method"—defied classification. Trilling and Barzun dubbed it cultural criticism, which "...arose from a lively sense of the force of circumstances, balanced by an equally strong sense of the free life that ideas lead when hatched. It seemed clear to us that in order to know what books and works of art, philosophies and movements of opinion intend, one must learn their antecedents and concomitants of whatever kind; and to know how ideas thrive and change, one must trace their consequences. ...The effort was a work of the sturdiest imagination—the imagination which springs from fact and is hedged in by possibility, the literal imagination, the imagination of the real."⁶

"Antecedents," "concomitants," "consequences"—those are the raw materials of ideas thriving and changing. Or as James put it, the raw material of experience in transition.

That one moment of [Experience] proliferates into the next by transitions which, conjunctive or disjunctive, continue the experiential tissue, can not, I contend, be denied. Life is in the transitions ... as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing line of the battle;

were like the thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn. In this line we live prospectively as well as retrospectively. It is 'of' the past, inasmuch as it comes expressly as the past's continuation; it is 'of' the future in so far as it comes as the past's continuance; it is 'of' the future in so far as the future, when it comes, will have continued it.⁷

I first encountered Barzun's imagination of the real about twenty years ago as I prowled through the open stacks at the Brooklyn Public Library in search of some diverting, but substantive, summer reading. My eyes fell on *The Energies of Art*. That title intrigued me, so I flipped through a few pages to sample the writing of this (to me) unknown writer. In his introductory essay, "The Critic's Task Today," he wrote: "Chaos in the world and art is in truth Criticism's opportunity to shine. For chaos has causes; confusion has clues; history is not an impenetrable riddle, and if one can for a moment rise above the anxious fret of the personal, one will discover at least some namable sources of public dismay."⁸

Then, "Who are we in the stream of time and Western thought? Supplying an answer to this question is the critic's task today, and the best excuse for his existence. For my part, I am willing to be judged by this test for venturing to use up paper and print on 'mere' criticism."⁹

I was surprised by the clarity of Barzun's writing—surprised because the last few critical works I had read were jumbled mixtures of puns and quotations pompously declaring themselves deconstructions of texts. So I flipped to the last essay of the book, "William James and the Clue to Art," and found this:

A ... way ... of showing the relevance of James's psychology to art is to sample its abundant evidence for the view that the mind is the original artist, who hardens into a geometrician only by special effort or dull routine. James's radical new view itself resembles an artistic revolution in that, displacing from the foreground as ready-made all ideas and objects, it restores primacy to sensation and will. Objects are always clear, hard, unyielding things that remain ever themselves as they recur, whereas will and sensation fluctuate. The Jamesian mind is thus the innovator's—bathed in sensation, individual, free, and confident of its power to shape the congenial material of its own perceptions.¹⁰

I checked out the book, and began my stroll with these two great teachers.

In *The Book of J*, Harold Bloom wrote, "As we read any literary work, we necessarily create a fiction or

metaphor of its author."¹¹ In my fiction William James and Jacques Barzun are my teachers, with whom I stroll through the Grove of Academe. They point out fads posing as breakthroughs and clichés disguised as tenets; they teach me that the giving and the taking of meaning is not automatic; and they profess the virtue of clarity. Then they usher me to the gate between the grove and agora and push me into the marketplace where, "jostled by rivals and torn by critics"¹² I empirically test what I have learned.

Winded and sweaty, I return to the grove¹³ with the test results, and James and Barzun remind me that the grove is as arduous as the agora, and that enlivened minds keep the gate between them open. They also point to other teachers who can cool me off. Teachers such as Charles Sanders Pierce, Walter Bagehot, Henri Bergson, and John Jay Chapman, who in turn point me in the direction of Lionel Trilling, Richard Rorty, Northrop Frye, and Harold Bloom. My distinguished faculty all repeat Bunyan's great warning against "Knowledge not attended with doing." So I return to the agora again, ready to converse with my fellow citizens.

About conversation and its concomitant, meditation, Barzun writes:

Culture in whatever form—art, thought, history, religion—is for meditation and conversation. Both are necessary sequels to the experience. Cultivation does not come automatically after exposure to the good things as health follows a dose of the right drug. If it did, orchestra players would be the most cultured people musically and copy editors the finest judges of literature. Nor does 'reading up' on art suffice unless it spurs meditation and conversation. Both are actions of the mind along the path of finesse. No one can imagine a systematic conversation.

As for true meditation, it excludes nothing; its virtue is to comprehend—in both senses: to understand and to take in the fullest view. Both are actions of the mind-and-heart, and therefore charged with the strongest feelings. Indeed both interior monologue and spoken dialogue aim at discerning which feelings and to what degree of each belong to an idea or an image. That is how culture reshapes the personality: it develops the self by offering the vicarious experience and thought; it puts experience in order.¹⁴

Culture is not a diversion for the idle or the passive, though many believe it to be. James alerts us to this tendency in his essay, "The Social Value of the College Bred:"

We of colleges must eradicate a curious notion which numbers of good people have about such ancient seats of learning as Harvard. To many ignorant outsiders,

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that name suggests little more than a kind of sterilized conceit and incapacity for being pleased. ... In Edith Wyatt's exquisite book of Chicago sketches called "Every One his Own Way" there is a couple who stand for culture in the sense of exclusiveness, Richard Elliot and his feminine counterpart—feeble caricatures of mankind, unable to know any good thing when they see it, incapable of enjoyment unless a printed label gives them leave. Possible this type of culture may exist near Cambridge and Boston, there may be specimens there, for priggishness is just like painter's colic or any other trade disease. ... Real culture lives by sympathies and admirations—under all misleading wrappings it pounces unerringly on the human core.¹⁵

We get the words *culture* and *cultivated* from Latin: to till, to plow a field. Preparing a plot of land for a crop is no more sweaty an activity than cultivating one's mind. As tools for cultivation, James's "sympathies and admirations" go well with Barzun's "meditation and conversation," and together they open the gate of our imagination of the real, so we can put our experience in order.

As a teacher of remedial writing and English as a second language, I work with people whose native languages have no verb "to be," whose adjectives follow nouns, and whose interrogatives are distinguishable from their declaratives only by a sentence's last syllable. By appealing to my students' imaginations of the real, I show them meaning behind sounds that reverse expected word order and alter the way they look at the world. I show them how to move from the grove of translation dictionaries to the agora of conversation so that they can, in English, negotiate contracts, discuss poetry and politics, and otherwise put their experience in order. This work requires of both teacher and student knowledge attended by doing.

Daily, I encounter cultures—history, religion, art, thought—different from mine. Because the giving and taking of meaning is not automatic, it is imperative for me to walk about the student's grove—Murasaki and Mishima, Goethe and Grass, Molina and Márquez—if I expect the student to join me in my agora—Shakespeare and Shaw, Strunk and White, James and Barzun. It is a delicate task requiring tact and vigor. Occasionally I get hot and winded, but my students leave the classroom speaking more English than they did when they arrived.

The grove, the agora, and the gate are real, and my stroll with James and Barzun continues.¹⁶

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Notes

1. Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll With William James* (Harper and Row, 1983)
2. Jacques Barzun, "Personal Memoir," unfinished essay by Lionel Trilling who died before he could complete it. It was published, as he left it, in *From Parnassus: Essays in Honor of Jacques Barzun*, eds. Dora B. Weiner and William R. Keylor, Harper and Row, 1976. This collection also contains a bibliography of Barzun's works, published before 1976.
3. In Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Briefer Version), (Harper Torchbooks, 1964, p. 43)
4. Jacques Barzun, "The Critic's Task Today," in *The Energies of Art*, (Harper Brothers, 1956, pp 5-6) Available in reprint from Greenwood Press, 1975.
5. Jacques Barzun, "The Imagination of the Real," in *Art, Politics and Will: Essays in Honor of Lionel Trilling*, eds. Quentin Anderson, Stephen Donadio, and Steven Marcus (Basic Books, 1977, p. 3.)
6. "Imagination," pp. 4-5.
7. William James, "A World of Pure Experience" (1904), in *William James: Writings 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Library of America, 1987, p 1181.)
8. *Energies* (Harper and Brothers, 1956; reprinted by Greenwood Press, 1975., p. 3.)
9. *Energies*, p. 4.
10. *Energies*, p. 326.
11. *The Book of J*, translated by David Rosenberg and interpreted by Harold Bloom (Grove Weidenfeld, 1990, p. 18.)
12. James, "Experience," p. 1159.
13. In another arboreal metaphor, James described the work of philosophers and poets as blazing a trail through a forest: "Philosophers are after all like poets. They are path-finders. What everyone can feel, what everyone can know in the bone and marrow of him, they sometimes can find words for and express. The words and thoughts of the philosophers are not exactly the words and thoughts of the poets—worse luck. Both alike have the same function. They are, if I may use a simile, so many spots, or blazes,—blazes made by the axe of human intelligence on the trees of an otherwise trackless forest of human experience. They give you somewhere to go from. They give you a direction and a place to reach. They do not give you the integral forest with all its sunlit glories and its moonlit witcheries and wonders. Ferny dells, and mossy waterfalls, and secret magic nooks escape you, owned only by the wild things to whom the region is at home. Happy they without the need of blazes! But to us the blazes give a sort of ownership. We can now use the forest, wend across it with companions, and enjoy its quality. It is no longer a place merely to get lost in and never to return. The poet's words and the philosopher's phrases thus are helps of the most genuine sort, giving to all of us hereafter the freedom of the trails they made." from "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" (1898), in *William James: Writings 1878-1899* (ed. Gerald E. Myers, Library of America, 1992, p. 1078).
14. Jacques Barzun, "Culture, High and Dry," in *The Culture We Deserve*, ed. Arthur Krystal (Wesleyan University Press, 1989, pp 20-21.)
15. William James, "The Social Value of the College Bred" (1908), in *William James: Writings 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (Library of America, 1987, p 1247).
16. HarperCollins is publishing Barzun's *From Dawn to Decadence* in May, 2000. See Edward Rothstein, "A Sojourner in the Past Retraces His Steps," *The New York Times* (April 15, 2000, p B7).

A Writer for a Common Reader

by Patrizia Vallasca

My first experience with a pragmatist was with John Dewey. It was not a spontaneous impulse but a scholastic duty. In the introduction of an Italian release of an anthology of his works, William James, “il vero fondatore del pragmatismo”¹ (the true founder of pragmatism) appears as the important figure for Dewey’s thought. But Dewey seemed too committed to democracy, education, and science. I despaired at the possibility of a human solution. In his efforts with practical life, I could see only an overwhelming theory that didn’t move any chord within me. Perhaps I had been skeptical because I didn’t keep a good record of the other philosophers that I had studied at high school.

I am not alone with this spot in my formative years. I share it even with philosophers. Here is an English translation of an excerpt of an article of a newspaper from a page on philosophy:

...I am still haunted by the incubus of the philosophy they [teachers] taught in that absurd program. Who hasn’t had the feeling that philosophy teachers explain the theories of village idiots? Bewildered, at our desks, we listen to their performances: one claims that the non-existent does not exist; another, that all is water; another still, that the monad has neither doors nor windows. Finally, there is the one who insists that absolutely everything, from a volcano to a keyboard, functions according to the inevitable process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.²

This was enough for me to carefully avoid any involvement with writers who plainly claimed themselves to be philosophers. My door was closed for them. But I later found that the word “pragmatism” appeared in some books I cared much about, and since I needed to know their origin (though this is rather impossible to obtain), I began to conceive the idea of reading more about what should be, more or less, according to my

point of view a “practical discipline,” probably too practical for my culture and sensitivity.

I found the involvement of pragmatism with literary criticism particularly intriguing. Though pragmatism is not famous in Italy, “where pragmatism—withstanding a good reception at the beginning with Vailati and Papini—actually never put roots”³, you can easily and oddly find it in literary criticism.

I decided to open, a little, and no more, my door to “il vero fondatore del pragmatismo”, William James. I had read in the same page of the article quoted above that there were some translations of James’s works that were not easy to find, but I would not have believed that in my town it was impossible to find a book by William James, even in English.

I found the lack of availability of writings by James to be intriguing. When I finally obtained a copy of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*⁴ (VRE), I decided to keep my resistance strong enough that I would be able to disagree. However, I had a discovery: for me, a common reader, with lukewarm interest in philosophy, this has been amazing.

I couldn’t believe, and still I wonder how it can be, that James was considered the father or one of the fathers of the philosophy of the “Yankees.” He seemed to me nearer European Romantic thought and art.

After closing the book, I then returned to the passages about change. VRE suggests that in being able to change and submit to its risks is the richness of life. “Life changes”—James says—if we have “gifts”, our passions, that depend “almost always upon non-logical, often on organic conditions” (VRE, 141). I returned to what seemed to me a romantic vision of the world:

the practically real world for each one of us, the effective world of the individual, is the compound world, the physical facts and emotional values in indistinguishable combination (VRE, 141).

Who was William James? Is his thought irrational and “debole” (weak)? Is his thought less “practical”, less definite, but more amusing among the fathers of American philosophy? I was baffled by James’s discourse and I had been waiting so long for the moment I would have found dryness. I relaxed. His stress on life, change, doubt and imperfection fascinated me. He seemed a peculiar philosopher. In fact, his need to find the boundaries of our real world is not a way to find “good”, or at least it is not the first task; rather, it is to suggest how to

¹ Lamberto Borghi, “Introduzione” in *John Dewey Il Mio Credo Pedagogico*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1954, p. viii

² “...Faccio fatica a liberarmi dell’incubo dell’insegnamento della filosofia che ho dovuto soffrire per via dell’assurdo. Chi non ha avuto l’impressione che ci insegnassero le teorie dei matti del villaggio? Attoniti dai banchi di scuola abbiamo assistito all’entrata in scena di quello che dice che il non essere non è, poi di un altro che grida che tutto è acqua, di un altro ancora stando al quale la nomade non ha né porte né finestre, di un ultimo per cui tutto, ma proprio tutto, dal vulcano al pianoforte funziona grazie ad un processo inarrestabile di tesi, antitesi e sintesi.”

—Roberto Casati, “La filosofia ha qualcosa da insegnare?”, *Domenica, Il Sole 24 Ore*, 2 April 2000, p. 31.

³ Armando Massarenti, “Pragmatismo, Oggettività e Democrazia”, *Domenica, Il Sole 24 Ore*, 22 August 1999, p. 26; “dove il pragmatismo – nonostante il buon inizio di Vailati e Papini—non ha mai veramente attecchito”

⁴ *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature in Library of America: William James, Writings 1902-1910*

achieve a way to live a richer life.

The whole book is impregnated by a critical distance that every one of us should be able to build with our own nuances of irrationalism, empiricism, naturalism, and whatever else make a pluralistic universe of us.

Yet the book is hard to swallow. It is rather bitter for one who has grown up with Catholic education. I suppose it is in me as the milk I sucked from my mother the first days of my life. Oddly the book is sad but also enjoyable, awfully honest in putting under its lens the whole human being:

The beauty of war... is that it is so congruous with ordinary human nature. Ancestral evolution has made us all potential warriors; so the most insignificant individual, when thrown into an army in the field, is weaned from whatever excess of tenderness towards his precious person he may bring with him, and may easily develop into a monster of insensibility (VRE, 331-332).

This passage compelled me to consider my own stiffness and my "childish" fascination for people with a deep faith. I still believe that people with a deep faith are this way because they have "a direct personal communion with the divine" (VRE, 35) for me.

I do not know how but VRE gives me peace, because it seems to open a possibility towards a path to follow for everyone and especially the ones who can't find a nourishment in what they have been brought up. VRE claims the right to live a powerful religious life in this world, beginning in this moment.

I am perfectly aware, as James was, that the goal can be far—"to-morrow it must be, or to-morrow, or to-morrow; and pretty surely death will overtake me ere the promise is fulfilled."⁵

VRE reminds me of the fascination I had for nuns, especially the ones living closed in their monasteries, having left the puzzling outside world forever. I used to think that they spent enchanted ordered life of great value. They spent every moment of their life to glorify god. I looked for their transfigured faces. I loved listening to their crystalline voices and looking at their faces and hands, they are so white and smooth as if made of marble.

Generally, the oldest nun of the monastery is allowed to speak with people coming to buy their fruits, vegetables, and marmalades. The one I met had clearly forgotten the outside world; to speak with people who lived beyond the gate was a strenuous effort for her. She did it only to glorify her god. The old nun had wrinkles but they didn't seem to disturb the smoothness of her face as if even time couldn't touch her.

She was like a sort of soldier controlling the outside

world so that it would not merge with the life of the monastery; and at the same time her sacrifice was useful for the youngest, the weakest, the ones I had noticed praying into the dark church, sometimes. She seemed heroic:

We glorify the soldier as the man absolutely unincumbered. Owning nothing but his bare life, and willing to toss that up at any moment when the cause commands him, he is the representative of unhampered freedom in ideal directions (VRE, 291).

The Catholic Church is full of symbols taken from military life. The sacrament of confirmation indicates also that a Catholic becomes a soldier of Christ. In fact, the sign with the oil symbolizes also the seal that s/he belongs to god. Once the soldiers (and the slaves) had a visible mark of their master impressed on their body that claimed this possession. I must say that, for me, it is not easy to be such a kind of soldier. Who can endure such a task?

The nuns reminded me of the statue of St. Teresa by Bernini. She had been a heroine of mine during my school days. She was so lifeless though devoted, so transfigured by love though so inhuman:

...in the main her [St. Teresa] idea of religious seems to have been that of an endless amatory flirtation—if one may say so without irreverence—between the devotee and the deity, and apart from helping younger nuns to go in this direction by the inspiration of her example and instruction, there is absolutely no human use in her, or sign of any general human interest (VRE, 316).

I often went to the monastery. My mother loved it. She was almost blind, but shadows, lights, and silences have a peculiar degree within such monasteries. They are, somehow, the places of strange presences. You must go there to get them.

Sometimes I thought how much stronger I would be if I could have gotten the strongest presence of the monastery. This meant hard work: to re-vitalize one of my oldest over-beliefs that seemed dead within me.

I used to go, alone, into their little church. Perhaps I expected a miracle. Nobody from the outside world was allowed in the church while a nun was praying. Perhaps I was because I was rather nun-like, and nobody noticed me. More than one time, I saw them as they lay stretched on the cold marbled floor, like fleshly crosses, praying. It was difficult to notice them; they were motionless and colorless on the marbled floor. Then, suddenly, they got up and flew away! Their whirlings left a sort of chill. I saw how far I was from my old Church:

The dominant Church notion of perfection is of course the negative one of avoidance of sin. Sin proceeds from concupiscence, and concupiscence from our carnal pas-

5. "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" in *Library of America: William James, Writings 1878-1899*, p. 1079

sions and temptations, chief of which are pride, sensuality in all its forms, and the loves of the worldly excitement and possession (VRE, 278).

Those colorless, cold butterflies had faith, a strong, deep faith. I felt as an intruder. Where was the path that allowed *me* to participate in the glory of such a powerful god?

James's words can be more helpful than the vision of those colorless cold butterflies. He recognizes that a religious life is important and that our life will always be ours, even if we glorify a god. We must find a way for a "melioristic" life. Moreover, James points out that there are many paths to follow and every path is worth walking. So even to look at the transfigured nuns was not idle.

In fact now I am aware that I can't and do not want to be a soldier of any god, notwithstanding in truth to give up absolutes is not easy when your culture and your first religious life has been built upon them.

Another topic that has drawn my attention has been disease. I have been struck by James's words. A hundred years ago he wrote what is still hard to be accepted nowadays. He thought that a disease was not a punishment or a bad mark. He recognized even a value to a disease, how it can help to reach a richer life with a higher spirituality.

James clearly points out that "few of us are not in some way infirm, or even diseased; and our infirmities help us unexpectedly" (VRE, 30). They can help us to achieve the depths of prayer. James's view is that "[p]rayer is religion in act; that is, prayer is real religion" (VRE, 416). But what is really fascinating in James is his honesty, his openness to the point of almost a naiveté, and his strong grasp in powerful insights:

In all sad sincerity I think we must conclude that the attempt to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverances of direct religious experience is absolutely hopeless (VRE, 408).

His view is not narrowed by this admission; on the contrary, he is not afraid to merge philosophy with religion and both with science:

[...] over-beliefs in various directions are absolutely indispensable...we should treat them with tenderness and tolerance so long as they are not intolerant themselves. As I have elsewhere written, the most and valuable things about a man are usually his over-beliefs (VRE, 460).

I need over-beliefs to achieve a religious life; I need something that is beyond what I am able to demonstrate "by purely intellectual processes". James tries to explain why these are at the base of a real religious life. Over-beliefs are enclosed words of "collective name" (VRE,

33) that live in me and help me to live. With the expression of a collective name, James draws my attention to its link with "the primordial thing" (VRE, 35) that has been characterizing the essence of the varieties of religious experience which began ages ago, since the first steps of evolution. In this way, an over-belief, as the existence of god, becomes an impulse that urges me from within. It is pragmatically true because "in one sense [it] is a part of ourselves and in another sense is not ourselves, actually exerts an influence, raises our centre of personal energy, and produces regenerative effects unattainable in other ways" (VRE, 467).

For James there is also another important thing to consider as part of our life: evil. "Evil facts" – he says – "are a genuine portion of reality" (VRE, 152). As a matter of fact our life is made of everything, even disorder and chaos. It is within this blurred reality that he never got tired of underlining how our religious impulses can make one able to build a key that opens the door to where "there is actually and literally more life in our total soul than we are at any time aware of" (VRE, 457).

James doesn't hide that sometimes the key fades away or that sometimes it no longer opens the door. James never opens the door for us. He knows he can't. For him "philosophers are after all like poets. They are path-finders. What everyone can feel, what everyone can know in the bone and marrow of him, they sometimes can find words for and express"⁶. James never blurs his identity. He doesn't show his own transfigured face. He is "only" a human being with the gift of words. He is not ashamed of living upon his own fears and joys. He suggests to me that I do the same. He believes that perfection is not the goal but life, "a larger, richer, more satisfying life" (VRE, 453) and this should be also "the end of religion" (VRE, 453).

James is not giving me a new theology or cosmology; he doesn't give us new beliefs to believe, they are strictly personal. So there is no contradiction in James, even when he must admit that "I can't possibly pray—I feel foolish and artificial"⁷.

And so, instead of concluding, let me begin: it seems to me that James sometimes is dazzling as a poet, and that it is ridiculous to label him as a founder of American philosophy. He seems first of all a writer for a common reader or, rather, a writer for me.

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6. "Philosophical Conceptions," p. 1078

7. *William James Writings, 1902-1910*, p. 1185

Orvieto's Well

by Patrizia Vallasca

In the Spring of 1905, William James visited the artesian well in Orvieto, known originally as Pozzo della Rocca. By that time, it was known by the name of Pozzo di San Patrizio. I would like to add some historical context to the well that James saw, and also share information that would have been available to him as a tourist at the time.

In 1527 Antonio da Sangallo il Giovane, one of the greatest architects of Italian Renaissance, was commissioned by pope Clement VII to create a well near a fortress, la Rocca, to provide the town of sufficient water in case of an attack by the army of Charles V. Rome had been sacked in 1525. These were troublesome years for the power of the Catholic Church.

As an artist of his time, wanting to express something alive, Antonio da Sangallo built inside the well a serpentine structure—two staircases going like spirals down towards the water, carved inside the well.

This artistic aspect of the well also had a practical value. The people and animals carrying water could climb down the 248 steps to the wooden bridge and then climb up the other side.

The Latin inscription above one of the two entrances celebrates the difficulty of this work, and suggests that man can improve upon merely found “nature,” a theme that also runs through James’s work:

QUOD NATURA MUNIMENTO INVIDERAT INDUSTRIA ADIECIT

(What nature refused to supply, human industry added)

The well became known as Pozzo di San Patrizio, the name of a famous and miraculous cave in Ireland that, according to the legend, had been revealed by Christ to Saint Patrick. This name began to appear in the popular 18th and 19th century guidebooks:

Al nord della Rocca, in prossimità della rupe, vedesi il famoso Pozzo di S. Patrizio, così detto, per analogia alla caverna che fu un tempo aperta per miracolo, alle preghiere di S. Patrizio.¹

(To the north of the fortress, near the cliff, you can see the famous Well of Saint Patrick, so-called by analogy to the cavern that was once opened miraculously, according to legend, by the prayer of Saint Patrick.)

Another guide from 1891, edited by the municipality of Orvieto, reports:

In tempi molto più tardi si usò chiamare il nostro pozzo di San Patrizio, gareggiando in celebrità con quello di San Patrizio in Irlanda..., di cui si spacciarono tante cose favolose....²

(Long after, our well used to be called “the well of Saint Patrick,” contending for celebrity with the one of Saint Patrick in Ireland...of which many fables have been passed down....)

The reference to Saint Patrick placed a fabulous halo around the well, and some Italian proverbial expressions³ grew up around it. “Essere come il pozzo di S. Patrizio” (to be like the Pozzo of Saint Patrick) can infer one who has a great appetite for food or knowledge, one that can never be satisfied. It also implies that one can be an endless resource.

The most important resource that the well gave was clean drinking water. The coin for the celebration of the well that Clement VII had commissioned to Benvenuto Cellini insists on water as a holy symbol. One side of the coin illustrates the passage of the book of Exodus (17:6) in which Moses, striking the stone with his rod, makes the water spring. It has also the Latin inscription:

UT BIBAT POPULUS

(For people to drink)

James called the Pozzo of S. Patrizio an “extraordinary well” and, having seen the well myself, I agree that it is extraordinary, linking art with practical life and religious belief.

Some statistics of the well include:

Period of realization: 1527-1537;

Height: 58 meters;

Height outside the earth: 4.85 meters;

Depth: 53.15 meters;

Diameter, outside: 12.21 meters;

Diameter, inside: 4.65 meters;

Steps: 248 from one side and 247 from the other side;

Windows: 72.

1. Piccolomini Adami Tommaso, *Guida Storico Artistica* della città di Orvieto e suoi contorni. Preceduta da cenni storici, cronologici e dalla topografia della città, Tip. all’ins. Di S. Bernardino, Siena, 1883, p. 233.

2. Fumi Luigi, *Orvieto Note Storiche e Biografiche*, Tipografia dello Stabilimento di S. Lapi, Città di Castello, 1891, p. 191.

3. For more references “Battaglia”, *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, UTET, Torino, 1961, vol. XIII.

Truth and the Fender Stratocaster

by Greg Stone

So I feel 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; and although now, if ever, would be the fit occasion, yet I cannot take you to the wondrous hidden spot today. To-morrow it must be, or to-morrow, or to-morrow; and pretty surely death will overtake me ere the promise is fulfilled.

—William James¹

In late 1966 Jimi Hendrix moved to England and began to play clubs. Jeff Beck related the experience of hearing Hendrix for the first time. He, Eric Clapton, and Jimmy Page went together to see Hendrix play a club in London. He explained that this was strange to begin with, since the three of them never did things together. They were so shattered by the experience that they were inseparable for the next two weeks, a kind of impromptu support group. In essence, the force of the musical reality that Hendrix created made them feel like the survivors of a world that had just been overwhelmed and destroyed.

A short time later Jeff Beck would be named by Hendrix, in a Rolling Stone interview, as the best guitarist in England. Eric Clapton was "god". These guys were IT. They were on the cutting edge. They were celebrated and adored. In the eyes of their fans, they had reached the pinnacle of musical truth.

...the poets and philosophers themselves know as no one else knows that what their formulas express leaves unexpressed almost everything that they organically divine and feel.²

Then they saw Hendrix, and they realized that they had been playing with toys. Their use of feedback and string bending was merely a new twist in an old game. Here was a guy with a brand new game. He was IT. The truth had been revealed.

No one like the path-finder himself knows the immensity of the forest, or knows the accidentality of his own trails.³

The quest for truth, and for Hendrix the truth of his life and the truth of his music were one, is a lonely and insecure business. Despite his success in the eyes of his peers, Hendrix was consumed with failure. Even his remarkable technique was not up to his musical vision. Most of his studio tapes were unusable due to errors in his playing. The very fact that his vision drove him to the edge of what was possible, constituted his enduring greatness. I'm reminded of Frank Lloyd Wright whose vision was so compelling that his customers were willing to overlook the fact that, because his vision was ahead of what was technologically possible, their roofs leaked.

The one-way chain of causality, like Euclidian geometry, is a useful abstraction, but cannot be found in the real world. Recursion is the rule, and vision can feed on technique. Just before coming to England, Hendrix saw the Mothers of Invention. Frank Zappa was using a wah wah pedal and loaned it to Hendrix. It's possible that Hendrix perceived a missing piece of his vision, but it's also possible that he was simply intrigued by Zappa's expert use of this device and wanted to experiment with it. Probably it was both. The wah wah became Hendrix's first regular "effect" and an integral part of his sound.

The visionary is a romantic. He perceives a truth and struggles to bring it to fruition in the world. He becomes a technician solely in service to his vision. In the early days of PC's, I read many accounts of scientists who, in struggling to solve a problem, suddenly became aware of the applicability of a PC, promptly bought one and became expert programmers.

The pure technician is a strict rationalist. I've known many musicians that could play a seemingly exact copy of a Hendrix, or Clapton, or Beck piece, but were unable to create their own unique voice/vision/truth. Hendrix did have an advantage in getting people's attention with his impressive technique. A group of innovative techniques strung together randomly is noise, in support of a "higher order" of coherence, it's music. If Hendrix hadn't drawn listeners into his musical vision, he would have made no lasting impression.

Just as music ruled by technique is meaningless noise, so within a philosophy ruled by rationalists or a psychology ruled by biologists, we humans are so much deterministic meat. Pragmatic truth is valued in human terms. Radical empiricism is human experience. William James places the locus on the truth-relation, but while he insists on the existence of the object, I still can't see why this is necessary to pragmatism or radical empiricism. Pragmatically, it doesn't seem to matter whether there is an objective reality or not. Since everything is based on our experience, what matter whether it is reflecting an objective reality or is self-contained? We are creating reality out of the inexpressible, regardless of whether the inexpressible is an internal or external phenomenon. It hardly matters whether spiritual perceptions come from God, the collective unconscious

1. "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" (1898) in *Library of America: William James, Writings 1878-1899*, p. 1078-9

2. *Ibid*, p. 1078

3. *Ibid*

Truth and the Fender Stratocaster by Greg Stone

or our DNA. William James believed in free will, believed in God, believed in human potential; he believed all these romantic notions, quite simply, because he needed to.

Jimi Hendrix attracts us. When he held the inanimate matter of a guitar in his hands, his powerful creative spirit infused it with life as God did when He breathed life into the clay. Hendrix brought forth tor-

rents of beauty as God did when He painted the sky with stars. Either the power of creation is within us and we can struggle to build heaven or we are damned to a deterministic hell. I stand with Hendrix and James in affirming free-will and the power of human creativity. I have no other meaningful choice, it's the only game in town.

WJ and the Pragmatic Method: Potent and Plural

by Chris Peterson

William James is a “potent” thinker: expressive and creative in his thoughts rather than logically rigorous or systematically coherent. Unfortunately, it is the later two characteristics which are privileged in philosophy rather than the former. The history of philosophy has a knack for reducing thinkers and thoughts to what is most sterile and basic, and this is particularly true of James and his pragmatism. To this extent, let us look at pragmatism from a different purview, one that does justice to James’s potency.

Where does James articulate his initial and explicit understanding of “pragmatism”? Curiously, it is not at Harvard, his psychological and philosophical home on the East coast. James traveled out west, to the symbolic end of western civilization, giving a lecture at Berkeley, California. In 1898 he ushered in pragmatism, not with his familiar colleagues from Harvard, but with new westward friends at Berkeley. His lecture, entitled “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results,” came to be recognized, by friends and foes alike, as the beginning of a profound philosophical movement with a uniquely American flavor. James suggests as much when he says, “Believing in philosophy myself devoutly, and believing also that a kind of new dawn is breaking upon us philosophers, I feel impelled, per fas aut nefas [right or wrong], to try to impart to you some news of the situation.”¹ This new dawn is pragmatism, which can be understood broadly as both an experiential and experimental philosophy. First, on an abstract level, pragmatism is a method by which “Truth,” “Reason” and other such lofty capitalized terms are to be understood as “of this world;” as having an experiential quality inherent within them, that is, having a capacity to affect (us) and be affected (by us). Second, at a more concrete level, pragmatism invites individuals to experiment with their own experiences so as to bring about difference, change, and growth: be it through their analyses, writings, relationships with others, activism, etc. It would seem that the second characteristic of pragmatism presupposes the first: insofar as one experiments, the only fabric from which any experimentation is made possible is drawn from the very folds of experience itself. James echoes this open sentiment suggesting that, “pragmatism is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses and to count the humblest and most personal

experiences. She will [even] count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences.”²

One of James’ favorite descriptions of pragmatism is that it does not stand for any particular results; that this curious “philosophy of consequences” stands for none at the outset. There is no specific doctrine nor dogma that one has to uphold, adhere to, or attempt to realize. Rather, there is only a method of approach, an ethos. What then is the method of pragmatism? It consists of a certain attitude of orientation, which can be understood as a new type of philosophical visibility, “of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.”³ Pragmatism consists in the transition away from the abstract (“first things”) towards the concrete (“last things”)—looking forward rather than backward. James also describes pragmatism as a reorganization or transvaluation of many “inveterate habits” dear to professional philosophy: “[The pragmatist] turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power.”⁴ The pragmatic attitude wholly rejects any static conceptualizations where truth, subjectivity, or knowledge could be locked into a perfect and motionless order, and instead resides within the flux and movement of such terms: truth as created, subjectivity as becoming, and knowledge as fallible. Hence, the pragmatic attitude of orientation is such that philosophical abstractions lose their historical import, while the prosaic concreteness of everyday life becomes primary. It is an attitude that insists upon the rich multiplicity inherent in such concreteness, thereby orientating one away from the motionless and sedentary modes of thought. Thus, this pragmatic orientation exemplifies, above all, the pluralist attitude.

Given this attitude, pragmatism seizes upon the movement of discourses, concepts, ideas, and terms. As such, it does not seek to undermine or determine the authenticity of a discourse, “Is this true or is this false?” Rather and against this “sentiment of rationality,” it asks a very different type of question: Does this work? This question, although deceptively simple, motivates James’s entire pragmatic project, allowing him to vision philosophy in a very unique manner. This shift in philosophical questioning makes room for other questions such as: What is the consequence, or the effect of such a discourse or activity? How does this discourse on “the good” realize itself in our con-

¹ William James, *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 363. Hereafter cited as WWJ.

² *Pragmatism* (1907), from “Lecture Two”, WWJ, 390.

³ *Pragmatism*, from “Lecture Two”, WWJ, 380.

⁴ *Pragmatism*, from “Lecture Two”, WWJ, 379.

crete experience? What has been the result of telling people that life on earth is finite while life after death is infinite? The first type of question—posed in terms of truth or falsity—implicitly defines the veracity or truth of a belief as a stagnant property inherent within it; whereas pragmatism proposes that, “Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process.”⁵ Pragmatism concerns itself with this event of truth, this process by which something becomes true. By inserting an organic sense of movement within the very terms that it analyzes, pragmatism’s concrete fallibilism pays little heed to questions concerning the first principle or the presupposed maxim of a given belief or theory. Rather, this philosophy of movement focuses passionately on how a specific premise, presupposition, or belief actualizes itself in our experience: how the truth of a given belief changes over time, how its specific effects transmutate and adapt along side of other beliefs, and how the ‘truth-effects’ manifest concretely within the realm of experience. In short, pragmatism’s preoccupation is in determining the “cash value” of a given concept, idea, or term. As such, pragmatism becomes a philosophy of vital movement.

The second fundamental aspect to the pragmatic method entails the notion of difference. James explains that the pragmatist affirms, “that there can be no difference anywhere that doesn’t make a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn’t express itself in a difference in concrete fact.”⁶ Stated differently, a pragmatist will ask the question, “What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true?”⁷ This resolve for sniffing out differences, following thought down to its manifest difference, strikes at the very heart of pragmatism. Locating this actual difference among various positions is a practice almost unknown for philosophers, but resonates clearly for those who are facing a real obstacle in their lives or a problem in their daily activity—that is, determining real differences is a common practice for those who are concerned with their real experiences. Hence, for the pragmatist, philosophy itself becomes more experimental, akin to a practice of thought rather than an implementation of theory: testing or exploring where a particular concept will lead, rather than following a given doctrine or applying a given formula. Philosophy also becomes more experiential insofar as it is directed towards the experiential difference that a particular practice or statement implies. Thus, whereas a philosopher concerned with the difference between the “God”

in Spinoza and the “God” in Descartes will look for textual, conceptual, structural, and philosophical differences; a pragmatist will determine how these two instances of gods differ, based upon how they resonate in an individual’s real experience. A pragmatist will determine the actual difference by grafting the two conceptualizations into their individual experience and then judge whether the difference makes any difference. This is actual difference as distinct from philosophical difference insofar as the former is directed towards the future action of the individual (i.e. how does this conception augment or change my relations with and in the world?); while merely philosophical differences are based on institutional alliances, departmental investments or historical debates, and as such, have no strong consequences for nor do they impinge upon an individual’s living experience. Hence, pragmatism can also be understood as a philosophy of difference.

All of the pragmatic endpoints (experiential, experimental, movement, and difference) discussed here cry out against those “important” characteristics championed by academic philosophy mentioned above. It seems to me that the necessity of James’s thought stems from his evaluation of life as potentiality, possibility, creativity, and potency. Perhaps James is undervalued within this discipline because his thought values precisely that which has no value.

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5. *Pragmatism*, from “Lecture Six”, WWJ, 430.

6. *Pragmatism*, from “Lecture Two”, WWJ, 379.

7. *Pragmatism*, from “Lecture Two”, WWJ, 377.



Resting Dove
by Bay James (1999)

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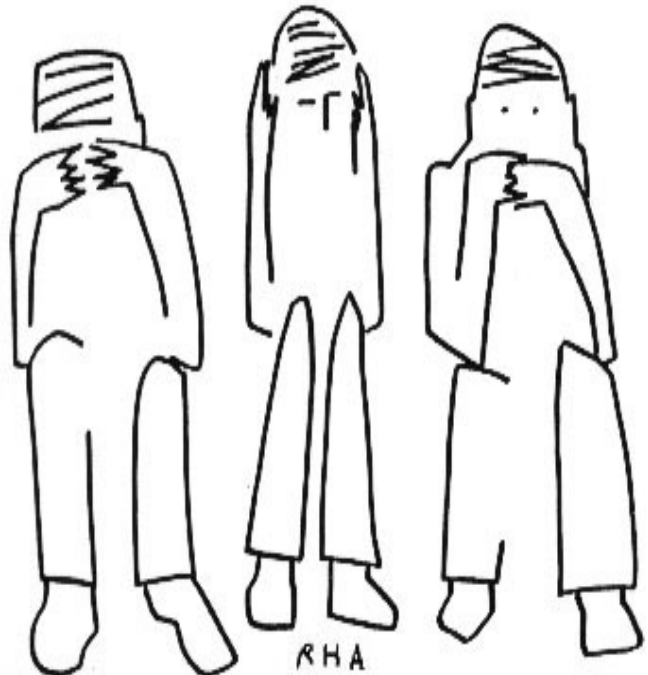
Discovering James

by Phil Oliver

I discovered James in my first year of Graduate School at Vanderbilt, in the early 1980's. I had majored in philosophy as an undergraduate at one of those Enormous State Universities in the heartland, but the professors there were about equally divided between continental esoterica and analytical/meta-ethical banality. American Philosophy was unknown and unmentioned. Eastern Philosophy pretty much meant Rod Chisholm and his ilk.

James hit me then like an invigorating gale wind. He wrote well, didn't deliberately obfuscate, and allowed his own personal and human vulnerabilities to show in his thinking and writing. After picking up the two volumes of letters edited by his son (1920 Atlantic edition), I was hooked for good. I didn't know if James was right but I sure knew I wanted him to be. He was the first philosopher I ever found myself actively "rooting" for, and though I'm still a little uneasy about some of his commitments (his leaning-over-backward receptivity to supernaturalism and so forth), his unique way of "reacting on life" awakened my own intellectual and humane sympathies enough to make me try and try again to grasp the "center of his vision." The effort has always been well-rewarded.

—Phil Oliver's e-mail = POliver826@aol.com



Dissociation by R.H. Albright (1983)

Note: In *Re-Writing The Soul* (Princeton UP, 1995), Ian Hacking credits William James with first bringing this psychological term to the English language.