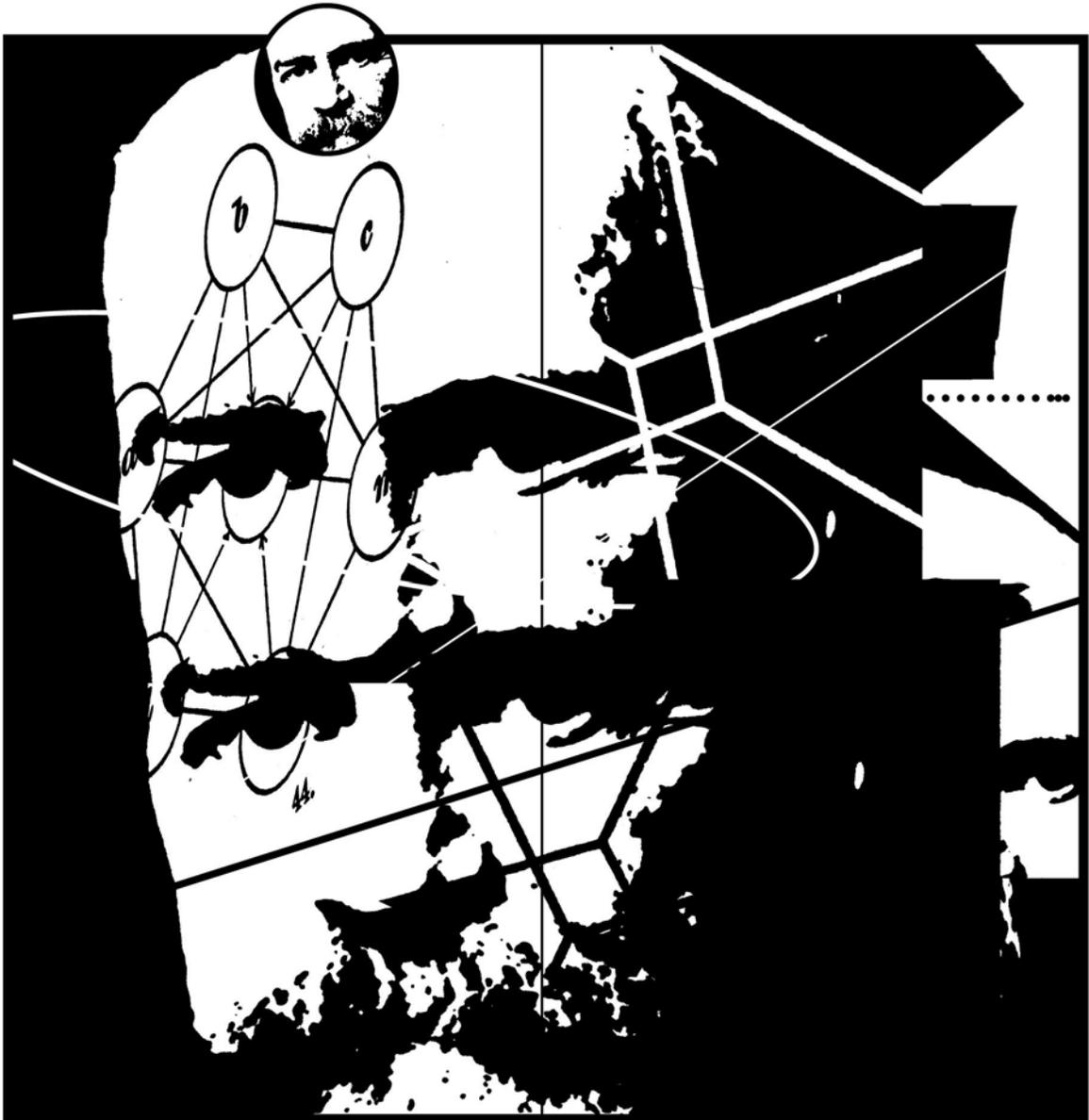


*Streams
of
William James*

*A Publication of the William James Society
Volume 4 • Issue 3 • Fall 2002*



Roy R. Behrens

First Special Issue on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*
Historical Perspectives on the Gifford Lectures and the 1902 Text
Paul Jerome Croce and John Snarey • Guest Editors

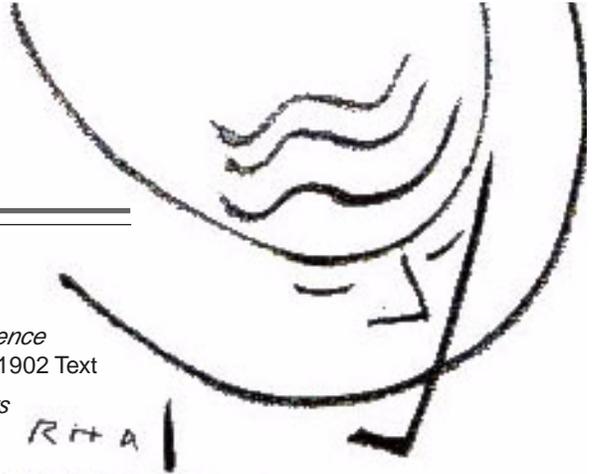
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"The purpose of the William James Society shall be to encourage study of, and communication about, the life and work of William James (1842-1910) and his ongoing influence in the many fields to which he contributed."

—Article I,
William James Society Constitution

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Introduction to the First Special Issue: Honoring a Pioneer

by Paul Jerome Croce

In this special issue, we honor William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* on the 100th anniversary of its publication. This occasion presents *Streams of William James* with an opportunity to explore our centenary topic with a feast of in-depth inquiries from many disciplines. And stay tuned: in a few months, we will be serving up another spread of articles. This first special issue will focus on historical perspectives and analyses of the text. The second issue will deal with contemporary perspectives on James's psychology of religion.

After 100 years of turmoil and change, observers of the ever-divergent varieties of religion and students of diverse methods in its interpretation can find ongoing inspiration in James's insights. His emphasis on personal experience at the core of religious meaning is even more relevant today than it was 100 years ago. For instance, his typology about the healthy-minded personality and the sick soul have enduring practical significance for understanding spiritual temperaments. His urge to find the natural correspondences to supernatural experiences anticipated much contemporary academic inquiry in science and religion, the interdisciplinary neurosciences, theology, the philosophy of mind, and the psychology of religion. His insights about the divided self, conversion, saintliness, and mysticism have an enduring ring to them. And, of course, his stories about people transported through the doors of the subliminal are riveting good reads.

The first article in this issue offers some thick descriptions of the Gifford Lectures and the tradition of natural theology that they were designed to honor. Hendrika Vande Kemp serves as a guide through ancient and modern philosophies of nature and creation to provide the context for Adam Gifford's bequest for lectures on "the true and felt knowledge... of the relations of man and of the universe to... the Being, Nature, and Attributes of the Infinite." She then shows how James both addressed the concerns of natural theology and pressed its limits with his inquiries into the psychology of human nature—and in doing so, enlarged the prestige of the Gifford Lectures.

The next two articles deal with James's own psychology in the writing of the lectures. Ryan Snyder starts from the premise that the tension between a passionate commitment to meaningful action and a recognition of the limits of such action spurred not only *The Varieties* but also James's broader personal and intellectual projects. The outcome of his act of inquiry into faith, Snyder details, was not an ultimate solution to this tension, but rather a continuous process of resolution. By attending to the details of James's biography and the way he composed his lectures, Snyder presents James offering faith as a tactful balance of competing elements that aimed at, but never achieved, resolution. Michel Ferrari deals with the psychological

relationship between the father who experienced religion personally and the son who described religious experiences vividly but vicariously. The apparent paradox of *The Varieties* is that William James was sympathetic with religion experienced "at first hand" by others, but he did not himself feel an ardent religious belief. Adding another layer to Gordon Allport's "productive paradoxes," Ferrari shows that James did have an array of germinally spiritual experiences, and he was convinced of the pragmatic importance of religious belief.

Christopher Nelson follows a similar thread of thought in his evaluation of James's exploration of human-induced mystical experiences—more to the point, he evaluates his experimentation with drugs and their influence on consciousness. Nelson proposes that these experiences, and James's understanding of the physiological effects of those stimulants on himself and others, influenced his composition of the Gifford Lectures. The direct personal experience of an "artificial mystic state of mind" gave James not only a first-hand experience of the extranatural, but also a vivid—and very personal—sympathy with the religious figures he discussed in his lectures.

That sympathy for diverse views is one of the most appealing features of William James. In a similar way, his work appeals to readers of diverse perspectives. Readers of this special issue will add still more disciplinary layers to their interpretations of *The Varieties* from study of the last two articles. Richard Gale focuses on a tantalizing inconsistency in the lectures: James's central contention that experience is the substance of religion and his claim that over-beliefs are a person's most interesting and valuable features. With rigorous and precise reasoning, Gale examines how religion is believed and lived, and links James's analysis of religious experience with his will to believe. Marcia Ian finds the internal tensions in James's thought to be the sites of some of his most significant insights about consciousness, experience, reason's relations to impulses, and his critiques of scientific confidence. In particular, she identifies a persistent unease with reason in James, despite his reasonable temperament and goals. This "impasse of reason" is also, however, a source of his sensitivity to the subtleties of religious experience and to the worldly life of religion.

In their close attention to the history of James's construction of the text, and their analysis of *The Varieties* itself, these articles pay tribute to William James and acknowledge the continuing significance of his work. They also share an emphasis on the importance of religious experience for understanding this landmark in the psychology of religion and for comprehending the elusive spiritual meanings that James pointed toward with such freshness of insight.

—Paul Jerome Croce is Professor and Chair of American Studies at Stetson University and author of *Science and Religion in the Era of William James, Volume 1: Eclipse of Certainty, 1820-1880 (U of North Carolina P, 1995)*. His article, "Calming the Screaming Eagle: William James as Brother and Friend to Warriors in the Civil War," is forthcoming in the March 2003 issue of *New England Quarterly*. E-mail = pcroce@stetson.edu

The Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology: Historical Background to James's Varieties

by Hendrika Vande Kemp

On 21 August 1885, Adam [Lord] Gifford (1820-1887), a Scottish jurist with literary and philosophical interests, signed a will that left £80,000 for a lectureship in natural theology at four major Scottish universities: £25,000 to the University of Edinburgh, £20,000 each to the University of Glasgow and the University of Aberdeen, and £15,000 to the University of St. Andrews. In the will, Gifford (1885/1986) clearly stated his motivation for leaving the residue of his estate “for the good of” his “fellow-men”:

I having been many years deeply and firmly convinced that the true knowledge of God, that is, of the Being, Nature, and Attributes of the Infinite, of the All, of the First and the Only Cause, that is, the One and Only Substance and Being, and the true and felt knowledge (not mere nominal knowledge) of the relations of man and of the universe to Him, and of the true foundations of all ethics and morals, being, I say, convinced that this knowledge, when really felt and acted on, is the means of man's highest well-being, and the security of his upward progress, I have resolved, from the “residue” of my estate as aforesaid, to institute and found, in connection, if possible, with the Scottish Universities, lectureships or classes for the promotion of the study of said subjects, and for the teaching and diffusion of sound views regarding them, among the whole population of Scotland. (Gifford, pp. 71-72)

Based on this conviction, Gifford dictated that a lectureship or popular chair be established for

‘Promoting, Advancing, Teaching, and Diffusing the study of Natural Theology,’ in the widest sense of that term, in other words, ‘The Knowledge of God, the Infinite, the All, the First and Only Cause, the One and the Sole Substance, the Sole Being, the Sole Reality, and the Sole Existence, the Knowledge of His Nature and Attributes, the Knowledge of the Relations which men and the whole universe bear to Him, the Knowledge of the Nature and Foundation of Ethics or Morals, and of all the Obligations and Duties thence arising’. (Gifford, pp. 72-73)

Gifford included various stipulations relating to the distribution of funds and terms of the lectureships, indicated his desire that the lectures should be “public and popular” (Gifford, p. 74), and mandated that

The lecturers appointed shall be subjected to no test of any kind, and shall not be required to take any oath, or to emit or subscribe any declaration of belief, or to make any promise of any kind; they may be of any denomination whatever, or of no denomination at all (and many earnest and high-minded men prefer to belong to no ecclesiastical denomination); they may be of any religion or way of thinking, or as is sometimes said, they may be of no religion, or they may be so-called skeptics or agnostics or freethinkers, provided only that the ‘patrons’ will use diligence to secure that they are earnest inquirers after truth. (Gifford, pp. 73-74)

Providing a succinct definition of natural theology, Gifford added the desideratum that the lecturers

treat their subject as a strictly natural science, the greatest of all possible sciences, indeed, in one sense, the only science, that of Infinite Being, without reference to or reliance upon any supposed special exceptional or so-called miraculous revelation. I wish it considered just as astronomy or chemistry is. (Gifford, p. 74)

The Tradition of Natural Theology

The earliest forms of natural theology appear in ancient Greek philosophy in the concept variously translated as “the prime mover,” “the unmoved mover,” or “the first cause.” In Plato's (427-347 BCE) dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus, Socrates concluded his argument on the immortality of the soul as follows: “therefore the self-moving is the beginning of motion; and this can neither be destroyed nor begotten, else the whole heavens and all creation would collapse and stand still, and never again have motion or birth” (Plato, 245 BCE/2002). Aristotle (384-323 BCE) introduced the concept of a first principle in *Physics*, and named it “God” in *Metaphysics* (350 BCE/2000):

For the most divine science is also most honourable; and this science alone must be, in two ways, most divine. For the science which it would be most meet for God to have is a divine science, and so is any science that deals with divine objects; and this science alone has both these qualities; for (1) God is thought to be among the causes of all things and to be a first principle, and (2) such a science either God alone can have, or God above all others. (Plato, Book I, Part 2)

No doubt the capitalized “God” is an interpolation by the Christian translator. Watson (1978) claimed that “the concept of the unmoved mover was seized upon by scholars in later ages in their search for God in Aris-

totle and a single 'supreme unmoved mover' was lifted to theological heights" (Watson 1978, p. 65). Aristotle's discussion of an unmoved mover "took place in two different realms—one concerned with types of motion [*Physics*], the other with a theological necessity [*Metaphysics*]. His use in psychology of the unmoved mover was singularly free from theological complications" (Watson 1978, p. 65).

The phrase "natural theology" (*theologia naturalis*) was apparently coined by the prolific Roman scholar Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 BCE), who,

probably following the Stoic philosopher Panaetius, divided theology into three concepts: mythical, natural (or physical), and civil (or political). Mythical theology was concerned with the myths about the gods and the doctrines implied in them; political theology with the descriptions of the rites and of the religious practices of various cities or states; and natural theology was the science of divinity, the proper occupation of philosophers. (Apostolic secession doctrine, 1998/2002)

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) adopted this definition of *theologia naturalis* in *De civitate Dei* (Augustine, 413-426/1998), where he argued that the Christian doctrine of the One God was thoroughly consistent with the deepest insights of Greek philosophy.

Christian natural theologians generally appeal to two biblical texts. In Psalm 19:1¹ the psalmist wrote: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork." In Romans 1:19-20 the author declared: "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." Contemporary Christian natural theology generally refers to "the knowledge of God drawn from nature in distinction from the knowledge of God contained in revelation" (*Natural Theology*, 2001). The distinction comes from St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who developed his natural theology in response to a medieval version of the contemporary controversy between science and religion: Siger of Brabant's doctrine of two truths or double truth, which led to his arrest for heresy in 1277 (Klein 1970; Leahey 1987). The two truths represented faith and reason as two epistemologies, "one derived from nature by the use of the Aristotelian logic, subject to the authority of the Church, the other, truth above reason, revealed by God but formulated and taught solely by authority of

the Church" (*Natural theology*, 2001). As articulated by the Arabian philosopher Averroës, "what faith decrees as true may be false in the light of reason, just as what reason finds to be true might be false in the light of faith" (Klein 1970, p. 163). Aquinas responded with a doctrine of one truth: "There were two paths to the same truth, not two truths. The theologian and the philosopher consider the same truths, but from different points of view" (Watson 1978, pp. 120-121).

The thomistic understanding became an official part of Catholic doctrine in the late 19th century at the Vatican Council that met from 8 December 1869 through 20 October 1870 by order of Pope Pius IX. The Council's dogmatic *Constitution on the Catholic Faith* addressed "the **natural and supernatural knowledge of God**. It then declare[d] that God, the beginning and end of all things can also be known with certainty by the natural light of reason" (Kirch 1912/1999). The *Constitution* further asserted that "The mysteries of faith cannot, indeed, be fully grasped by natural reason, but **revealed truth can never contradict the positive results of the investigation of reason**. Contrariwise, however, every assertion is false that contradicts the truth of enlightened faith. **Faith and true learning are not in hostile opposition; they rather support each other in many ways.**"

The phrase "natural theology" thus originally described philosophical theology.² Only in the 17th century, after the publication of Bacon's (1605/2000) *The Advancement of Learning*, would natural theology suggest the application of the hypothetico-deductive method and the observations associated with empiri-

2. John Locke (1632-1704) attributed "knowledge of God's existence to *demonstration*" (Klein 1970, p. 373) in the following argument (Locke 1690/2002):

Since I know intuitively that I exist as a thinking thing, and since nothing can be made to exist except by something else which both exists and has powers at least equal to those of each of its creations, it follows that from all eternity there must have existed an all-powerful cogitative being. (Kemerling 2001)

Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677), who was one of Adam Gifford's heroes (Jaki 1986, p. 7), also focused on thinking as prime evidence of God's existence:

What [Spinoza] called "true knowledge" was tantamount to getting to know Nature and for him getting to know Nature was equivalent to getting to know God. His God was not a transcendental Being but a symbol of the sum total of fixed principles of order or scientific law in the light of which the universe is viewed as a cosmos and not as a chaos.... [He had] a metaphysical concept of God as both extended and thinking substance. (Klein 1970, pp. 405-406)

1. Quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible* (1989).

cism. As both traditions continue, scholars differ radically in their definitions of natural theology. Long (1992b) argues that some of its practitioners limit natural theology to the two philosophical traditions associated with arguments for the existence of God:

In the ontological tradition God is held to be present and immediately knowable to every soul. God is the basis or the presupposition of the question of God itself. In this tradition, says Tillich [1959], “man is immediately aware of something unconditional which is the prius of the separation and interaction of subject and object, theoretically as well as practically.” By contrast, knowledge of God in the cosmological tradition is understood to be a way of rational inference from the world to God, or, better, from God’s effects to God. (Long 1992b, p. 2)

Long suggests that “natural theology in the broader sense might be understood to refer to all knowledge of God not dependent on appeals to the authority of special or particular revealed revelation” (Long 1992b, p. 2). A natural theologian may then “appeal to any relevant data including that of religious experience and would be able to use any philosophical method appropriate to [the] task” with the purpose of “providing connections between religious faith and the more general dimensions of our knowledge and experience” (Long 1992b, pp. 2-3). Such a broad definition emerged in the Gifford Lectures.

The Gifford Lectures: A Brief Overview

The Gifford Lectures, which rotated unevenly through the four Scottish universities, began in 1888. Since then, approximately 215 lecture series have taken place: 44 at Aberdeen, 76 at Edinburgh, 45 at Glasgow, 46 at St. Andrews, and 4 at unidentified universities.³ Several scholars have identified themes running through the Gifford Lectures: the teleological argument (Cranston 1930); theism and reason (McKay 1941); the knowledge of God (Ficek 1954); the problem of evil (Hughes 1989); personal idealism, immanentist humanism, freedom of the will, thomism, reductionism and materialism, natural religion, and comparative religion (Jaki 1986); and the history of natural theology (Jones 1966 and 1970).

The influence of the Gifford Lectures extends far

beyond Lord Gifford’s intended audience of Scottish citizens. The Gifford Lectures have become “the foremost intellectual event in the matter of religion” (D. A. C. 2001). In the first published assessment of the lectures, Jones (1970) wrote: “One can hardly conceive that there is a university in any land which does not have on the shelves of its library at least some volumes of Gifford lectures” (p. 14). Lecturers have included “the great names of science, philosophy and theology” (p. 15), and “religion has been discussed by the anthropologist, the psychologist, the sociologist and the historian” (p. 19). Jaki (1986) concluded that the lectures had by the 1980s grown “into a prominent forum for that officially neglected part of philosophy which is natural theology” (p. viii). This prestige contrasts greatly with the early judgment offered by Otto Pfeleiderer, “the third Gifford lecturer in Edinburgh, [who] made the comment still remembered there ‘Die Ehre ist nicht gross, aber der Gehalt ist kolossal’ (‘The honor is not great, but the honorarium is colossal’)” (quoted in Jaki 1986, p. 10).

A number of major figures in the history of psychology, psychiatry, cognitive science, and neuroscience presented Gifford Lectures, including four APA presidents (William James, Josiah Royce, John Dewey, and Wolfgang Köhler) and three Nobel laureates (Henri Bergson, Charles Scott Sherrington, and John Carew Eccles). James (1902), Bergson (1913-1914),⁴ Dewey (1929), George Frederick Stout (1931, 1952), Sherrington (1940), Köhler (1957-1959), and Eccles (1979 and 1980) lectured at Edinburgh. James Ward (1911) and C. Lloyd Morgan (1923, 1925) lectured at St. Andrews. Royce (1899, 1901), Ward (1899), and Hans Driesch (1908) lectured at Aberdeen.⁵

William James and the 1900-02 Edinburgh Gifford Lectures

According to Jaki (1986), the honor of the Gifford lectureship caught up with the honorarium as a direct result of the two series of Edinburgh lectures delivered by William James:

In imparting such esteem to the Gifford lectureship, the first important single factor was the publication of William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, which for all its size

³ Jones (1970) provides an alphabetical list of lecturers through 1968; Jaki (1986) provides an alphabetical list and a “synoptic chronological list” for lecturers through 1984. Vande Kemp (1984) provides a listing through 1965, with minor omissions. A complete listing of lecturers, lecture titles, and published books based on the lectures is available from the author.

⁴ Bergson’s lectures remain unpublished. He spent the years from 1914 until 1921 on various French diplomatic missions, then served until 1926 as president of the Commission for Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations.

⁵ Cardinal Désiré Mercier, who was invited to lecture at St. Andrew’s after World War I, declined due to the heavy demands of his schedule (Jaki 1986, p. 24).

became a runaway bestseller following its first printing in June 1902. Six years later it was in its fifteenth impression with all its copies informing countless readers on the title page that the book was the text of “The Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902.” (Jaki 1986, pp. 10-11)

In Jaki’s opinion, “the wealth of material and the enchanting form of its presentation could only develop the renown of the lectureship itself” (Jaki 1986, p. 11). One measure of James’s attractiveness was the attendance at the lectures: about 300 for the first series, 400 for the second series (Wulff 1991, p. 476). This was in contrast to typical lecturers. Jaki writes:

If a Gifford lecturer drew an average audience of about fifty, he had to congratulate himself. Such was at least the view of Samuel Alexander [Glasgow, 1916-1918] whose first lecture was attended by several hundred, a number that quickly dropped to about fifty. Others, even some luminaries, drew on the average a mere dozen or even less, and this could happen even to a celebrity like Niels Bohr [Edinburgh, 1949-1950] (Jaki 1986, p. 9).

Jones (1970) also singled out James as “the most exciting of the early attempts to understand the nature of religion”: James “used the then infant science of psychology to study religious phenomena and established the truth, sometimes forgotten, that the ground of religion is indeed religious experience rather than rational argument” (Jones 1970, p. 18). James provided what Alister Hardy [Aberdeen 1963-1965] pleaded for, “a natural theology that is ‘a science of man’s religious behavior’, by which he means a serious study of all that goes by the name of religious experience” (Jones 1970, p. 18). Jones believed that James and Hardy came closest of all the Gifford lecturers to achieving “what Lord Gifford envisaged when he spoke of the parallel of astronomy and chemistry” (Jones 1970, p. 18). Hardy (1966) quoted archbishop Frederick Temple’s (1821-1902) assertion, more than a century earlier, that “Our theology has been cast in a scholastic mould, i.e., all based on logic. We are in need of, and we are being gradually forced into a theology based on psychology. The transition, I fear, will not be without much pain; but nothing can prevent it” (quoted in Jones 1970, p. 43).⁶ Hardy believed that natural theology must be “a science of man’s religious behaviour, ... built upon an enormous collection of observations regarding man’s religious experience and behaviour” (quoted in Jones 1970, p. 43).

⁶ I have been unable to verify the original source for the quotation, but it is most likely Temple (1860).

James’s Natural Theology in *The Varieties*

James, by emphasizing experience rather than rational arguments, brought to natural theology a new approach in the tradition of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who placed the foundations of religious knowledge in experience rather than in the “authoritatively communicated truths of revelation” or “the truths of speculative reason” (Long 1992b, p. 5; see Schleiermacher 1799/1958). James also anticipated the existential-ontological tradition of Martin Heidegger (1879-1976), whose influence led the later Gifford lecturer John Macquarrie [St. Andrews, 1983-1984] to argue that the new natural theology was to be “phenomenological or descriptive rather than deductive in method” (Long, 1992b, p. 18; see Macquarrie, 1984). Thus, the natural theologian must aim, “not to prove God exists but to let us see the phenomenon of faith in the basic human situation in which it is rooted” (Long, 1992b, p. 18). These lecturers and others shifted the focus of natural theology from God’s nature to human nature and the God-human relationship. As Long (1992a) argues, “religion itself seems to have to do primarily with a sense of divine presence within the believer’s experience of self and world,” and natural theology must have “the aim of providing some connection between one’s religious faith and one’s general knowledge and experience” (Long 1992a, p. 209).

James was highly critical of natural theology in the tradition of the rational theologians who attempted to establish God’s existence “by demonstrative, rational *a priori* argument” (Farmer 1954, p. 19). According to James (1902),

The proofs are various. The ‘cosmological’ one, so-called, reasons from the contingency of the world to a First Cause which must contain whatever perfection the world itself contains. The ‘argument from design’ reasons, from the fact that Nature’s laws are mathematical, and her parts benevolently adapted to each other, that this cause is both intellectual and benevolent. The ‘moral argument’ is that the moral law presupposes a lawgiver. The ‘argument *ex consensu gentium*’ is that the belief in God is so widespread as to be grounded in the rational nature of man, and should therefore carry authority with it. (James 1902, p. 437)

James argued that these arguments “prove nothing rigorously. They only corroborate our pre-existent partialities” (James 1902, p. 439). James explicitly rejected the natural theology of Cardinal John Henry Newman’s classic treatise on liberal education, *The Idea of a University*, which “contains a passionate and elaborate plea on behalf of the central role to be given to the classic proofs of the existence of God in higher education”

(Jaki 1986, p. 17). Newman (1888, discourse II, § 7) advocated a nonsubjective “*Science of God*, or the truths we know about God, put into a system, just as we have a science of the stars and call it astronomy, or of the crust of the earth and call it geology” (James 1902, p. 435). In Newman and other dogmatic theologians, “feeling valid only for the individual is pitted against reason valid universally” (Newman 1888, p. 433). In a statement prefiguring the spirit of postmodernism, James argued that as a matter of history [philosophy] fails to prove its pretension to be ‘objectively’ convincing. In fact philosophy does fail. It does not banish differences; it founds schools and sects just as feeling does. I believe, in fact, that the logical reason of man operates in this field of divinity exactly as it has always operated in love, or in patriotism, or in politics, or in any other of the wider affairs of life, in which our passions and our mystical intuitions fix our beliefs beforehand. It finds arguments for our conviction, for indeed it *has* to find them. It amplifies and defines our faith, and dignifies it and lends it words and plausibility. It hardly ever engenders it; it cannot now secure it. (Newman 1888, p. 436)⁷

James believed that no empiricist could “claim exemption” from the “universal liability” of having one’s religious truths corrected over time, in line with emerging sentiments and needs (James 1902, p. 332). For James, the tests of religion should focus not on rational theological proofs but on pragmatic criteria. Religions that survive are those that “have *approved* themselves; they have ministered to sundry vital needs which they found reigning” (James 1902, p. 331). He recommended that theology claim no more than reasonable conclusions, rather than aiming for absolute certainty. James outlined several functions that philosophy could perform for religion: (a) “eliminate the local and the accidental” from definitions of the divine (James 1902, p. 455); (b) remove historic incrustations from dogma and worship; (c) “eliminate doctrines that are now known to be scientifically absurd or incongruous” (James 1902, p. 455); (d) test hypotheses and pick out the most probable hypothesis; (e) “distinguish innocent over-belief and symbolism” in expression from what is to be taken literally; (f) offer “mediation between different believers, and help bring about con-

sensus of opinion” (James 1902, p. 456). James ultimately described a science of religions that

would depend for its original material on facts of personal experience, and would have to square itself with personal experience through all its critical reconstructions. It could never get away from concrete life, or work in a conceptual vacuum. Philosophy lives in words, but truth and fact well up into our lives in ways that exceed verbal formulation. There is in the living act of perception always something that glimmers and twinkles and will not be caught, and for which reflection comes too late. (James 1902, p. 456)

James contrasted this with traditional dogmatic natural theology:

The intellectualism in religion which I wish to discredit ... assumes to construct religious objects out of the resources of logical reason alone, or of logical reason drawing rigorous inference from non-subjective facts. It calls its conclusions dogmatic theology, or philosophy of the absolute, as the case may be; it does not call them science of religions. It reaches them in an a priori way, and warrants their veracity. (James 1902, p. 433)

Concluding Comments on William James as Natural Theologian

James advocated a differential, comparative psychology of religious experiences rather than a universal psychology of religion, claiming that “nothing can be more stupid than to bar out phenomena from our notice, merely because we are incapable of taking part in anything like them ourselves” (James 1902, p. 109). James definitely provided the science of religious behavior desired by Hardy (1966), offering a vast array of observations regarding religious experience and its consequences. *The Varieties* has been reprinted at least once in every decade of the 20th century: Longmans, Green listed a 38th impression in 1935 and published additional copies in 1945 and 1952. Various reprint editions were published (in chronological order) by The Modern Library, New American Library, Penguin, Fontana, Collins, Collier, Fountain Books, Doubleday, University Books, Image Books, Harvard University Press, Vintage Books/Library of America, Triumph Books, The Classics of Psychiatry & Behavioral Science Library, and Simon & Schuster (Touchstone). *The Varieties* has been translated into Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Hebrew, Persian, Polish, Russian, and Spanish. Dover, Prometheus Books, and Routledge are publishing English cente-

⁷ James Ward (1899) in his Gifford Lectures [Aberdeen, 1896-1898] went even further, writing of the arguments from design: “Such arguments have ceased to be edifying, or even safe, since they cut both ways, as the formidable array of facts capable of an equally cogent dysteleological application sufficiently shews” (cited in Jones, 1970, p. 38). He continues: “Sturmius, says Paley [in *Natural Theology*, 1802] ‘held that the examination of the eye was a cure for atheism.’ Yet Helmholtz, who knew incomparably more about the eye than half a dozen Sturms, describes it as an instrument that a scientific optician would be ashamed to make: and Helmholtz was no atheist” (Ward 1899, p. 38).

nary editions.⁸ The book is a classic in the psychology of religion which has generated an extensive secondary literature (see Gorsuch & Spilka 1987; Wulff 1991).

But one must also conclude that despite the prestige he brought to the Gifford Lectures, James did not in any way advance natural theology as a science of infinite being; he rejected not only the classic arguments for God's existence but also those for God's attributes (James 1902, pp. 439-438), regarding these attributes as projections which changed over time in a process of "empirical evolution" (James 1902, p. 328). In his approach to an infinite being, James moved ambivalently between a reductive psychology of religion and his personal over-belief that "we and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled" (James 1902, pp. 516-517). And yet it may be in naming this realm of "the between" that James made his greatest contribution to a natural theology focused on the God-human relationship: this realm features prominently in the later neopersonalist theology of Buber (1958), the religious psychology of Friedman (1992), and the implicitly interpersonal personality theory propounded by John Macmurray (1957 and 1961) in his 1952-1954 Glasgow Gifford Lectures which have become classics in their own right.

But it is the psychologists of religion, and not the natural theologians, who keep *The Varieties* alive. Jones (1970), in his anthology of selections from the Gifford Lectures, uses James only to illustrate Lord Gifford's search for "true and felt knowledge" (Jones 1970, pp. 86, 90-91) and to criticize (rather than advance) "theistic arguments" (Jones 1970, p. 117). Regarding the latter, Jaki (1986) wrote:

James' dismissal—epitome of countless similar ones—of the proofs of the existence of God on the ground that they have failed to elicit general consent, is a boomerang that returns with a deadly vengeance to philosophy proper after taking its apparently mortal swipe at natural theology and the realist metaphysics underlying it. (Jaki 1986, p. 37)

Jaki discussed various additional aspects of James's work, none of which constitute natural theology, although they address psychological and theological issues: his polytheism and later polycosmism; his opposition to Catholicism and the "doctrine of creation out of nothing" (Jaki 1986, p. 11) which were the focus of his later Hibbert Lectures (James 1909) published as *A Pluralistic Universe*; his claim that all religious

experiences were "the fruit of the same psychological urge" (Jaki 1986, p. 18); his pluralism, which Jaki labeled "a monism in disguise" (Jaki 1986, p. 28) and which he concluded "has never become more than an opinion whatever the customary encomiums accorded to it" (Jaki 1986, p. 37). Jaki also ascribed to James "an elemental wish to let the will have the freedom to find its fulfillment in the faith most appropriate to its strivings" (Jaki 1986, p. 18) and a skepticism regarding empiricism and determinism that led James and later lecturers such as Arthur James Balfour [Glasgow 1913-1914 and 1922-1923] to conclude "that science too rested on non-scientific considerations which were quickly labeled as various faiths or fiducial stances" (Jaki 1986, p. 19).

But James's failure to advance natural theology does not negate his rich insights into religious experience. I found in my most recent reading of *The Varieties* that contemporary critics of positive psychology will find no better starting place than the chapter on healthy-minded religion. Throughout the text, James offers an implicit theology of evil and the place of suffering that should earn *The Varieties* a place on the reading list for theology and psychology courses on evil and suffering. It is true that James brought respectability to the Gifford Lectures, although the success of the rest of the published lectures can hardly be attributed to him. It may also be true that we can attribute James's enduring posthumous success to Adam Gifford, as James stated in his preface to *The Varieties* that "this book would never have been written had I not been honored with an appointment as Gifford Lecturer on Natural Religion at the University of Edinburgh" (James 1902, p. v).

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⁸ A complete publication history based on entries in the Library of Congress catalogue and the WorldCat is available from the author.

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The Balance of James's Faith

by Ryan Snyder

The Varieties of Religious Experience was for James an act of faith that balances potentially dissonant particulars. The balance of James's faith presents religion as an exceptional experience that is had by a wide variety of ordinary people and can therefore be considered a general human possibility. What's more, the balance James seeks is not a set of scales or a simple equilibrium, but more like what we can do with a graphic equalizer or a multitrack mixing board. Rather than measuring or weighing a pair of static things once and for all, the balance of James's faith works with diverse frequencies, tweaking dynamic waveforms to produce the best possible mix. Dealing with ongoing processes rather than finished products, it is an activity in which there is always more work to do and the outcomes, though connected and potentially improving on one another, are never final. Working through the interwoven fusions of life—the innumerable ways in which dissonant elements are held together and mixed up, retaining their identity at the same time they construct something new together—the balance of James's faith is a matter of improvisation: balancing the demands of structure and spontaneity, making one a means for the other and vice versa, repeating and renewing the unexpected and unforeseeable.

James believes that the "essential point" of "faith comes in the *adjustment of the given world to our ideal*" (James 1900a). Such ideals come not out of thin air, but are in fact "derived from certain experiences this world affords us." The "universal fact" of "dissatisfaction, desire, striving," however, "makes for an incompleteness in all existence, in travail to bring its more ideal essence into being." Thus, at the center of religious experience are ideals "of which the very essential peculiarity consists in the fact that they are *not* realized—certainly not here, possibly not anywhere." Through the balance of James's faith, "our dumb fidelity to such ideals" become "our deepest vocation." A "man struck down by fate and moribund in the midst of whatever uncompleted tasks" is sustained by the "inner aching" that he feels when "he thinks of the good which is the star of his own life." "To love and serve that object," James writes, "is the deepest meaning of his existence here below" (James 1900b). Since "every concrete is imperfect in comparison with the abstract ideal of its type," this pursuit of meaning will inevitably lead to many moments of frustration, pain, and even hopelessness. "Religion," however, "gives to each and all of these places in life an infinite significance, and actually makes the desert sing." It "is a desire for transforming every kind of sorrow into the profoundest joy" (James 1900c).

Thus, while James (1909) sought to make his faith as inclusive as possible, it came to focus on what he would call in *A Pluralistic Universe* "religious experi-

ences of a specific nature." These moments, he writes, "may all be described as experiences of an unexpected life succeeding upon death" (James 1909, p. 303). The demise that James spoke of here, however, was not of the body. "I mean," he explains, "the deathlike termination of certain mental processes within the individual's experience, processes that run to failure, and in some individuals, at least, eventuate in despair" (James 1909, p. 303). Though immensely difficult, these moments can open up to us "a world in which all is well, in *spite* of certain forms of death, indeed *because* of certain forms of death—death of hope, death of strength, death of responsibility, of fear and worry, competency and desert" (James 1909, pp. 305-306). Surviving such experiences can lead to a strange sort of hope by mixing life and death, showing how death—far from being absolutely separate—actually winds its way through life on a regular basis. These experiences present "new ranges of life succeeding on our most despairing moments." "They suggest that our natural experience," James explains, "may be only a fragment of real human experience. They soften nature's outlines and open out the strangest possibilities and perspectives" (James 1909, p. 306). In short, they loosen up our preconceived ideas, setting them in motion to broaden our sense of what experience itself can be.

At the same time that they bring "all our naturalistic standards to bankruptcy" (James 1909, p. 304), however, "these abnormal or supernormal facts" form the very heart of "ordinary religious experience" (James 1909, p. 299). As such they form the very definition of what it means to be human. Although such moments sometimes require us to let go of what we had once considered of the utmost importance, in doing so they can also allow us to recover discarded parts of our past and infuse them with a new life. Since to be human is to be imperfect, or at least dissonant, this saving grace is liable to occur as much when we fail as when we succeed. Be this as it may, we can help the ideal along its way by making constructive use of our dissonance, making the most of our limitations by improvising, turning conflicts into fusions, making connections where we're most likely to find tensions. This is what the balance of James's faith achieves as it works through "the varieties of mind in living action." Within this medium "all things are provisional, half-fitted to each other, and untidy." It is by virtue of this perpetual process of being unfinished, however, that "human nature" is capable of opening up into "a vast living picture." Thinking activity for James "has no essential unity." Its coherence is achieved through fluctuation, arising and being sustained as thinking "aggregates and dissipates" at regular intervals. With the mind put in motion, "what we call normal consciousness" is shown to be "only one case out of thousands," "an extract from a larger total." James doesn't wish to contest the usefulness or commonality of this part. Rather, he merely means to caution against taking it for

the whole lest we miss how the "larger total" can in fact move through it, how the part may continue to "evolve by growing into yet untried directions" (James 1901a, pp. 199-202).

This sense for human personalities, not as narrow or changeless entities, but rather as ongoing and revisable processes that can nevertheless be made to hang together through the loose coordination of constructive dissonance, runs through *The Varieties*, forming the filter through which its many frequencies are balanced. "The only form of thing that we directly encounter, the only experience that we concretely have," James writes, "is our own personal life." Thus, he concludes, personality is the "only complete category of our thinking" (James 1897, p. 327). He is also aware, however, that a "personal life" can't be contained in a single "personality." Although we aim to strike the best possible balance between all the parts of our experience, this balancing act is never fully achieved. Throughout our lives runs a musical thread, like a sustained chord that gets fuzzy at the edges, throwing off irregular sounds. What keeps this center from completely disintegrating over time is the variable field of overtones through which it moves and is filtered. These timbres, including the discarded irregularities, brush up against the blurred borders of the central chord, slightly altering the ways in which its frequencies relate and resonate. As slight as it may be to begin with, however, the shift in overall tone can become quite considerable in the long run, as the thread of our life continues to unravel and as grace notes continue to nudge us off center and back again. The center doesn't as much change position as it is itself recomposed as we work to keep its balance. This balancing act would be impossible without the return of the dissonant elements we had once thrown away and our efforts to put them back in the mix.

Paying attention to the movement of this composition not only opens a view to personal transformations but also shows us how unique individuals can share a world of shared experiences without having these experiences in exactly the same ways, how our lives can overlap and intertwine without forming knots that can't be untied. As a part of this world of experience, as the central thread of our lives, thinking is a "many directional, many dimensional" activity made up of a moving combination of ideas, feelings, and doings. Working through it is less a straight line, and more a matter of bobbing and weaving, looping backwards and forwards, sometimes simultaneously. James explains that, "after pursuing one line of direction from it, you have to go back, and start in a new dimension." "No one point of view or attitude," he writes, "commands everything at once in a synthetic scheme. Yet all things are continuous through the mediation of the fact that each of them is contiguous to some others." Accounting for how our own lives hang together, much less the whole world of experience, requires that we acknowledge that "no one type of mind"

can "discern the totality of truth" (James 1900b; James 1897, p. 301). This would be an irremediable problem if a person could be reduced to "one type of mind," a difficulty that would compromise the very possibility of truth. But since each of us is in fact made up through a process of combining different ways of thinking, we can draw on this fusion we find at our hearts to improvise new combinations, increasing the amplitude of our central frequencies to reach farther into the atmosphere of overtones, coming close to touching other centers and getting a better sense for what truth may be.

For James (1902), such an expansion of our field meant not only that the religious experiences "which we shall find most instructive need not be sought for in the haunts of special erudition" (James 1902, p. 3). It also meant that if we are to realize that such deliverances "lie along the beaten highway" we have to first recognize that "experiences of melancholy," even ones that center on the "potentiality of death," "lie right in the middle of our path." In other words, "if we are to touch... religion at all seriously, we must be willing to forget conventionalities, and dive below the smooth and lying official conversational surface" (James 1902, p. 145). We need to be willing to not only make a connection with but to embrace what James called the "unclassifiable residuum," those "elements of the universe which may make no rational whole in conjunction with the other elements, and which, from the point of view of any system which those other elements make up, can only be considered so much irrelevance and accident—so much 'dirt,' as it were, and matter out of place" (James 1902, p. 133). If we are to get a sense for the balance of James's faith we need to appreciate these remainders not as "paradoxical absurdities," but rather as "members of a natural kind of fact of which we do not yet know the full extent." As far as religion goes, James argues, the most unclassifiable of residua have been those people who experience the fusion of their central chord and its surrounding overtones as "a certain discordancy or heterogeneity," "whose existence is little more than a series of zig-zags, as now one tendency and now another gets the upper hand" (James 1902, p. 169).

For such people life is "one long drama of repentance and of effort to repair misdemeanors and mistakes" (James 1902, p. 169). Leading this kind of life is difficult and painful, but it is also the scene for perhaps the most miraculous religious experience of all, when we learn to stop confusing "misdemeanors" with "mistakes." Although the former requires "repentance" the latter does not. When we come to accept that "our nature" is in fact "rooted in failure," mistakes can be considered to be "pivotal human experiences." Making them becomes a "process so ubiquitous and everlasting" that it is "evidently an integral part of life" (James 1902, p. 138). Once this realization is made the feelings of dissonance at the heart of life are not a curse, but rather "come as gifts, adding nothing to the *contents* of life, yet ordering and

organizing all the contents in absolutely new ways, making the impossible possible, and the actual henceforth impossible, in the twinkling of an eye" (James 1900d). They are blue notes that lend our central chord a jazzy tone, making it richer and more complex, yet just as sensible, as a life drawn along lines derived from classical sources. The zig-zags of our life become limber again, wrapping together and coming apart in flexible and constructive ways. Feelings of inconsistency are shown to occur not when we're dissonant, but rather when we pretend that we're not, when the aim to make the form of our life complete rules out the very possibility of dissonance. Until we understand form itself as an ongoing process of improvisation and fusion we not only underestimate our freedom, but also remain unaware of our real limits, preferring the false comfort of a misleading security.

"No fact of human nature," James (1902) writes, "is more characteristic than its willingness to live on a chance." Thus, it's coincidence and risk rather than certainty and safety that "makes the difference... between a life of which the keynote is resignation and a life of which the keynote is hope" (James 1902, pp. 526-527). We can come close to singing in the key of hope by working through unexpected fusions and making new combinations in the process, but we don't really hit it until after we've practiced these forms of improvisation and mixed them inextricably into the balance of our thinking. After putting in this sort of work, new fusions seem to "burst forth unaided" (James 1902, p. 210). This is, James writes, "the vital-turning point of the religious life" (James 1902, p. 210). It is liable to be experienced as a "crisis of self-surrender" (James 1902, p. 211), when after struggling to get something right and failing, we throw "ourselves upon the mercy of powers which, whatever they may be, are more ideal than we are actually, and make for our redemption" (p. 210). This letting go is a form of "human nature *in extremis*" (James 1899, p. 273). But it should be taken not as off the charts of normality, but rather be seen as extremely human, at the very root of what humanity means. For, James writes, "we are all such helpless failures in the last resort" (James 1902, p. 47). We should take this permanent and universal dissonance constructively, though. Always being "matter out of place" is not to be unbalanced forever. It is, rather, an important part of the process of reaching for a new and better balance.

"The sanest and best of us are of one clay with lunatics and prison inmates," James writes (1902, p. 47), "and death finally runs the robustest of us down. And whenever we feel this, such a sense of the vanity and provisionality of our voluntary career comes over us." This is when "religion comes to our rescue." Such a turn to faith doesn't have to be taken as resignation but can be considered rather as a recognition of our limits, one that opens new possibilities. It is "a state of mind... in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been

displaced by a willingness to close our mouths." Instead of leading to our final breath, however, it provides us with a breath of fresh air, as "what we most dreaded has become the habitation of our safety, and the hour of our moral death has turned into our spiritual birthday." "Religious feeling is thus," James concludes (1902, p. 48), "an absolute addition to the Subject's range of life." It is the atmosphere in which we meet "human nature strained to its uttermost and on the rack, yet getting through alive, and then turning its back on its success to pursue another more rare and arduous still." For James, "this is the sort of thing the presence of which inspires us" (1899, p. 272). In *Varieties* he works to bring home the reality of this balance of faith by drawing on his own experience.

At the end of his chapter on "The Sick Soul," James (1902) presents his own life as an example, painting a picture of the "state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits" that he experienced during the years around 1870, right before he began his teaching career at Harvard. One night, James writes, "suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence." At the same time, "there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum," a figure that seemed at first "absolutely non-human." "This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other," James continues. "*That shape am I*, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him." He felt simultaneously "such a horror" for this alter ego and "such a perception of my own merely momentary discrepancy from him." Sensing what he had initially taken as "absolutely non-human" to be in fact at the very heart of his own humanity, James felt "as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely." "After this," he writes, "the universe was changed for me altogether." "It was like a revelation," James concludes, "I have always thought that this experience of melancholia of mine had a religious bearing" (James 1902, pp. 160-162).

James begins to realize the full meaning of this religious experience as he revisits it in *Varieties*. What had once struck him with nothing but horror now appeared full of promising leads. The prospect of "something hitherto solid" giving way becomes not dissolution, but rather "extension of our personality" in which "*the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come*" (James 1902, p. 515). At the crossroads of fusion and improvisation a person feels "*conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself*" (James 1902, p. 508). "If religion is to mean anything definite for us," James writes, "we ought to take it as meaning this added dimension of emotion." This whole field of sensibility

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opens up to us nothing less than a "new reach of freedom" (James 1902, p. 48). This spontaneity is always balanced with structure, however, our expansion with its limits. Continuity with the "more" is always a "working touch," a connection with the whole that always opens up through parts and is broken forever when, instead, we mistake a part for the whole. To be "saved" is not to "have it all together," but merely to have a sense that we could potentially move from any one point to any other even if we are never actually able to do so. As central as such moments are to religious experience, their occurrence remains a rare thing. Though they resonate through ordinary life at length, tracing out all their leads would end in silence.

The "added dimension of emotion" at the heart of religious experience amounts to what James describes as that "characteristic attitude" in which we feel "most deeply and intensely active & alive." "At such moments," he writes, "there is a voice inside which speaks & says 'this is the *real* me!'" (James 1877, p. 570) For James, this voice "always involves an element of active tension, of holding my own as it were, & *trusting* outward things to perform their part so as to make it a full harmony, but without any *guarantee* that they will." (James 1877, p. 571) James begins to sound the first strains of this constructive dissonance in the 1870s, and gives voice to the fullness of its "religious bearing" through *Varieties*. During this ongoing process the balance of James's faith avoids not only final guarantees but also the very possibility of a "full harmony." Such a firm connection between the various parts of the "larger total" compromises the balance of James's faith at its heart. "No man is homogenous enough to be fairly treated," James writes, "according to the law of one 'type' exclusively. There is 'more' of him." So, "to 'save' himself" he "can choose which of his *ones* to take a stand on, and not count the others." "From all these shimmering suggestions of varying possibility in type and character," James writes, "may arise a sense of the oddity, peculiarity, and almost accidental, of whatever character there actually may be" (James 1900c).

But, on the other hand, to insist on full harmony is to freeze once and for all the perpetual balancing act that makes for whatever real safety we will ever be able to find. It is simply impossible to establish too certain or complete a connection with the "more." To paraphrase from James's fascination with the problem of the one and the many, to reduce the "many" not only to "ones" but to just *one*, not only fails to do justice to its full breadth and variety but also passes over the part we could possibly play in its further development, snuffing out the meaning of our lives like a vacuum does a candle flame. Much better, James found, to remain mixed up and rely on improvisation rather than have it all neat and written out once and for all, to place trust in true chance rather than take a chance with a false trust. "It is only as being always out of equilibrium," he writes, "that man manifests any infin-

ity of destiny. Claims and demands excessive, impossible to gratify save through producing disaster elsewhere; renounced by those who conscientiously consider the cost; affirmed and acted on by those who refuse to consider cost, and feeling the vocation, face its risks to self and others; such in brief is human life" (James 1900c).

And such is the balance of James's faith, as composed through *Varieties*. It is "an entirely new *tone*," constructive dissonance in all its fullness, an ongoing process of chord changes through which to continuously improvise new fusions (James 1901b, p. 508).

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The Personal Paradox of William James's Varieties

by Michel Ferrari

The Varieties of Religious Experience was a personal and paradoxical book for William James. Personal, because it fulfilled a pledge to his wife soon after his father's death to treat religion more seriously. Paradoxical, because its coherent position on the possibility of experiencing a connection to God through mysticism and prayer is not one that William James personally experienced. Instead, he was obliged to say that mystical truth is one that he believed everyone can have "in germ," and have the right (or will) to believe in—that, pragmatically, this belief can bring peace and purpose to our lives. His 'radically empirical' evidence for the reality of God is mostly from hidden or altered states of everyday consciousness and this evidence seems to gain its deep personal significance from what James felt was a close brush with insanity as a young man and from an experience with nitrous oxide. But why did James argue so passionately for the existence of God on such a slim foundation? I suggest that a resolution of this paradox is in the intimacy with the universe that such a belief allows and the real benefit it provides by empowering individual lives in ways that are rooted in their deepest emotional response to the experience of reality. Because it is rooted so deeply, for James, belief in God can unleash our untapped potential energies in this life, and it holds out the hope that we will see our departed loved ones once again after death.

Personal Pledge

William James's grandfather, "William James of Albany" (1771-1832), emigrated from Ireland around 1789 and went into various major business ventures, including the opening of the Erie Canal. By the time of his death, he had married 3 times, had 14 children, and amassed an estate estimated to be worth between \$1.2 to \$3 million dollars—one of the largest personal fortunes of that time (Perry 1935, 1948/ 1976; Croce 1995; Menand 2001). He was one of the first citizens of the city and a pillar of the Presbyterian Church. Good works stood at the center of William of Albany's religious life, and he aimed at increasing his moral status in this world through material means (Croce 1995).

Henry James (1811-1882), son of William of Albany, rebelled against this unromantic and materialistic view of religion and became a delinquent youth, drinking and gambling and footing his father the bill (Croce 1995; Menand 2001). When William James, Sr., died suddenly in 1832, Henry James contested the strict will¹ in court and won. From then on, he was a wealthy man, but never a business man (Croce 1995; Perry 1935). He

experienced a major psychological panic crisis that rocked his sense of his own manhood and led to a religious conversion in 1844 (Barnard 1997; Croce 1995; H. James 1885; Menand 2001; Perry 1935)—what William James later called an experience of panic-fear in his *Varieties*. Henry James found inspiration in the writings of the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772),² in place of his already devout Calvinist faith.³ The writings of Swedenborg emphasized the evil vanity of selfhood, and Henry James came to see redemption in a self-surrender that allows an in-flowing of divine love to inspire a concern for social justice.⁴ He was also captivated by Fourier's social utopianism which had a huge following in the U.S. at that time (about 200,000 adherents). For Henry James, the redeemed form of man could only exist in an ideal social setting. "A perfected community would encourage each individual to develop a spiritual spontaneity without the inhibitions of selfishness" (Croce 1995, p. 61). He wrote several books and gave public lectures on these themes (Menand 2001) and essentially preached a "gospel of his own design" (Perry 1935, p. 23).

Henry James died peacefully on Dec. 18, 1882, the same year as Mary James, his wife of many years. Commenting on his father, in his introduction to *The Literary Remains of the Late Henry James*, William James (1885) said that his father was out of sync with his times, being a "robust and dogmatizing theologian" whose truths were his life. Soon after his father's death, William James (9 Jan. 1883) wrote to his brother Henry in response to Henry's letter about their father's death, "As life closes, all a man has done seems like one cry or sentence. Father's cry was a single one that religion is real" (James 1992, p. 344). Days earlier, he made a pledge to his wife Alice in a letter dated Jan 6th, 1883:

1. The original will awarded him only \$1,250 per year—far less than his siblings (Menand 2001).

2. Swedenborg was a famous Swedish scholar, engineer, statesman, inventor, and scientist (Schmit 2000). He also saw himself as a Church reformer as he believed that the Church had lost sight of a fundamental truth of the oneness of God that operates through all of creation. Swedenborg's mission was to correct this wrong thinking and to prepare us for salvation in the new Church. Swedenborg believed in a 'correspondence' theory, according to which every material thing 'corresponds' to the spiritual thing of which it is an effect. Swedenborg's views coincided with Romantic views of nature, and inspired the young Blake and Emerson. Swedenborgians are still practicing today in the Church of the New Jerusalem.

3. Ironically, Henry James's friend J.J. Garth Wilkinson saw nothing in common between James and Swedenborg except the phrase "Divine Natural Humanity" (Perry 1948).

4. Not incidentally, William James in *Varieties* considered such panic experiences to play an important role in religious conversions that were fuller than those of the 'healthy-minded' because they did not ignore, but transcended, the evil obviously present in this world.

...You must not leave me until I understand a little more the value and meaning of religion in Father's sense, in the mental life and destiny of man. It is not the one thing needful, as he said. But it is needful with the rest. My friends leave it altogether out. I as his son (if for no other reason) must help to set it right in their eyes. And for that reason I must learn to interpret it aright as I have never done, and you must help me. (James 1997, p. 379)

The Varieties of Religious Experience was thus a personally important text for William James because it helped fulfill this pledge to honor his father's memory (Perry 1935 [I, p. 323] and 1996; Strout 1971).

William James on Religion

No doubt because of his upbringing and his close connection to his father, William James was a deeply religious man. The nature of God and the question of His existence occupied William James's thought throughout his life (Perry 1935). But, like his father, William James was not a conventional Christian and was quite anticlerical. As he wrote in a letter to Rankin,⁵ (16 June 1901), "I believe myself to be (probably) permanently incapable of believing the Christian Scheme of vicarious salvation, and wedded to a more continuously evolutionary thought." (James 2001, p. 501) And so he framed his topic in *Varieties* as follows: "In these lectures I propose to ignore the institutional branch [of religion] entirely, to say nothing of the ecclesiastical organization, to consider as little as possible the systematic theology and the ideas about the gods themselves, and to confine myself as far as I can to personal religion pure and simple" (James 1902, p. 29). James allowed that some members of the audience might not find this formulation to capture religion at all. He invited them to call it whatever they like—e.g., conscience or morality; in any case, such experiences are worth studying. More important, for William James, church founders owed their spiritual power to their direct personal communion with the divine. This was true both of those considered divine themselves (e.g., Christ, Buddha) and of those who started Christian religious movements (e.g., St. Loyola, St. Francis, George Fox). So personal religion remains "the primordial thing," even if some might consider it incomplete as an account of religion (C. Taylor 2002).

It is in this personal sense that William James himself struggled with deep religious issues, especially the problem of evil in a world created by God. Like his

father, and at about the same age, he twice suffered a sense of utter worthlessness and despair or panic-fear. This feeling worsened in 1869, and 1870-71 was the low point of a six-year period of intense emotional and physical suffering in which he felt his will paralyzed, and was often depressed. "James also had eye and back trouble, insomnia, gastro-intestinal disturbances, and periodic exhaustion. On several occasions, he was tempted to kill himself" (Anderson 1982, p. 369). This experience fundamentally shaped his attitude toward religion. Overcoming it opened him up to a comforting faith with the image of "a God who protects and offers refuge to those in need" (Anderson 1982, p. 384). It made him sympathetic to those who suffered from insanity, since he himself felt he was at times on the verge of it (Fullinwider 1975, p. 42).

Paradoxically, James's return to peace of mind was also by a very different route than his father's religious mysticism. After reading the French philosopher Charles Renouvier (1815-1903), it consisted not merely in the comforting faith of self-surrender, but in a fighting faith that affirmed his belief in free will and in the resolve to acquire intellectual habits that would lead to daring acts of thought. It is this resolution to base his life on will and not on mystical surrender—evident in many of his writings about psychology and religion (James 1897, 1899, and 1911)—that generates some curious paradoxes in the public and private views expressed by William James, in particular around *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Specifically, it led to his creative synthesis of comfort and willful fighting that was grounded in reasoned and emotional acquaintance with what is deepest and most meaningful in our own experience, a synthesis that James considered of great pragmatic importance.

Personal Religion

The essence of religion, William James says in *Varieties*, involves at least two main aspects: mystical experience of connection with a higher power, and prayer as communications with the divine. As he wrote in the letter to Rankin, 16 June 1901:

In these [Gifford] lectures the ground I am taking is this: The mother-sea and fountain-head of all religions lies in the mystical experiences of the individual, taking the word mystical in a very wide sense. All theologies and all ecclesiasticisms are secondary growths superimposed; and the experiences which make such flexible combinations with the intellectual prepossessions of their subjects, that one may almost say that they have no proper *intellectual* deliverance of their own, but belong to a region deeper, & more vital and practical, than that which the intellect inhabits. For this they are also indestructible by intellectual arguments and criticisms. I attach the mystical or religious consciousness

⁵ Henry William Rankin was a librarian at the Mount Hermon Boy's School in Northfield, MA. He corresponded with James for years on these issues, sent him pamphlets and clippings, and loaned him some books from which James culled cases of European and Asian mystical experiences.

to the possession of an extended subliminal self, with a thin partition through which messages make irruption. We are thus made convincingly aware of the presence of a sphere of life larger and more powerful than our usual consciousness, with which the latter is nevertheless continuous. The impressions and impulsions and emotions and excitements which we thence receive help us to live, they found invincible assurance in a world beyond the senses, they melt our hearts and communicate significance and value to everything and make us happy. They do this for the individual who has them, and other individuals follow him. Religion in this way is absolutely indestructible. Philosophy and theology give their conceptual interpretations of this experiential life. The farther margin of the subliminal field being unknown, it can be treated as by Transcendental Idealism, as an Absolute mind with a part of which we coalesce, or by Xian theology, as a distinct deity acting on us. Something, not our immediate self, *does* act on our life! So I seem doubtless to my audience to be blowing hot & cold, explaining away Xianity, yet defending the general basis from which I say it proceeds. (James 2001, pp. 501-502)

This letter is very telling, since it shows that James was clearly aware of the apparent paradox of his views about religion as both defending it and explaining it away. It is worth considering James's work in more detail to see if he really does arrive at an integrated view. So let us now consider in more detail his paradoxical approach to religion (both hot and cold), starting with mysticism.

Mysticism

For William James, the essence of personal religious experience was mystical, not ritual. "One may say truly," says James "that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness; so for us, who in these lectures are treating personal experience as the exclusive subject of our study, such states of consciousness ought to form the vital chapter from which the other chapters get their light" (James 1902, p. 379). Furthermore, accounts of mystical experiences seem universal and timeless:

This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed.... Perpetually telling of the unity of man with God, their speech antedates languages, and they do not grow old. (James 1902, p. 419)

Mystical states represent an altered state of con-

sciousness that is ineffable; since they defy expression, they must be directly experienced by each individual. But while this makes them similar to emotions and other felt states, mystics agree that they are states of knowledge and insight that go beyond those that can be arrived at by intellect alone. And while the onset of these states can be prepared for through exercises of various kinds—like fixing one's attention for example on breathing—once the mystical state of mind takes hold, the mystic feels his will is "in abeyance" and sometimes even held in thrall by a superior power (James 1902, p. 381). This last point connects mystical experiences with abnormal psychology, especially mediumistic trance, prophetic speech, automatic writing, and the like. Although these states often do not last long, usually no more than an hour or two, their effect on the waking personality can be profound and lifelong. What is more, William James maintained that such experiences were very common, at least among leading religious figures.

Mystical states are important because they are of great practical benefit to the individual. As he says, "Saint Augustine and Alline⁶ both emerged into the smooth waters of inner unity and peace" (James 1902, 175). Such unification, when it happens, may come gradually or abruptly; through changed feelings or changed powers of action; through new intellectual insights or mystical experiences. But it always brings extreme relief when it is religious:

Happiness! happiness! religion is only one of the ways in which men gain that gift. Easily, permanently, and successfully, it often transforms the most intolerable misery into the profoundest and most enduring happiness. (James 1902, p. 175)

Such experiences carried undeniable personal (first person) authority to mystics themselves, but William James asks whether there is any warrant for making them authoritative of the truth of "twice-bornness and supernaturalism and pantheism which it favors." His answer is, briefly, that (1) "They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith." However, (2) "No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically" (James 1902 p. 422, *passim*).

Although their very existence is enough to make us

⁶ Henry Alline is a Nova Scotian evangelist whose autobiographical account of his subjectively-centered form of morbid melancholy and divided will James used as an example in lectures VII & X.

realize that there is more to human existence than meets the 'inner eye' of the waking mind, this view suggests that first person experience is the only real way to use mystical experiences to found one's belief in God. Yet, clearly, William James was ambiguous in his own relation to mystical experience: much more so than his father. With the possible exception of a later report (James, 1920a), William James always said that he was not a mystic and made light of any analogous personal experiences: "Whether my treatment of mystical states will shed more light or darkness, I do not know, for my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand." (James 1902, p. 379).

So how can William James contend that mysticism is at the heart of religious experience if he was not a mystic himself? In defending his writings on the importance of mysticism, perhaps his clearest statement is in a letter to Leuba⁷ (17 April 1904).

"My personal position is simple. I have no living sense of commerce with a God. I envy those who have, for I know that the addition of such a sense would help me greatly. The Divine, for my active life, is limited to impersonal and abstract concepts which, as ideals, interest and determine me, but do so but faintly in comparison to what a feeling of God might effect, if I had one. This, to be sure, is largely a matter of intensity, but a shade of intensity may make the whole center of one's moral energy shift. Now, although I am devoid of *Gottesbewusstsein* in the directer and stronger sense, yet there is *something in me* which *makes response* when I hear utterances from that quarter made by others. I recognize the deeper voice. Something tells me:—"thither lies truth"—I am sure it is not old theistic prejudices of infancy. Those in my case were Christian, but I have grown so out of Christianity that entanglement therewith on the part of a mystical utterance has to be abstracted from and overcome, before I can listen. Call this, if you like, my mystical *germ*. It is a very common germ. It creates the rank and file of believers. As it withstands in my case, so it will withstand in most cases, all purely aesthetic criticism, but *interpretative* criticism (not of the mere "hysteria" and "nerves" order) it can energetically combine with." (Letter reconstructed from fragments, see Perry 1935 [II, p. 350-351]—italics in original; see also James 1920b, pp. 211-12).

As this letter shows, William James lacked this first

person authority, except in a very attenuated form—or at least that he minimized the importance even of his own reported mystical experiences (See James 1920a).

James Did No Training to Develop His Own Mystical Experiences

James granted that untapped energies and mystical experiences could be unleashed (or at least predisposed) through specific training. "[T]he best practical knowers of the human soul have invented the thing known as methodical ascetic discipline to keep the deeper levels constantly in reach. [Through exercises of progressive levels of difficulty, practiced day by day] disciples of asceticism can reach very high levels of freedom and power of will." (James 1911a, p. 251). Tapping into this subliminal region is presumably the way to develop mystical communion with God. That such practices are beneficial is a universally acknowledged truth in all the major religions. All have something to say about care of the self through religious practices or meditation, fasting, or prayer (C. Taylor 2002). In *Varieties*, William James emphasizes this point with regard to specifically Christian practices.

In the Christian church there have always been mystics.... The experiences of these have been treated as precedents, and a codified system of mystical theology has been based upon them, in which everything legitimate finds its place. The basis of the system is 'orison' or meditation, the methodical elevation of the soul towards God. Through the practice of orison the higher levels of mystical experience may be attained. It is odd that Protestantism, especially evangelical Protestantism, should seemingly have abandoned everything methodical in this line. Apart from what prayer may lead to, Protestant mystical experience appears to have been almost exclusively sporadic. It has been left to our mind-curers to reintroduce methodical meditation into our religious life. (James 1902, p. 406)

Yet although William James extolled the idea of training to develop mystical experiences, he did not himself train in any way (C. Taylor 2002)—perhaps because meditation was not part of his generally Protestant upbringing. But perhaps the reason why such training was not important to William James was that his key personal concern with the divine, aside from being an energizing force in his own life, was in the personal connections that a belief in God would allow us to maintain after death with those we love, and with our own deeply held ideals. Perhaps for this reason, he sought to bolster his claims about the importance of mysticism by appeals to more accessible evidence of the divine—specifically, the pragmatic effects of prayer on everyday life.

⁷ James Henry Leuba was a student of G. S. Hall and later professor of religion at Bryn Mawr. He conducted some of the first empirical studies of religious experience in America. James cites his study of conversion experiences (Leuba 1896), but he is most well-known for his 1916 survey of working scientists' beliefs about God that generated a storm of controversy by showing that only 40% believed in God, 30% did not, and the rest were agnostic (Leuba 1921). Interestingly, this result was recently replicated by Ed Larson (1997) using Leuba's identical methodology; Larson found that about 40% believed in God and 45% did not.

Prayer

If the essence of religious experience of the divine was mysticism, to William James most books on religion consider three things as its essential elements: sacrifice, confession, and prayer. William James considered prayer as most essential of these elements, even though many people disparage what he calls 'petitional prayer' (in which we ask God for some personal favor).⁸ Petitional prayer is only a small aspect of prayer, Prayer taken in a wider sense of "inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine" (James 1902, p. 464) is not affected by scientific criticism. This inner communion is what allows individuals the world over to get in touch with higher powers, and stands apart from any theological or ecclesiastical additions or flourishes. And "Prayer in this wide sense is the very soul and essence of religion" (James 1902, p. 64). Such conversation with the divine, to be effective, must be both "active and mutual." Indeed, the genuineness of religion is bound up with its pragmatic effects. We may criticize those effects as being biased by the mind of the person praying, or as merely influencing the mind of the person praying, but still "however our opinion of prayer's effects may come to be limited by criticism, religion, in the vital sense in which these lectures study it, must stand or fall by the persuasion that effects of some sort genuinely do occur" (James 1902, p. 466). If the world is no different due to it, then this transactional sense of prayer is "a feeling of what is illusory, and religion must on the whole be classed, not simply as containing elements of delusion ... just as materialists and atheists have always said it was" (James 1902, p. 465). (See also James's *Pluralistic Universe* [1909] and *Will to Believe* [1897]). William James returns to this theme again in the conclusion to *Varieties*, saying that religion necessarily involves the belief "That prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof—be that spirit 'God' or 'law'—is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world" (James 1902, p. 485). In just this way, faith generally urges us to do good in the world, trusting that that other (possibly higher) powers will do the same, in an effort to make it a better place (James 1911c).

But if the essence of religious communication is prayer, and if this is the easiest and most universal way of feeling some communion with the divine, then it is certainly strange that William James himself felt that he couldn't pray. In answer to Question 6 of the *Pratt Ques-*

tionnaire—probably completed in the Autumn of 1904—which specifically asks, *Do you pray?* William James answered, "I can't possibly pray—I feel foolish and artificial." (James 1920b, p. 214).

Paradoxically, the *Pratt Questionnaire* was answered years after William James had worked out the detailed argument of *Varieties*. So on what basis did James arrive at his own empirical evidence for his will to believe in the divine presence?

More to Psychology Than Meets the Inner Eye

William James draws his main personal evidence from a nascent psychology that shows us that there is "more" to the mind than meets the inner eye, and that this added realm of conscious experience is an extension of ordinary waking life.⁹ Throughout *Varieties*, James's "agnostic scientific conscience is in tension with another spirit, the phenomenological and existentialist philosopher of experience" (Strout 1971, p. 139). In the end, he emphasized the empirical evidence of psychic experiences, psychopathology, and drug-induced altered states of consciousness. It is an extension that all (including the germinally-mystical William James) can see if we pay close attention to our own mental states—especially when altered by drugs—and to evidence of altered states in others offered by psychopathology and 'psychic' experience. These phenomena invite us to extend our conception of human consciousness (E. Taylor 1982 and 2002). James makes this point clear in the last essay he published in his lifetime, *A Suggestion about Mysticism* (James 1920a):

The suggestion, stated very briefly, is that states of mystical intuition may be only very sudden and great extensions of the ordinary 'field of consciousness.' Concerning the causes of such extensions I have no suggestion to make; but the extension itself would, if my view be correct, consist in an immense spreading of the margin of the field, so that knowledge ordinarily transmarginal would become included, and the ordinary margin would grow more central. (James 1920a, p. 500)

William James illustrates this view by reference to Fechner's "wave-scheme" and gives the further example/analogy of what can be seen of the shore line with the ebb and flow of the tide (James 1920a, p. 501; see also James 1899 and 1909). Throughout his career, William James made similar claims, and typically drew on three main sorts of evidence: psychic experiences,

⁸ But even here, James makes a distinction between praying for the sick to get well—which he suggests may really help recovery in people who pray regularly in their lives—and prayer for changes to material conditions, like the weather, when it is now known and accepted that moral appeals will not alter physical conditions that produce them.

⁹ This theme has important ties to James efforts to develop a metaphysics grounded in "pure experience" and to his call for a radical empiricism, as shown in detail by Lamberth (1999).

abnormal states of consciousness, and altered states of consciousness.

Psychic Experiences

James had an ongoing interest in psychic phenomena throughout his career (James 1986). He helped found the American branch of the (still existing) Society for Psychical Research¹⁰ and worked closely with mediums such as Mrs. Leonora Piper—whom he met originally in July of 1885. And if he was not always convinced of the evidence, he was not entirely able to explain away the information that came from psychic readings (Barnard 1997; James 1909). As his career progressed, he became ever bolder in his claims about psychic phenomena. He startled the scientific world by reporting that he had been in communication with the spirit of the late Dr. Richard Hodgson, a member of the Society of Psychical Research who had recently passed away. He read his report (over 100 pages) of this supposed spiritual communication in the general meeting of the American Society for Psychical Research. A lot of the report consisted of transcripts of these mediumistic conversations, extending over many seances (Barnard 1997; James 1986). When questioned about his evidence that he really had spoken with Hodgson, he replied, "I await more facts, facts which may not point clearly to a conclusion for fifty or a hundred years." (New York Times Obituary, 1910).¹¹ In *A Suggestion about Mysticism*, as well, James (1920a) reports an experience of three simultaneous dreams that might have signaled a telepathic intrusion of the thoughts of some other person(s)—a terrifying experience for him. And so despite James's fascination with psychic experiences of others, and the evidence it provided, his own psychic experiences were perhaps too closely associated with his own brushes with psychopathology, experiences that opened his mind to another important source of evidence of the divine (Schmidt 2000; Strout 1971).

Psychopathology

Abnormal states of consciousness, for James, are critical to understanding the deeper sense of human psychology. In fact, he goes so far as to claim that the discovery of 'extra-marginal' subliminal memories, thoughts, and feelings that lie outside waking consciousness—but that reveal themselves through signs such as the selective numbness in hysterics—was the

most important discovery of psychology since his days as a student. In particular, they illuminate many phenomena of religious biography. Although granting that the evidence rested on especially suggestible hypnotic or hysteric patients, he suggested that the general mechanism is probably true to some degree in every one. This view was, of course, made famous by Freud, writing about the same time, and whose book with Breuer that James reviewed (James 1894), and of his friend Frederic Myers (1903), but it was clearly based on James's own struggle with mental illness. William James did not find anything interesting or original in Freud that was not already found in Janet, but he granted the reality of subliminal conscious states recently discovered:

In the wonderful explorations by Binet, Janet, Breuer, Freud, Mason, Prince, and others, of the subliminal consciousness of patients with hysteria, we have revealed to us whole systems of underground life, in the shape of memories of a painful sort which lead a parasitic existence, buried outside of the primary field of consciousness, and making irruptions thereinto with hallucinations, pains, convulsions, paralyzes of feeling and of motion, and the whole procession of symptoms of hysteric disease of body and of mind. Alter or abolish by suggestion these subconscious memories, and the patient immediately gets well. (James 1902, pp. 234-235)

This idea of psychological trauma was a radical one in the mid-19th century, and even at the dawn of the 20th century when James was proposing its affinity to mystical religious experiences (Hacking 1995 and 1997; E. Taylor 2002). Recently, Weston (1998) has shown how extensive the evidence is in support of this notion, even within a strictly cognitive psychology—something that might have pleased James. Certainly, James's conviction in the reality of these states and their importance for the personal meaning of life ran much deeper than his more rational acceptance of psychic phenomena as worthy of study. Ironically, though, James's own firm experiential ground for beliefs of mystical experience and their importance to religious experience came from his experience with mind-altering drugs—specifically, nitrous oxide.

Mind-Altering Drugs

Although William James emphasizes the scientific evidence from abnormal psychology to bolster his own "germinal intuition about mysticism," his most direct evidence seems to have been his experience under nitrous oxide (James 1882, James 1902), which made a profound and lasting impression on him:

¹⁰ <http://www.aspr.com/>

¹¹ Ironically, some say William James himself spoke from beyond the grave (Burke 1922, 1931, and 1934—published privately). James himself would not have accepted this evidence as conclusive, any more than he would have that of contemporary near-death experiences—but he would have studied these accounts, of that we can be sure.

One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time [i.e., when under nitrous oxide intoxication], and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. (James 1902, p. 388)

James draws a critical conclusion from this: “No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question,—for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality” (James 1902, p. 388). For James, these altered states have important implications for mystical states of mind.¹² We can only wonder what he would have made of the experiences of shamans under the influence of ayahuasca—a psychotropic drug used in shamanic healing, and in certain Christian sects in South America influenced by shamanic practices (Luna & Amaringo 1991).

But James is careful not to let his scientific explanations of religious conversion categorically deny the existence of God:

If you, being orthodox Christians, ask me as a psychologist whether the reference of a phenomenon to a subliminal self does not exclude the notion of the direct presence of the Deity altogether, I have to say frankly that as a psychologist I do not see why it necessarily should. (James 1902, p. 242)

While everything associated with psychopathology might be only the idiosyncratic manifestations of some hidden aspect of our mind, for James, it is entirely plausible that this hidden area of the mind might serve as a gateway to divine inspiration.

[J]ust as our primary wide-awake consciousness throws open our senses to the touch of things material, so it is logically conceivable that if there be higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so might be our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them. The hubbub of the waking life might close a door which in the dreamy Subliminal might remain ajar or open.... I confess that this is the way in which I should rather see the topic left lying in your minds.... The notion of a subconscious self certainly ought not at this point of our inquiry to be held to exclude all notion of a higher penetration. If there be higher powers able to impress us, they may get access to us only through the subliminal door. (James 1902, pp. 242-243)

The source of this experience that there is ‘more to human consciousness’ and that consciousness is intimately related to the rest of creation, is not known. If there is a God, maybe he can best speak to us subliminally—or make his presence known through mind-altering drugs. Or maybe prayer and mystical experiences are just ways to mobilize our latent energies, of which we know there are vast untapped potentials—James asks us each to decide for ourselves based on our own experience. But importantly, the existence of God, for James, has important implications for personal immortality which in turn is critical to the fate of our loved ones and of ourselves. Oddly, this point is down-played by James in *Varieties*, despite its obvious importance in his life.

Personal Immortality

In his postscript to *Varieties*, William James grants that religion, for most of his audience, is synonymous with personal immortality. Anyone who doubts immortality is branded an atheist. Although immortality became increasingly important to William James (Ferrari 2002), in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *Human Immortality*, he argues that personal immortality is a secondary point. In *Human Immortality*, he writes, “The whole subject of immortal life has its prime roots in personal feeling. I have to confess that my own personal feeling about immortality has never been of the keenest order, and that, among the problems that give my mind the greatest solicitude, this one has not taken the very foremost place” (James 1899, p. 3). In *Varieties*, he still did not have the evidence to decide. “I sympathize with the urgent impulse to be present ourselves, and in the conflict of impulses, both of them so vague yet both of them noble, I know not how to decide. It seems to me that it is eminently a case for facts to testify. Facts, I think, are yet lacking to prove ‘spirit-return,’...I consequently leave the matter open, with this brief word to save the reader from a possible perplexity as to why immortality got no mention in the

¹²He says as a footnote, “What reader of Hegel can doubt that that sense of a perfected Being with all its otherness soaked up into itself, which dominates his whole philosophy, must have come from the prominence in his consciousness of mystical moods like this, in most persons kept subliminal? The notion is thoroughly characteristic of the mystical level, and the *Aufgabe* of making it articulate was surely set to Hegel’s intellect by mystical feeling” (James 1902, p. 389).

body of this book" (James 1902, p. 524).

But James insisted that he had the right to believe in God and personal immortality (1897 and 1911c). He makes a point of defending against an interpretation of immortality that is impersonal (or pantheistic) in the preface to the second edition of *Human Immortality* (1899). He writes, "I am myself anything but a pantheist of the monistic pattern" (James 1899, vi) and ends the preface saying, "[M]y concern in the lecture was not to discuss immortality in general. It was confined to be showing it to be *not incompatible* with the brain function theory of our present mundane consciousness. I hold that it is so compatible, and compatible moreover in fully individualized form. The reader would be in accord with everything that the text of my lecture intended to say, were he to assert that every memory and affection of his present life is to be preserved, and that he shall never in *saecula saeculorum* cease to be able to say to himself, 'I am the same personal being who in olden times upon the earth had those experiences'" (James 1899, pp. viii-ix).

Privately, he sent both *Varieties of Religious Experience* and *Human Immortality* to Henri Bergson, noting his defense of immortality through a transmission model of cerebral functioning resembled Bergson's own position (Perry 1935). More important, on the 6th of July 1891 he wrote of his belief in the after-life to his dying sister, encouraging her that she would soon enter a bigger and better existence and says how his views had changed (and they had changed, as compared to what he wrote in his last letter to his father [14 Dec. 1882], in which he says he is unable to believe that they will meet again after death, much as he wishes they could).

Father would find in me today a much more receptive listener.... And what a queer contradiction...the ordinary scientific argument against immortality (based on the idea of body being mind's condition and mind going out when body is gone), when [given the evidence for split selves, trance enlargement of self, etc.] one must believe...that some infernality in the body prevents really existing parts of the mind from coming into their effective rights at all, suppresses them...from participation in this world's experiences although they are there all the time. When that which is you passes out of the body, I am sure that there will be an explosion of liberated force and life till then eclipsed and kept down. I can hardly imagine your transition without an oscillation of both "Worlds", as they regain their new equilibrium after the change! Everyone will feel the shock, but you yourself will be more surprised than anybody else. (James 1999, p. 178)

It remains for each of us to believe about immortality as we will, and time will tell each of us—soon enough—whether there is a God and immortality, once we leave this waking life. But it is clear from this letter,

written long before *Varieties* and *Human Immortality* that the question of life after death was much more important to James than he often let on.

Personal Energies and Care of the Self

All of the above suggests that William James struggled to find evidence of divine influence in this world. But why? Why not just grant that we may have hidden aspects of experience—or aspects only accessible through drugs—that have nothing to do with any divine presence? Perhaps because of the real benefits that accrued to William James (and other people like himself) who had the will to believe in the divine. As he wrote in answer to question 3 on the Pratt Questionnaire (*Why do you believe in God? [...] Because you have experienced his presence?*), "No. But rather because I need it so that it 'must' be true." (James 1920a, II, p. 213). For William James, God is an idea that—when considered a 'live option', as it was for him—allows us to better 'care for ourselves,' to use Foucault's (1988) phrase. In other words, it lets us lead a happier, healthier life, in which we can adopt a "strenuous mood." Already in 1891, in *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*, he wrote:

The capacity of the strenuous mood lies so deep down among our natural human possibilities that even if there were no metaphysical or traditional grounds for believing in a God, men would postulate one as a pretext for living hard, and getting out of the game of existence its keenest possibilities of zest.... Every sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity for handling life's evils, is set free in those who have religious faith. (James 1897, p. 213)

The Energies of Men (James 1911a), written much later, reiterated the importance of tapping into reserves usually dormant in our everyday conscious lives. "In general, whether an idea be alive or dead depends more on the person in whose mind it is injected than on the idea itself" (James 1911a, 255). Here William James poses an interesting problem to those, like Dennett (1991), who hold to the idea of memes as integral to the self and to personal development: why are some memes alive to us while remaining dead to others? For some, at least, religion is one way to achieve a feeling of unity; overcoming inner incompleteness and discord is a general psychological process that can occur with any mental material not just religious material. Religious regeneration "is only one species of a genus that contains other types as well" (James 1902, p. 176). Psychologically speaking, religious conversion experiences are special cases of ordinary psychological transformations—what today we might call a 're-equilibration' of a dynamic nonlinear system in personality development (Lewis 2000). As James specifies:

[T]he new birth may be away from religion into incredulity; or it may be from moral scrupulosity into freedom and license; or it may be produced by the irruption into the individual's life of some new stimulus or passion, such as love, ambition, cupidity, revenge, or patriotic devotion. In all these instances we have precisely the same psychological form of event, — a firmness, stability, and equilibrium succeeding a period of storm and stress and inconsistency. In these non-religious cases the new man may also be born either gradually or suddenly. (James 1902, p. 176)

When a new belief settles on someone, it always charges the will to act, providing they are someone to whom the idea comes alive. And this is true whether political, scientific, philosophic, or religious, conversions allow latent energies to be let loose. They unify our resolve and overcome habitual interferences and inhibitions, often resulting in a great increase of personal powers. "In religious conversions we have so fine an adjustment that the idea may be in the mind for years before it exerts its effects; and why it should do so then is often so far from obvious that the event is taken for a miracle of grace, and not a natural occurrence" (James 1911a, 258-259).

So religious belief does real and important work, pragmatically, in this life. Precisely because these are ideas that have a power to move us more fully and deeply than moral beliefs that are not so inspired, although other beliefs may also move us to act.

Apart from such individually varying susceptibilities, there are common lines along which men simply as men tend to be inflammable by ideas. As certain objects naturally awaken love, anger, or cupidity, so certain ideas naturally awaken the energies of loyalty, courage, endurance, or devotion. When these ideas are effective in an individual's life, their effect is often very great indeed. They may transfigure it, unlocking innumerable powers which, but for the idea, would never have come into play. 'Fatherland', the Flag' the Union' Holy Church' the Monroe Doctrine,' truth', Science', Liberty' [...], etc. are so many examples of energy releasing ideas. The social nature of such ideas is an essential factor of their dynamic power. (James 1911a, 255-256)

James believed that the pragmatic way of considering religion was the deeper way because it involved more of our subliminal emotional being than did mere rational belief. "It gives it body as well as soul, it makes it claim, as everything real must claim, some characteristic realm of fact as its very own" (James 1902, p. 519). James could not imagine what divine facts might exist other than "the actual inflow of energy in the faith-state and the prayer state" (James 1902, p. 519). Critically, his own deeply held beliefs about how to interpret experi-

ence led him to make it his "personal venture" that they exist. Furthermore, James believed that the emotional comfort and security unleashed by an experience of the divine is what gives us the strength to fight for what we believe is good and right. He sums up his position clearly:

The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in. *By being faithful in my poor measure to this over-belief, I seem to myself to keep more sane and true....* the total expression of human experience, as I view it objectively, invincibly urges me beyond the narrow scientific bounds. Assuredly, the real world is of a different temperament, — more intricately built than physical science allows. So my objective and my subjective conscience both hold me to the over-belief which I express. *Who knows whether the faithfulness of individuals here below to their own poor over-beliefs may not actually help God in turn to be more effectively faithful to his own greater tasks?"* (James 1902, p. 519, italics added)

Conclusion

The Varieties of Religious Experience is James's way of personally honoring his father's memory by fulfilling a deeply felt pledge to his wife. It was also a way of keeping his hope of the continued existence of those he loved alive. But *Varieties* offers no conclusive scientific proof of God and immortality—what Henry James hoped William James would find when he allowed him to enroll in Lawrence Scientific College (Croce 1995; Perry 1935). Still, it does argue for the importance of religious experience to humanity—as a way to deny death (Becker 1974) or more charitably to "care for the self" (Foucault 1988). Mystical experiences and prayer allow us to care for ourselves and find deep and lasting peace and purpose in our lives. Perhaps more importantly, for William James, belief in God as a divine presence allows us to tap untold energies and increase our powers in this life. This will to believe is James's (1897, 1911c) reformulation of Pascal's intellectual wager (C. Taylor 2002)—one James continued to gather evidence in support of until the end of his life. And so *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in its paradoxical way, continues to enchant us even a century after it was written. Much of that enchantment is due to the spirit of William James himself, as it lives on in his own often-quoted words:

The 'inexplicable,' the 'mystery'... remains; but it

remains as something to be met with by faculties more akin to our activities and heroisms and willingnesses, than by our logical powers...let my last word, then, speaking in the name of intellectual philosophy, be his [Blood's] word: 'There is no conclusion. What has concluded, that we might conclude in regard to it? There are no fortunes to be told, and there is no advice to be given.—Farewell!' (James 1911b, p. 411)

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The Artificial Mystic State of Mind: WJ, Benjamin Paul Blood, and the Nitrous-Oxide Variety of Religious Experience

by Christopher A. P. Nelson

In the century since the publication of William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, "metaphysics" has, by some counts at least, fallen back into a state of disrepute among philosophers. The present paper may thus strike some readers as an enormous step backwards, philosophically speaking, insofar as any indulgence—and what is attention, if not a species of intellectual indulgence—in metaphysics, mysticism, and/or mind-altering drugs would appear to exemplify precisely the kind of flight from reality that philosophy has come to abhor as its cardinal vice. However, my aim in this paper, in hearkening back to William James's peculiar utterances regarding his "mystical" experiences on nitrous oxide and the "metaphysical" significance that he cannot help ascribing to them (James 1902, pp. 387-389), is not merely indulgence for its own sake. The argument I mean to put forth consists of three interrelated claims. (1) The "anesthetic revelation" constitutes the pivotal moment in the *Varieties*. (2) The *Varieties* is itself best understood as a moment in the progression of James's increasing appreciation of the import of the anesthetic revelation for philosophy—a progression that, at its crest, points directly to the work of Benjamin Paul Blood (1832-1919). (3) The writings of Blood figure in the history of philosophy as a moment of singular import, namely, a moment when the nature, purpose, and efficacy of philosophical discourse are called into question vis-à-vis Blood's philosophical elucidation of the elusiveness of the philosophical quarry.¹ In sum, I mean to argue for a re-orientation of the philosophical vocation consonant with the revelation attendant to the nitrous oxide variety of religious experience.

I. The Pivotal Moment in The Varieties

The *Varieties* is, by its own account, a description of man's religious appetites that awaits a sequel that would supply a complimentary description of the satisfaction of these appetites through philosophy (James 1902, p. xxxv). In the interest of keeping such a task finite, James delimits the methodology of the work in several key respects: he will invoke acquaintance with particulars, rather than have recourse to abstract formulas (James 1902, p. xxxv); he will appeal to personal documents as his principal source of data (James 1902, p. 3); he will suggest that the significance of states of mind—as, e.g., the religious—should be judged not by their origin—as, e.g., the pathological—but by the value of their "fruits" (James 1902, p. 15); he will tend to

¹. Though one might with equal veracity speak of the elusiveness of the philosophical quarry.

place emphasis on the personal, rather than the institutional, dimension of religious experience (James 1902, pp. 29-30); and, lastly, he will be concerned primarily with extreme, or fringe, experiences (James 1902, p. 40). Thus, while it is beyond the scope of the present paper to dwell at any great length upon the great variety of considerations that may have led James to make these methodological concessions, we may fairly summarize the nature of the *Varieties* in a preliminary fashion as follows: the work is a particularized description of man's religious appetites, especially the more extreme cases thereof, concerned (in one sense) with the personal experiences of individuals and (in another sense) with the personal documents that ostensibly communicate something of these experiences, aiming toward a judgment of the significance of the former by virtue of the value of the latter.²

Several lectures into the *Varieties*, having passed through the relatively more conceptually constrained descriptions of spiritual health and sickness (James 1902, pp. 78-165), the divided self and unification (James 1902, pp. 166-188), conversion (James 1902, pp. 189-258), and saintliness (James 1902, pp. 259-378), James arrives at the core lectures of the entire project, namely, the lectures on mysticism (James 1902, pp. 379-429). Despite the fact that the lectures on mysticism occupy such a crucial position in the *Varieties*, however, James is quick to point out that, with respect to mystical experiences, "[his] own constitution shuts [him] out from their enjoyment almost entirely" (James 1902, p. 379). Thus—neglecting to pay much serious consideration at this early juncture to the qualification "almost"—we are reminded yet again of the nature of the *Varieties*: it is concerned with the particular experiences of individuals only insofar as the significance of these experiences may be gauged with reference to the literary fruits that they have borne.

In the interest of brevity, I will confine myself presently to calling attention to three fairly general items within the lectures on mysticism as a means of effecting some accurate characterization thereof. First, in a manner entirely resonant with his earlier provisional definitions of "religion" and "the divine" (James 1902, pp. 26-31), James attempts to define "mystical" experience by identifying its essential elements. He discovers four such elements: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity (James 1902, pp. 380-382). These, he claims, are the defining characteristics of any mystical experience so far as we are given to understand them by reading the writings of confessed mystics. Second, James delineates a marked progression up "the mystical ladder," from a vague but deepened sense of the significance of a familiar maxim or formula, to the experience of

². While this last clause may seem an unnecessarily constricted qualification, it seems a necessary one, insofar as James must deal first with documents, and these only insofar as they are the veritable fruits of religious states of mind; his final judgments may well extend beyond the sphere of literary production—it matters little at this point. What does matter, however, is that we are currently engaged in a markedly comparable endeavor, namely, the attempt to form some judgment about the enduring significance of the *Varieties*.

existential déjà vu, to waking dreams and trances, to intoxicants and anesthetics, and, finally, to the sporadic or maintained realization of the immediate presence of God (James 1902, pp. 382-393ff). Third, James offers three conclusions based upon his extensive considerations of the testimonies of reputed mystics:

(1) “Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come. (2) No authority emanates from them [i.e., from mystical states] which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically. (3) They [i.e., mystical states] break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith. (James 1902, pp. 422-423)

While the preceding digest of the core lectures of the *Varieties*—four marks, five-rung ladder, three conclusions and all—would seem to give a fairly satisfactory indication of the nature of mystical experience, there is yet within this core a further discernible core. Within the pivotal lectures on mysticism, the sub-section concerned with what James (following Benjamin Paul Blood) refers to as the “anesthetic revelation” constitutes the pivotal moment around which this “vital chapter” (379), and hence the *Varieties* as a whole, revolves.³ As contentious as this hypothesis might at first glance appear, I offer five supplementary contentions in the interest of inducing the willing reader to entertain it—contentions pertaining, respectively, to the experiential, adjudicative, hierarchical, provisionally conclusive, and enduringly significant aspects of James’s elucidation of mystical experience.

As regards the experiential aspect of James’s elucidation of mystical experience, it is worth pointing out that among the many and varied mystical experiences reported in the *Varieties*, the experience of “nitrous oxide intoxication” is the lone mystical experience that James explicitly claims, within the *Varieties*, to have had (James 1902, pp. 387-389)—thus supplying the much-needed explanation of the “almost” that James uses to qualify his claim to never having a mystical experience.⁴ Thus, insofar as the *Varieties* can be said to be concerned with the particular experiences of individuals, and not only—or at least not in the same sense—with the personal documents pertaining thereto, James’s report of his experience with nitrous oxide assumes a kind of privileged position in the text. For, when James claims that, “nitrous oxide stimulates the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree” (James 1902, p.

387), he is speaking, for the first and only time in the *Varieties*, as one who has been There.⁵

With respect to the adjudicative aspect of James’s elucidation of mystical experience, I would suggest that rather than merely satisfying the four criteria he explicates as definitive of the mystical state of consciousness, James’s nitrous oxide experience may well have supplied these criteria in a way that no document could have supplied them. In James’s words:

Depth beyond depth of truth seems revealed to the inhaler. This truth fades out, however, or escapes, at the moment of coming to; and if any words remain over in which it seemed to clothe itself, they prove to be the veriest nonsense. (James 1902, p. 387)

We have here, in so many words, nothing but an appropriately succinct report of the noetic quality (“depth beyond depth of truth seems”), passivity (“revealed to the inhaler”), transiency (“this truth fades out, however, or escapes, at the moment of coming to”), and ineffability (“and if any words remain over in which it seemed to clothe itself, they prove to be the veriest nonsense”) of the experience in question. If first-hand experience is to lay claim to any kind of precedence over second-hand reports with respect to the determination of the nature and significance of mystical experience, this is the lone moment in the *Varieties* in which James takes any step toward signaling this precedence.

Concerning the hierarchical aspect of James’s elucidation of mystical experience, the fact that James explicitly places the anesthetic revelation below “religious” mysticism on his “mystical ladder”—coupling it with drunkenness, though elevating it above the latter—is at least ironically significant. James gives no reason for thus situating the anesthetic revelation on the mystical ladder—in fact, he offers no reason for distinguishing qualitatively between any of the steps on his ladder. Rather, in making the transition to “religious” mysticism, James introduces the “sudden realization of the immediate presence of God” (James 1902, p. 393) as the only new criteria on this highest rung—an introduction that, at least nominally, betrays his former commitment to dispense with the talk of “God” in favor of the more general terminology of “the divine” (James 1902, p. 31ff). However, in thus relegating the anesthetic revelation to a position beneath that of religious mysticism proper, James is at the very least (perhaps at most) betraying an implicit adherence to the conservative presumption that “drugs” do not, or rather cannot, effect a truly religious experience—a presumption that may or may not have merit in the last analysis, but a presumption nonetheless. As a result, even the least sympathetic reader ought to

³ This is not an entirely novel contention on my part—cf. Leuba 1904, p. 329; Bridges 1970, pp. 15-19; Barnard 1997, pp. 25-31.

⁴ Whether or not James actually had any other “mystical” experiences is well beyond the purview of this author. However, within the context of his elucidation of mystical experience in the *Varieties*, James’s otherwise impenetrable reticence on this score is telling.

⁵ Surprisingly, the advent of such a privileged moment fails to undermine the methodological consistency of the *Varieties*, in that James refers his readers to a document (James 1882) that he wrote while under the influence of nitrous oxide. For an interesting indication of the extent to which such inspired writing might suggest itself as worthy of philosophical attention, see James 1889b.

wonder whether drug-induced states of consciousness are too “extreme” to merit inclusion in the category of the religious—a peculiar concession indeed, considering James’s explicit commitment to concern himself with experiences in the extreme and on the fringe.

Apropos the provisionally conclusive aspect of James’s elucidation of mystical experience, the question arises, again, as to the relative significance of James’s own experience in the formulation of these conclusions. James confesses to being ever unable to shake the impression of the truth of a certain conviction gained in the nitrous oxide experience (James 1902, p. 388), but he does not presume that this conviction will be, or ought to be, shared by his readers or anyone else; and the substance of this certain conviction is, of all things, the conclusion that “our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness ...” (James 1902, p. 388). We have here in so many words an expression of the conviction that the experience in question carries authority for the one who has it, but for no one else, and that this experience breaks down the exclusive authority of rationalistic states of mind. Instead of comprising yet another instance of a phenomenal description that might lend itself to the drawing of certain generic conclusions, James’s nitrous oxide experience appears to supply these conclusions specifically.

In reference to the enduringly significant aspect of James’s elucidation of mystical experience, we would do well to recall that evaluating the significance of James’s nitrous oxide experience is only possible for us in one way, according to his suggestion that we gauge the significance of any reported experience, not by its origin,—as, e.g., drug-induced—but by the value of its fruits. What then, we may well ask, are the fruits of the experience in question? I submit, based in large part upon the foregoing explication, that we take the production of the *Varieties* (in particular) as the fruit of James’s nitrous oxide experience. There is nothing in his report of the experience that mitigates against its being construed as such a definitive moment; while, moreover, there is much in his report of the experience that recommends it as suited precisely for such an interpretation. Furthermore, opting to see the *Varieties* as the fruit of James’s nitrous oxide experience renders both the experience and the product comprehensible in a way that neither of them was before; in sum, it permits us to ask whether and to what extent the *Varieties* is immediately luminous, philosophically reasonable, and morally helpful, with an eye toward the determination of the significance of a putatively mystical experience. Conversely, such a view requires us to see the *Varieties* as an existential response to an actual experience—i.e., a novel experience that opened new vistas of inquiry, or at least mandated the opening of other, prematurely closed vistas of inquiry (the “religious” in particular).

However, having suggested the manner in which the section on the anesthetic revelation might well be construed as the pivotal section around which the entirety of the vital chapter on mysticism revolves, the question remains—and it is to James’s great credit that he recognized it—as to whether, and to what extent, mysticism is an

essentially religious phenomenon. James signals as much in his brief consideration—a consideration immediately preceding the conclusions of the lectures on mysticism—of what he terms “diabolical mysticism, a sort of religious mysticism turned upside down” (James 1902, pp. 426-427). For present purposes, the question may be put as simply as this: is the anesthetic revelation a religious experience, or is it rather an “insane,” “enfeebled,” “deluded,” “paranoid,” “desolating,” and “dreadful” manifestation of “that region” in which “seraph and snake” abide side by side? If the latter, James has herewith supplied the lone qualification that might disqualify the anesthetic revelation as the pivotal moment of the *Varieties*—inasmuch as he has left room for a “mystical” experience that might not even be essentially “religious.” And it is to this very question that we must inevitably return, at some point, if we are to make any assessment as to the enduring significance of the *Varieties*.⁶

Anticipations of diabolical undertones notwithstanding, I feel comfortable in asserting that, insofar as the *Varieties* is the explicit anticipation of a philosophical sequel that would endeavor to describe the satisfaction of man’s religious appetites, it would behoove us to take notice of the manner in which the core insights of this text are appropriated and elucidated elsewhere in James’s philosophy, both before and after the publication of the *Varieties*. As I will presently endeavor to show, the anesthetic revelation crops up in a number of interesting and arguably conspicuous places throughout James’s literary career—a cropping up that does not fail to indicate the manner in which such a philosophical sequel might eventually see the light of day.

II. William James and the Anesthetic Revelation

Among the figures referenced by James throughout his impressive survey of the literature pertaining to religious experience, one of them merits singular attention. Not only is he the most prominent character in James’s discourse on the anesthetic revelation, he is also the one who inspired James to experiment with nitrous oxide, and whose repeated philosophical discourses on the anesthetic revelation find their way into James’s writings in a handful of conspicuous places. His name is Benjamin Paul Blood; and aside from the fact that he was the “crank” philosopher who introduced James to nitrous oxide, little else is ever said about him.⁷ Considerate of the manner in which this character and his purported revelation find their way into and out of their allotted role in the *Varieties*, however, Blood’s philosophical production merits a closer look.

Before endeavoring any explication of Blood’s philosophy, however, we would do well to consider the manner in

⁶ I perhaps owe it to the reader to inform him/her that a return to this question is forthcoming. Suffice it to say at this point, however, that, notwithstanding my explicit concern with the religious, the present exercise may well acquire a retrospective coloring consonant with James’s characterization of the diabolical.

⁷ There are a few exceptions that prove this rule: Blood 1920, pp. xv-xliv; Blood 1924; Foreword, *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century* (1998), pp. 33-35; Wright 1992, pp. 447-456; Tymoczko 1996, pp. 95-98.

which he and his thinking find their way into several of James's other works; these consist of a review of Blood's *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy* (1874), "The Sentiment of Rationality" (1879), "On Some Hegelisms" (1882), "The Psychology of Belief" (1889a), "Consciousness Under Nitrous-Oxide" (1898), "A Pluralistic Mystic" (1910), and *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy* (1911).

Though it was by no means the first, the most developed, the longest, the most dialectically refined, the most poetic, or the last literary production from the pen of Benjamin Blood, his pamphlet *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy* (Blood 1874)—in which he heralds the discovery of the satisfaction of philosophy through the administration of anesthetic agents—is certainly the most well known of his works. Perhaps more importantly for present purposes, it is this work that brought him to the attention of William James. James received the pamphlet sometime in 1874, and wrote a review of it for the *Atlantic Monthly* later that year (James 1874). In his review, James acts the professional and responsible academic. Blood, on his account, is one who condemns the metaphysical craving as "an essentially hopeless passion," and who "frees himself from philosophy only as many others have done, by wading deeply through" (James 1874, p. 628). James is "more than skeptical of the importance of Mr. Blood's so-called discovery [though James] will not howl with the wolves or join the multitude in jeering at it" (James 1874, p. 628). For, "ontological emotion, however stumbled upon, has something authoritative for the individual who feels it" (James 1874, p. 628). However, while sympathetic with some of the insights he gleans from the pamphlet itself, James is ultimately and unequivocally critical of Blood's thesis, a criticism succinctly summarized thus: "what blunts the mind and weakens the will [i.e., nitrous oxide] is no full channel for truth" (James 1874, p. 628).

Five years later, in "The Sentiment of Rationality" (James 1879), James shows that, while he has yet to make anything of Blood's philosophy, he has not forgotten him. Toward the conclusion of the essay, and a propos Jacobi's "rationalization" of existence by the heart rather than the head, James cites Blood's pamphlet in a footnote, describing it simply as "a curious recent contribution to the construction of a universal mystical method" (James 1879, p. 345). The purported "method" in question pertains to the hope, at the very least, of finding a means of communicating something of mystical experience to other persons. Recalling that the first mark of any mystic state is, on James's account, "ineffability," such a hope, though almost certainly as old as mystical experience itself, is no less heroic than it is problematic. The fact that James refers his readers to Blood on this point can thus be seen as a strikingly significant gesture, in that it testifies (implicitly at least) to the extent to which James considers himself to be the beneficiary of Blood's curious attempts to effect such a communication.

Three years later, in a note appended to his essay "On Some Hegelisms" (James 1882), James notes that—due to the influence exercised over him by Blood's pamphlet, and since the time when the article "On Some Hegelisms" was

originally written—he has experimented with nitrous oxide and encourages others to do so as well (James 1882, p. 206). He claims to have attained a real insight into the strength and weakness of Hegel's philosophy through nitrous oxide intoxication, identifying the keynote of the experience as a sense of metaphysical "reconciliation" (James 1882, pp. 206-207). He notes the impossibility of writing about the experience, though he transcribes some curious verbiage penned during the experience itself (James 1882, p. 207). He points out the downside of the experience, namely, the pessimistic fatalism that accompanies the revelation (James 1882, p. 208). He describes how the experience itself fades, until nothing remains save bewilderment at one's own bewilderment (James 1882, p. 208). Finally, he concludes that the root of Hegelian idealism is an affect akin to the sense of reconciliation attained in the nitrous oxide experience (James 1882, p. 208). For all the philosophical implications that this note contains, the significance of this philosophical afterthought can hardly be emphasized enough: not only has James come to see something worthy of philosophical attention in the anesthetic revelation, but he has taken the further step of re-thinking an entire (and entirely dominant) philosophical scheme in light of this revelation.⁸

Seven years later, James returns briefly to the anesthetic revelation in "The Psychology of Belief" (James 1889a).⁹ Concerned with illuminating the constitutive role that belief plays in one's perception of reality, James considers the pathological exaltation of belief:

One of the charms of drunkenness unquestionably lies in the deepening of the sense of reality and truth which is gained therein. In whatever light things may then appear to us, they seem more utterly what they are, more 'utterly utter' than when we are sober. This goes to a fully unutterable extreme in the nitrous oxide intoxication, in which a man's very soul will sweat with conviction, and he be all the while unable to tell what he is convinced of at all. The pathological state opposed to this solidity and deepening has been called the questioning mania. (James 1889a, p. 322)

The important thing to note about this passage, however, is not the manner in which the anesthetic revelation is offered as an example of a "pathological exaltation," but rather the nature of the experience insofar as James ventures to render a positive account of it: the experience consists in a sense of reality that is unutterably utterly utter. And while some might choose to find in this phenomenological description nothing but a kind of self-gratifying confusion, such a description is almost sure to compare favorably with the cryptic characterizations of mystical experience typical

8. On James's professed comprehension of Hegel and his system vis-à-vis his nitrous oxide experience, see Cook 1977.

9. This article later evolved into Chapter XXI of *The Principles of Psychology*, "The Perception of Reality."

of the literature on the subject.¹⁰

Nine years later, James submits for publication an account of nitrous oxide intoxication mailed to him by an anonymous friend (James 1898). While the account itself is interesting in its own right, James's preface to the account is no less so:

Normal human consciousness is only a narrow extract from a great sea of possible human consciousnesses, of whose limits we know nothing, but of the nature of portions of which such documents as the following may help inform us. It were greatly to be wished that they might be multiplied. (James 1898, p. 194)

In the century and change since James penned this invitation, his wish has gone virtually unheeded.¹¹

Twelve years later (eight years after the publication of the *Varieties*), James wrote the final work he saw published in his lifetime (James 1910)—an essay devoted to summoning other readers to the enjoyment of a relatively “unknown author of rare quality” whom James has discovered in his explorations, namely, Benjamin Paul Blood (James 1910, p. 739). The essay is titled simply, “A Pluralistic Mystic,” and consists of several passages from various works by Blood, interspersed with James's idiosyncratic interpretations and summarizations of these remarks. From these interpretive summaries, five items suggest themselves for further consideration. First, James's philosophical interest in Blood stems primarily from James's admiration of the manner in which Blood suggests a mystical revelation consonant with James's pluralistic metaphysical hypothesis (James 1910, pp. 740-741). Second, James's description of the dialectical method of exposition exemplified by Blood suggests a relatively novel means of coming to terms with dialectical thinking as such; in short, James identifies the “rotational experience” characteristic of dialectical thinking—an experience that, as such, is no more purely cognitive than it is purely affective—as its defining feature (James 1910, p. 741). Third, James claims that, his philosophy proper notwithstanding, Blood's truly original contribution lies in the manner in which he becomes “a renegade and relapse” from philosophy (James 1910, p. 749)—a relapse manifest both in Blood's penchant for poetic expression as over and against philosophic articulation, and in Blood's explicit recommendation of the anesthetic revelation as offering the satisfaction that philosophy craves, but is incapable of achieving. Fourth, however, James confesses to being unable to comprehend the integrated significance of this shift in Blood's thinking from the super-rational to the irrational—a shift that parallels the latter's purported shift from a monistic metaphysic to a pluralistic metaphysic; in fact, James wonders aloud whether or not he is dealing inade-

quately with a dialectical circling, the profundity of which he is not able to comprehend (James 1910, p. 750). Fifth and finally, James concludes his essay on Blood in a manner that merits quoting in full:

Philosophy must pass from words, that reproduce but ancient elements, to life itself, that gives the integrally new ... [The mystery] remains as something to be met and dealt with by faculties more akin to our activities and heroisms and willingnesses, than to our logical powers. This is the anaesthetic insight, according to our author. Let my last word, then, speaking in the name of intellectual philosophy, be his word: There is no conclusion. What has concluded that we might conclude in regard to it? There are no fortunes to be told, and there is no advice to be given—Farewell! (James 1910, pp. 758-759)

There are perhaps two extreme ways of taking this conclusion. Perhaps we have here an ill-advised encomium to a good friend—an understandable and forgivable case of personal admiration confounding philosophic acumen. On the other hand, without bothering to belabor the obvious posthumous significance of these particularly striking “last words,” perhaps we have here not only evidence of a relatively unexplored indication of the degree to which Blood's thinking was a major influence on the philosophizing of James, but the direction in which James's philosophizing was leading him.

Curiously enough, this suspicion finds slight confirmation a year later when an introductory book on philosophy written by James was posthumously published (James 1911). Though there is no credit given for the quotations, James quotes Blood approvingly both in concluding his chapter on “The One and the Many” (James 1911, p. 143), and again in opening his chapter on “The Problem of Novelty” (James 1911, pp. 147-148). James's growing fascination with Blood—a fascination that began in 1874 and culminated dramatically in 1910—thus finds its final expression in an intellectual deference with respect to the articulation of such perennially troublesome problems as unity vs. multiplicity, and sameness vs. difference.¹²

Thus, while it would certainly be a stretch to suggest that the anesthetic revelation is the lone item through which his philosophical development can be comprehended, the evolution of James's appreciation of the import of this revelation for philosophy is worth noting. James fortuitously happens across an elucidation of the significance of the revelation in 1874, but remains highly critical of its import. The revelation next appears in connection with the project of the construction of a universal mystical method in 1879, indicating that, his earlier skepticism notwithstanding, James had already allotted a rather significant place for it in his thinking. After making his own experiments with nitrous oxide, James makes the transition from skeptic to

¹⁰One might, for instance, well imagine Meister Eckhart composing an entire sermon that takes its point of departure and return in the formulation of the “unutterably utterly utter.”

¹¹The lone remarkable contribution in this respect with which I am familiar is Shedlin, et al., 1992. The classic text on the subject is still Davy, 1800.

¹²It is worth noting as well the manner in which, in 1897, James defers to Blood with respect to the elucidation of “pluralism,” and appropriates Blood's phrase “ever not quite” as the heraldic device thereof (James 1897, pp. viii-ix).

proponent sometime prior to 1882, and invokes the substance of the revelation, in 1889, in conjunction with his abbreviated elucidation of a sense of reality that is unutterably utterly utter. And after wishing aloud, in 1898, for further accounts of excursions into the revelation, James authors the *Varieties*, in 1900-1902, in which the anesthetic revelation comes to occupy (or so I have attempted to argue) a privileged position as an experience of singular import and novel insight. Finally, in the last year of his life, James writes an essay in which his parting words consist entirely in the summoning of his readers to the reading of the works of the most outspoken proponent of the anesthetic revelation. With this call in mind, I would like now to pick up the thread where James left off of it, and briefly consider the works of Blood.

III. The “Philosophy” of Benjamin Paul Blood

Blood’s literary production can be roughly broken into three kinds of works: letters, poems, and essays. Subsequent to the composition of his pamphlet on the anesthetic revelation, Blood mailed the pamphlet to intellectuals throughout America and Europe. Among the more notable persons who took an interest in the pamphlet, and with whom Blood subsequently struck up active correspondence, are such persons as Alfred Tennyson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Ramsay, Edmund Gurney, and Hutchison Stirling. While corresponding frequently and at length with the eminent minds of his age, however, Blood maintained an even more prolific correspondence in the form of letters to local newspapers. Such an item is worthy of note insofar as this pronounced composition of intellectualized and localized correspondence is a testimony to Blood’s understanding of the place and function of philosophy in the life of man.

In addition to this output of correspondence, and motivated no doubt by something inherent in the nature of his philosophic discovery, Blood spent a great deal of time composing and publishing poetry. His poems range in length from short submissions to magazines (see Blood 1924), to hundred-page epics (Blood 1854 and 1868). Whatever the length, Blood discovered something liberating about poetry—something that, while not forsaking the discursive capacity manifest in man, gives every indication that a capable mind could chart a course through language that seeks the elucidation of the genius of being in a manner different from, though perhaps comparable in profundity to, the typical (almost stereotypical) mode of discourse prevalent in academic philosophy.

Though “correspondent” and “poet” might well have constituted vocational actualizations enough, Blood authored, in addition, at least twelve essays in his lifetime.¹³ For present purposes, I will confine my attention to two of these essays in particular, though even a cursory glance at

Blood’s production of essays indicates a concern not only with the signalization of a particular metaphysical discovery, but with the elucidation of the relationship between this discovery and such otherwise diverse fields of inquiry as philosophical psychology, practical theology, politics, linguistics, poetics, and last though not least, the everyday life of common folk. It is greatly to be wished that all metaphysical inquiry might, as a rule, find such far-reaching applications.

Turning now to a consideration of two of Blood’s essays in particular, it is worth remarking that whatever philosophical permutations may be cited as characteristic of the equivocations manifest in Blood’s philosophy—as, e.g., between reason and unreason, monism and pluralism, metaphysics and common sense, discrete articulation and poetic expression, etc.—his central thesis is univocal throughout, and stated in print for the first time in 1874:

By the Anaesthetic Revelation I mean a certain survived condition (or uncondition), in which is the satisfaction of philosophy by an appreciation of the genius of being, which appreciation cannot be brought out of that condition into the normal sanity of sense—cannot be formally remembered, but remains informal, forgotten until we return to it. (Blood 1874, p. 33)

Accordingly, as Blood states in no uncertain terms at the outset of this pamphlet, his hope is “to signalize [rather] than purpose to define [the] discovery” (3). Hence the structure and development of the pamphlet itself: first a diagnosis of the dissatisfaction peculiar to philosophy, and second the recommended satisfaction. The significance of this discovery, philosophically construed, consists in the fact that the revelation calls for, or at least implicates, philosophy, and that philosophy fails to articulate the revelation. The search for the “what” and “why” of human existence, the search for the word of life, the query as to the ultimate intelligibility of the human condition, is an unqualified failure so far as articulation thereof is concerned. But this recognition alone—i.e., the recognition of the failure of philosophy to deliver ultimately satisfying answers to its deepest questions, as, e.g., the beginning and end (telos) of the universe, the one and the many, sameness and difference, et al.—is not sufficient of itself to dispel the craving for answers to such questions. And in concluding his short pamphlet on the anesthetic revelation and the gist of philosophy, Blood turns the conservative argument, that drug-induced states of consciousness are too facile to constitute a veritable revelation, on its head by appealing to this very facility as the chief benefit of the anesthetic revelation. For, “now for the first time the ancient problem is referred to empirical resolution, when the expert and the novice may meet on the same ground” (Blood 1874, p. 35). It is at least worth speculating as to the origin of the expert’s prejudice against any such resolution.

Forty-five years later, in the final work prepared for publication in his lifetime, Blood endeavors once again to signalize his peculiar discovery. This time, the work, *Pluriverse*, evolves into a lengthy nine-chapter book (Blood 1920). The structure and aim of this work, however, correspond

¹³ Blood 1851, 1860, 1863, 1874, 1875, 1878, 1882, 1886, 1893, 1916, 1920; the twelfth, “Tennyson’s trances and the anaesthetic revelation” is quoted in the *Varieties* (James 1902, pp. 390-391), but no citation is supplied.

perfectly to the structure and aim of the earlier pamphlet: the first eight chapters consist of topically focused diagnoses of the dissatisfactions of philosophy, specifically with respect to (I) duplexity, (II) idealism, (III) monism, (IV) cause, (V) self-relation, (VI) the negative, (VII) ancillary unity and the present tense, and (VIII) Jesus and free will. And once again, the final section—in this case the final chapter—is devoted to signaling the satisfaction of philosophy in the anesthetic revelation. And while *Pluriverse* is, at least in one sense, more of a final summary of Blood's philosophy than a culmination thereof, I would like to draw attention to four insights offered therein.

First, Blood strays a bit further in the direction of phenomenological description in *Pluriverse* than ever before. Of the anesthetic revelation, of which he had precious little to say directly on previous occasions, he now says: "Its best remembered impression is the sense of initiation"—the sense that "now you know" (Blood 1920, p. 205). Recalling the brief appearance of the anesthetic revelation in James's explication of the cognitive/affective integration called "belief," this is an astute observation ripe with philosophical implication. For, in so many words, Blood is signaling the existence of a singular affective component to such diverse modes of "knowing" as, for example, mystery religions, mysticism, the Cartesian Cogito, the Hegelian Absolute, Pragmatic Common Sense, et al. And furthermore, whether following or preceding James on this point, Blood is suggesting that the cognitive and affective elements of any conviction—philosophical or otherwise—are inextricably linked in actual experience.¹⁴

Second, Blood remains adamant that, though he is offering a semblance of philosophy in *Pluriverse*, "it should be obvious that a generalization of such an experience [as the anesthetic revelation] ... would have to be told in tentative, provisional and poetical rather than factual terms" (Blood 1920, p. 212). Accordingly, Blood's several discursive strategies are fundamentally informed by the recognition that any attempt to render an account of being, truth, reality, etc., is but itself one more instance of the stuff for which it was meant to account. Hence the epigraph to the entire essay: "The Hound of Heaven is on his own trail, and the vestige still lures the scent of a foregone conclusion" (i). The genius of being is manifest in an extraordinary degree in the very fact that any attempt to philosophize being comes into existence and is. The grammatical conundrums that ensue from any further explicative attempts in this

direction and of this nature are recommendation enough for some to look to poetry for further instruction. We come thus to a problem at least as old as Plato—a problem that cries out precisely for the kind of solution existentially effected by Plato: the problem of determining the proper practical relationship between philosophy and poetry.

Third, Blood repeatedly invokes the problem of "the one and the many" throughout *Pluriverse*. However, his invocations tend not only in the direction of confirming James's suspicion that there is something "deeper" to this problem than simply allying oneself with the monists on the one hand or the pluralists on the other, but tend equally to be reminiscent of Plato's depiction(s) of Parmenides' struggle(s) with this problem (Blood 1920, pp. 213, 236, *passim*). Without rehearsing here the several difficulties that attend this ages old "problem," it seems prudent rather to recall that, as far as "truth" is concerned, the one thing that the self-proclaimed protesters of the plight of the practical man tend all too often to forget is that the satisfaction that they offer to those plagued by metaphysical questions (as, e.g., the question of the one and the many) does not satisfy the latter's souls in the least. What Blood is signaling is a satisfaction that promises to come in terms as majestic or as absurd as the dissatisfaction itself. The vanishing of the problem of "the one and the many" can and perhaps must be as ridiculously profound as the entertainment of that very problem ever pretended to be. But the vanishing of an ostensibly metaphysical dissatisfaction cannot consist exclusively in any formulaic dismissal of the problem. Rather, it is only ever by wading deeply through metaphysics, and running the very real risk of becoming entirely submerged, that one can come to any appreciation whatsoever of the efficacy of entertaining metaphysical questions in the first place.

Fourth and finally, as with the 1874 pamphlet, the concluding chapter of *Pluriverse* draws toward a close with an appeal to the facility of the anesthetic revelation. This time, however, the appeal is a bit stronger than it was in the earlier pamphlet, and its palpable path to mysticism could appeal directly to the empirical and pragmatic emphases of American intellectuals:

The boasted progress of the race will be shamelessly inadequate if we have come to a time when the historical secret which philosophy has coveted is empirically accessible, only to be inconsequently neglected. (Blood 1920, p. 244)

The upshot of this unorthodox invitation is two-fold: if the nitrous oxide experience truly permits access to an otherwise inaccessible yet significant dimension or region of consciousness in which something like a metaphysical revelation occurs, it is a revelation easily had; contrariwise, if the nitrous oxide experience is a farce and its proponents frauds, this suspicion is likewise easily substantiated. In either case, the almost ridiculous facility with which the experience may be had cuts a striking figure against the background of a century's worth of philosophical silence on the subject.

¹⁴This appears to offer more than is offered by "the sentiment of rationality," insofar as "the sense of initiation" may well attend to an initiation into the revelation of the absolutely chaotic flux of the pluriverse as much as it might attend to an initiation into the revelation of the fundamental logos of the universe. Moreover, such an excessively encompassing revelatory moment is also precisely that which permits Blood a definition of the "religious" that encompasses both the majestic/solemn and the absurd/comedic—a definition much wider than James's, and one that better accommodates those who, on occasion, find reason to laugh at or with primal reality. For, as Blood in true mystic fashion says, "aside from mere formality the majestic and the absurd are of equal dignity" (Blood 1874, p. 34).

IV. For Continued Consideration

If it is not too late at this point, perhaps the objection should be raised, on behalf of a great many potential objectors, that, with respect to accessing “the historical secret that philosophy has coveted,” we modern philosophers have done better still, by neglecting to covet any such secret in the first place. After all, was it not William James himself who instructed us that pragmatism is the truth about truth, that pragmatism constitutes the actual satisfaction regarding the nature of truth, that the truth about truth is that truth is equivalent to satisfaction, and that the true satisfaction of our ridiculously formulated metaphysical queries lies in the pragmatic realization of ideal aims and ends, and not in the reception of any amount of equally ridiculously formulated metaphysical responses?

Such an objection merits a more involved response than is possible here. However, an appropriate beginning in this direction can be found in the correspondence between James and Blood, a propos the publication of James’s *Pragmatism*.¹⁵ Insofar as *Pragmatism* suggests itself, at least implicitly, as the kind of sequel—the philosophical satisfaction—to the *Varieties* heralded by James,¹⁶ the question inevitably arises as to the nature of the satisfaction provided by pragmatism from the perspective of the religiously appetitive spirit. Such is precisely the question that Blood raises, when he asks James, in so many words, why he fails to acknowledge that the experience that crystallizes the pragmatic hypothesis is in fact an experience of singular import, the experience that reveals the Truth about truth, the experience wherein James discovers for himself that the satisfaction attendant to the recognition of philosophical truth is just that: the experience of satisfaction. The question is a pertinent one, insofar as James appears to lose sight of the hypothesis, so adamantly maintained throughout the *Varieties*, that this kind of crystallizing experience cannot be had by proxy.

Whether or not he ever intended or attempted to write the sequel to the *Varieties*, *Pragmatism* is the closest thing we have from James resembling a response to the question of the satisfaction of man’s religious appetites, inasmuch as the definition of “truth” supplied therein is virtually meaningless if “religious truth” is to be qualified as requiring something besides the “satisfaction” that the pragmatic method supplies. If religion indeed consists, as James “concludes” in the *Varieties*, in “an uneasiness” and “its solution” (James, 1902, p. 508), Blood’s rejoinder to the effect that pragmatism is ultimately unsatisfying is entirely to the point, insofar as James appears to have become convinced that the abstract formulas of pragmatism may yet serve as suitable surrogates for the experience at the root of the pragmatic hypothesis. But the story does not end here.

Insofar as we remain committed to the thesis that states of mind are best judged by the value of their fruits,

we ought to take notice of the fact that, despite their several differences, James and Blood are of one voice when it comes to determining their existential response to the anesthetic revelation: both of them write. Thus, bearing in mind the fact that the question as to the fruits that flower from the anesthetic revelation is but a version of the dominant question that runs through all of *the literature* on the subject of the relationship between drugs and mysticism,¹⁷ we must inevitably ask ourselves whether, to what extent, and in what respect the commitment to the development of a universal mystical method (i.e., primal communication) exemplifies precisely the “zest for life” and “love for others” putatively characteristic of the religious psyche (James 1902, pp. 485-486). In fact, such is precisely the question that one must ask in order to decide whether or not the anesthetic revelation constitutes a “religious” or a “diabolical” experience.¹⁸

Before asking about the value of such an enterprise—i.e., the development of a universal mystical method—we would do well to ask about its legitimacy. The question as to the legitimacy of any attempt to philosophize the revelation assumes a dialectical significance for us: on the one hand, the significance of the anesthetic revelation is to be gauged, at least initially, by the value of the literary fruits that it produces; on the other hand, the value of these literary fruits themselves may consist principally in the corroboration of the efficacy of communion with the larger spiritual universe. In other words, at least insofar as mystical experience is concerned, not only is the significance of an experience to be gauged with reference to the value of its fruits, but the value of these fruits is to be gauged with reference to the extent to which they succeed in reproducing (not representing, but “signifying” in the sense in which Peirce might use the word) something of what is valued in the experience in question. Thus, the question does not pertain so much to the theoretical legitimacy of any attempt to philosophize the revelation, as much as it pertains essentially to the practical legitimation of any such endeavor.

¹⁵ This exchange can be found reprinted in Perry 1935, pp. 556-560.

¹⁶ See especially Lecture VIII of *Pragmatism*, in which the question of “religion” is revisited, and “pragmatism” becomes virtually synonymous with pluralistic and melioristic religion.

¹⁷ The question is almost always as simple as whether or not drugs can induce mystical states of consciousness (Huxley 1954; Zaehner 1961; Harman 1963; Asrani 1963; Smith 1964; Murray 1966; Parsons 1969; Tapia 1970; Gotz 1972; Oakes 1976; Kellenberger 1978; Prakash 1979; Pinto 1979; Pullapilly 1979; Egan 1984, pp. 338-47). Incidentally, it would be curious to discover the extent to which those on the conservative side of the dispute (those who speak against the possibility of drug-induced mysticism despite the striking absence of any phenomenological characteristics that might distinguish such drug-induced states from authentic mystical states) recognize the alliance that they are striking with Pragmatism when they collectively invoke “knowledge by fruits” as the sole criterion for authenticating mystical experience, and the extent to which they are comfortable with this alliance on other fronts—especially when “knowledge by fruits” is invoked as a criterion for determining the significance of experience in general, and religious experience as such bears the brunt of the assault.

¹⁸ It must be kept in mind, however, that as practical as the matter of distinguishing between the religious and diabolical fruits of mystical states of mind might be made to seem, the problem is really only heightened when it is recognized that the power characteristic of the diabolical is precisely the semblance of the religious.

The Artificial Mystic State of Mind by Christopher A. P. Nelson

Accordingly, in addition to describing the satisfaction of man's religious appetites—a function that philosophy may yet serve by attending to the “sense” that accompanies epistemic and revelatory experiences¹⁹—philosophy stands poised to assume, or rather acknowledge, the additional function of actually reproducing this sense in the experience of philosophy itself. This latter function is a self-imposed burden assumed in accordance with the recognition of the value and significance of reflexive integrity—i.e., the recognition of the value and significance of reproducing through discourse the reality about which one is wont to speak. Whether or not this recognition is precisely what is facilitated in the “artificial mystic state of mind,” I must leave to the reader to discover.

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¹⁹There would appear to be at least two avenues open with respect to this project: phenomenological description, and neuro-scientific analysis. In either case, however, the question remains as to the nature of the affective resonance of any articulate description of the experience of satisfaction—which is to say, any endeavor to render a satisfactory account of the experience of satisfaction is perpetually precarious.

A Challenge For Interpreters of Varieties

by Richard M. Gale

Over and over again sympathetic interpreters of William James are challenged to find some way to neutralize apparent inconsistencies in his text. One of the nastiest occurs in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; and, since it is the centennial of the publication of this great masterpiece, it seemed a propos that it now be brought to their attention with the hope that a way can be found to neutralize it. This inconsistency, briefly, consists in an apparent clash between the underlying thesis of *Varieties*, that religious experience is the essence and life-blood of religion, and the claim that “the most interesting and valuable things about a man are usually his over-beliefs,” an over-belief being a philosophical theory about the nature of the apparent object of a religious experience (James 1985, p. 405). Before an attempt is made to reconcile these apparently conflicting claims, it is necessary to bring this conflict into bold relief by expounding further on each of them.

By giving pride of place to religious experiences over religious institutions, with their creeds and theologies, *Varieties* supports a religious ecumenicalism that fits in with the over-all ecumenical tenor of James’s philosophy. Just as James, in *The Principles of Psychology*, refuses to give a privileged authority to the perspective of any one of his many selves, he refuses to make invidious ontological distinctions between the many worlds that are the objects of the interests and purposes of these selves. This democratic ontology reconciles the apparently conflicting perspectives taken by the moral agent, scientist, and mystic. The apparently conflicting revelations of different religious experiences, as for example between monistic and dualistic mystical experiences, admits of a similar type of ecumenical resolution. James’s empirical science of religion attempts to extract a vital common denominator from the great extant religions. It is found to consist in three theses:

“1. That the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance; 2. That union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end; 3. That prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof—be that spirit ‘God’ or ‘law’ —is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, either psychological or material, within the phenomenal world” (James 1985, p. 382).

An over-belief attempts to fill in the metaphysical details about the nature of this more spiritual universe. When these over-beliefs gain sufficient currency they become embedded in the official creed of some religious institution. There is no doubt that James sees this as a great misfortune, since it is these institutionalized over-beliefs that create religious exclusivism, with all of its

attendant horrors, as we clearly see in the world today. (See especially pp. 270-1 of James 1985.) There are two ways in which James defangs over-beliefs and thereby religious exclusivism. First, in the chapter on “Philosophy” he attacks the epistemic credentials of over-beliefs by attempting to show the impossibility of presenting good philosophical arguments concerning the existence and nature of God. Second, he claims that what really matters is one’s feeling and conduct and people can agree in these respects although they have conflicting over-beliefs. “When we survey the whole field of religion, we find a great variety in the thoughts that have prevailed there; but the feelings on the one hand and the conduct on the other are almost always the same, for Stoic, Christian, and Buddhist saints are practically indistinguishable in their lives. The theories which Religion generates, being thus variable, are secondary; and if you wish to grasp her essence, you must look to the feelings and conduct as being the more constant elements” (James 1985, p. 397).

Given James’s strong moral and philosophical motivation for de-emphasizing the importance and epistemic legitimacy of over-beliefs, it is surprising to find him suddenly saying that “the most interesting and valuable things about a man are usually his over-beliefs” (James 1985, p. 405).¹ That a man’s over-beliefs are usually the most *interesting* thing about him does not contradict James’s claim that over-beliefs are of secondary importance or value in religion, since something could be interesting without being important or valuable. The consistency problem arises from James’s claim that usually a man’s over-beliefs are the most *valuable* thing about him.

How are these apparently conflicting claims to be reconciled? And reconciled they must be, since an interpretation that leaves an unresolved inconsistency in the text of a great philosopher is one of last resort. Probably the least satisfactory resolution is the one that holds James to be intentionally espousing inconsistent doctrines so as to stimulate his readers to think more deeply. This “solution” is not to be confused with one that interprets James’s inconsistencies as his way of giving dialectical expression to the irreconcilable conflicting interests and needs of human beings. This particular inconsistency does not seem to be a case in point of this.

Dewey attributed James’s inconsistencies to his

1. It also is surprising to find him saying that “Although the religious question is primarily a question of life, of living or not living in the higher union which opens itself to us as a gift, yet the spiritual excitement in which the gift appears a real one will often fail to be aroused in an individual until certain particular intellectual beliefs or ideas which, as we say, come home to him, are touched. These ideas will thus be essential to that individual’s religion; -- which is as much as to say that over-beliefs in various directions are absolutely indispensable, and that we should treat them with tenderness and tolerance so long as they are not intolerant themselves” (James 1985, p. 405).

“willingness to make concessions to his opponents in the hope of finding common ground beneath and to his large-minded indifference to minor details of his own former writings.” Lovejoy saw them as due to his “enthusiasm and instinct for the effective and emphatic way of putting things,” which led him to overstate a position, omitting the needed qualifications. The accounts given by Dewey and Lovejoy, at best, causally explain James’s inconsistencies, but they fail to explain them away, in particular, the one in *Varieties*.

On occasion, James charged critics who claimed to find an inconsistency in his philosophy, such as the lady whose doctoral dissertation attempted to unearth several of them, with failing to note the different contexts in which the apparently inconsistent claims were made. A case in point is his response (in footnote 10 of the 1904 “The Experience of Activity”) to critics who claimed that he said inconsistent things about the nature of activity, espousing both naturalistic and supernatural views of it: “Single clauses in my writing, or sentences read out of their connexion, may possibly have been compatible with a transphenomenal principle of energy; but I defy anyone to show a single sentence, which taken with its context, should be naturally held to advocate that view.” We should be suspicious of appeal to context, since experience has shown that it usually is the last refuge of a scoundrel. It is true that many of James’s inconsistencies can be explained by differences in context, namely, the different audiences to whom he directed his inconsistent claims. For James, like a good barnstorming political candidate, wanted to please all of his constituents and often wasn’t above playing both sides of the street so as to ingratiate himself with audiences that held conflicting beliefs. But this, again, gives only a causal explanation, not a reconciliation, of his conflicting remarks.

In correspondence, Felicitas Kraemer suggested that we interpret an over-belief in a broad, generic sense so that it includes not just metaphysical beliefs about the nature of the apparent object of mystical experience but in addition a “weltanschauung, vision, feeling for life, temper, attitude, and personal susceptibilities.” Thus when James asserted the paramount importance of a person’s over-beliefs he was thinking primarily about the latter type of philosophical beliefs, especially those that concern freedom and determinism. On this reading of “over-belief,” there is no inconsistency in asserting that over-beliefs are of little importance to religion but are of importance in a person’s life. Furthermore, James’s ecumenicalism is not undermined by encouraging people to having philosophical beliefs about monism versus pluralism.

The problem with Kraemer’s solution, based on the generic interpretation of an over-belief, is that James initially introduces the term on p. 402 of *Varieties* as being a philosophical theory about the nature of the “more,” which is defined as the apparent object of a mystical experience. This connection between an over-belief and the *more* gets retained on pp. 404-5. Herein an over-belief

is only one among the many different species of philosophical beliefs that Kraemer mentions; and the fact that some of the latter species of belief are compatible with James’s ecumenicalism does nothing to show that an over-belief is. Being a lion is not shown to be compatible with being noncarniverous just because some other species of the genus animal are noncarniverous. But in fairness to Kraemer’s generic reading of over-belief, it needs to be pointed out that on pp. 407-8 James broadens the concept in the direction of her genus interpretation.

The following might be the best way to resolve the apparent inconsistency. The underlying thesis of *Varieties*—that over-beliefs are not important to *religion*—is not obviously inconsistent with the claim that over-beliefs are important to a *man*, since the subjects of these claims are different. Creedal beliefs, which include over-beliefs in the narrow sense, *are* the least important thing about religion, and, moreover, ought to be since they invariably lead to religious fanaticism with all of its attendant evils. Herein James is thinking of religion as an institution or widely shared social practice. But these narrow over-beliefs *are* the most important thing about an individual *qua* isolated individual. For many people are so constituted that how they conceive of God is determinative of much of their behavior. By allowing and even encouraging individuals to have over-beliefs about the nature of God, James is not compromising his religious ecumenicalism. The reasons are twofold. First, these beliefs are private matters, not creedal beliefs of an organized religion. Second, they must be held in a most tentative manner, given James’s trashing of the epistemic credentials of such beliefs in the chapter on “Philosophy” in *Varieties*. Furthermore, an over-belief has a more specific reason for being held in a tentative way. It gives an interpretation of the apparent accusative of a mystical experience. But James relativizes the evidential force of a mystical experience for the objective existence of its apparent accusative to the subject of the experience. Thus an over-belief, in addition to being highly dubious in the way in which all statements about the existence and nature of God are, has the additional reason for epistemic modesty because of the failure of the mystical experience upon which it is based to constitute inter-subjective evidence for its own veridicality.

Because of their lack of epistemic support, they are suitable targets for a will-to-believe option, but this, again, is a private affair that is compatible with religious ecumenicalism.

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Psychology and the Impasse of Reason: William James's Religious Experience

by Marcia Ian

Preeminent American psychologist and philosopher William James had an aversion to reason—despite having been himself the most reasonable of men. For James reason or rationalism took three major forms, the religious, the philosophical, and the scientific, all to his mind personally limiting and ideologically problematic. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he expressed an aversion to all three. James had a horror of the a priori, the teleological, the dogmatic, and the absolute. (No doubt this horror had something to do with his hobbyhorsically religious father, whom one acquaintance dubbed “Absolute James” [Habegger, p. 456].) William James trusts rather “the unreasoned,” a congeries of intuition, interest, and sensibility: “The unreasoned and immediate assurance is the deep thing in us, the reasoned argument is but a surface exhibition. Instinct leads, intelligence does but follow” (James 1982, p. 74). Ironically, however, James sees reason as one of our instincts, one we frequently follow too far, so this doesn’t make a lot of sense. Furthermore, the rationalism against which he defends religion in the name of individual subjective experience is a prime feature of the individualistic American religion with which James is himself “supersaturated.” One wants to say to James, as Stephen Dedalus’s friend Cranly said to him (in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*): “It is a curious thing, do you know... how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you profess to disbelieve” (Joyce, p. 240).

James cannot avoid articulating a vision of religion, however radical or liberating many continue to think it, that shows, as he puts it, an “admirable congruity [with] Protestant theology” (James 1982, p. 244). And yet to James the most repellent kind of reason was that practiced by “systematic theologians” who set out to prove the absolute completeness and perfection of God:

What is their deduction of metaphysical attributes but a shuffling and matching of pedantic dictionary adjectives, aloof from morals, aloof from human needs, something that might be worked out from the mere word God by one of those logical machines of wood and brass which recent ingenuity has contrived. (James 1982, p. 446)

This sort of God is a “metaphysical monster,” the “absolutely worthless invention of the scholarly mind” (James 1982, p. 447). Sometimes James lays the blame for this invention at the Catholics’ door (James 1982, pp. 326-327), offering the Inquisition as the very type of academic pathology (James 1956, p. 17). Demonizing Catholics is itself a rather Protestant maneuver, somewhat understandable, if disappointing, before an audience of Protestant

divines and scholars; but the God James has in mind here is that of Catholics and Protestants generally, specifically that “in which our [Protestant] great-grandfathers,” and particularly his grandfather, “took such satisfaction,” “proofs of [whose] existence [were] drawn from the order of nature” but now “gather dust in libraries” (James 1982, pp. 73-74).

“Rationalistic tendencies” were “the distinctive badge” of New England Protestant theology (Miller, p. 233), although the idea “[t]hat man is a rational creature was not a novel theorem in New England’s theology. Puritan scholasticism assigned him that rank in the great chain of being” (Miller, p. 248). “Reason,” Perry Miller writes, “was that active comprehension of the cosmic system which both angels and men might share” (Miller, p. 428). In its operations it discerned, reproduced, and glorified the orderliness of Creation: “we conceive of God’s decrees in a rational way... because else we could entertain no conceptions at all about this glorious mystery” (Samuel Willard, quoted in Miller, p. 233). James doesn’t see it this way: “Ratiocination is a relatively superficial and unreal path to the deity” (James 1982, p. 448). For James, what is monstrous about this rationally conceived God is his very completeness, self-sufficiency, and inalterability; in *Varieties* James suggests that God evolves in accord with human needs and cultural change. Equally monstrous in James’s view is the presumptuous certitude of those who, thinking themselves endowed with God’s very gift of cognition, believe reason (the god’s eye view) to be the guarantor of objectivity rather than just one arrow in the subjective quiver.

How God evolves for James is in a secular direction, toward pluralism and subjectivism. Secularism and empiricism—the latter crucial for James because, at least in his version, it allows for subjective differences among experiences—work hand in hand. They require both the “renunciation” of the rationalistic a priori (a renunciation to which James “confessed” more than once before his scholastic audience [James 1982, p. 329]) and the “progressively develop[ed]” “insight into [men’s] nature and their social arrangements,” including their “common-sense prejudices and instincts” (James 1982, p. 328). Ironically, James sees rationalism as one of our common-sense prejudices and instincts: “The greatest empiricists among us are only empiricists on reflection: when left to their instincts, they dogmatize like infallible popes” (James 1956, pp. 13-14). Usually we associate reason with reflection, and instinct with our more animal parts; here, however, rationalism is an instinct which we must use consciousness of irrationalism to resist. As he elaborates in the essay “The Sentiment of Rationality” (1879), deep down, we have faith in reason and the possibility of objective certitude: “You believe in objective evidence, and I do” (James 1956, p. 13). But like other instincts given sway, unchecked reason is dangerous: “it is... when they forget that they are hypotheses and put on rationalistic and authoritative pretensions, that our faiths do harm” (James 1956, p. xiii).

When our faiths put on rationalistic pretensions, they lead us into delusion: “Objective evidence and certitude

are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found?" (James 1956, p. 14). As ideals to play with, objective evidence and certitude are wills-o'-the-wisp, products of the mind like dreams or other fantasies; more, they are objects of romantic desire of the sort scientists and theologians spend their lives mooning after. Being an instinct, reason like unreason is a product or function of our brains and therefore of bodily experience: "Scientific theories are organically conditioned just as much as religious emotions are" (James 1982, p. 14). "Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations" provide the "premises" of all that comes into existence as "experience," consciousness included (James 1982, p. 73). Although James argues that "[t]here is no point of view from which the world can appear as an absolutely single fact" (James 1956, p. ix), it would be more accurate to say that it is only from one point of view that the world does appear as absolutely single fact. It is precisely point of view itself—by definition infinitely plural and variable—which cannot be included in such a world view. Point of view, structurally intrinsic to rationalism, is ironically the symptom of ineluctable subjectivity; one might say that rationalism is what infected Christianity with the virus of individuality.

In the American case, as James perceives, increasing secularism means not a widening gulf between religious and other kinds of institutions, or between religious beliefs and the values by which people live, but on the contrary, the closing of that gulf to the point where they are intermingled, if not indistinguishable. James the philosopher and psychologist, trained in physiology, does not buy into Cartesian mind/body dualism. (Neither does Freud; but for Freud the continuity of mind and body means there is no room for a soul, whereas for James it means spirit might just be material.) For James, here rising up on his high agnostic horse, the closing of the gap between God and world, church and state, manifests itself somatically, in the closing gap between mind and body:

We cannot divide man sharply into an animal and a rational part. We cannot distinguish natural from supernatural effects; nor among the latter know which are favors of God, and which are counterfeit operations of the demon. We have merely to collect things together without any special a priori theological system.... (James 1982, p. 327; his emphasis)

Rationalism and irrationalism alike are features of subjectivity, "organically conditioned," and thus ineluctably, ethically and epistemologically, as well as physically and psychologically, bound to and limited by, the individual.

James could see what is even clearer in our time, that in America secularity does not mean the freeing up of the public space from religious influences, but rather (what I call) the worlding of religion, such that it permeates the cultural atmosphere. This was made possible by the confluence in the marketplace of "the Protestant ethic" with Darwinian forces: "the freest competition of the various

faiths with one another, and their openest application to life by their several champions, are the most favorable conditions under which the survival of the fittest can proceed" (James 1956, p. xii). The fittest apparently was a diffuse mainstream Protestantism which by the nineteenth century evolved from the rigid New England Puritanism James excoriates to something kinder and gentler, having from the days of the Republic undergone a process Nathan O. Hatch calls "the democratization of American Christianity." From the beginning, Hatch argues, "America's nonrestrictive environment permitted an unexpected and often explosive conjunction of evangelical fervor and popular sovereignty [... allowing indigenous expressions of faith to take hold among ordinary people, white and black." It was not "religious elites" who fueled this expansion, but rather "common people who molded it in their own image" (Hatch, p. 9).

The ecclesiastical institutions, those bogey men William James, like his father, so vigorously waved away, were by William James's time hardly a threat: "American Protestantism has been skewed away from central ecclesiastical institutions and high culture; it has been pushed and pulled into its present shape by a democratic or populist orientation" (Hatch, p. 5). The populist pluralism James expresses throughout his work, and with particular passion in *Varieties*, epitomized the American Protestantism of his own time, rather than signaling a break with it, or auguring a radically different future. James really could count on a certain sympathetic anti-intellectualism in the American popular audience for his book, an anti-intellectualism responsive to the "untutored" and the "irregular" (Hatch, p. 5). What James claims to be key to religious experience—a subjective significance that cannot be defined, determined, or gainsaid by any one except that person and, hypothetically, God—was intrinsic to Protestantism from the Reformation. Affirming individual conscience, and its direct relation to God, irrespective of human institutions, was essential to the Protestant Reformation at its inception (even if "Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Knox were as intolerant of private judgment when it went against their own conceits as any pope in Rome" [Wilhelm]):

It was the Protestant Reformation that undermined once and for all the unity of Western Christendom. Its principle of individual conscience carried within it from the beginning the potential for an ever-expanding variety of Christian groupings. (Berger, p. 2)

This principle of individual conscience as "final arbiter" was central as well to the revolutionary politics of America's founding, from the Boston Tea Party to the Constitution.

Similarly, James's emphasis on affect, emotion, and sensibility, and their supreme relevance to what counts as religious experience, is entirely in keeping with the rise of "affectionate religion" throughout the nineteenth century, itself building upon the emotion-driven trends (such as Methodist, Baptist, and Evangelical practices) Hatch

argues formed the heart and soul of American Protestantism. Even Calvinism found itself softening, turning to the domestic scene as a rightful locus for faith in action. Emersonianism and Transcendentalism were masculine (if not masculinist) high culture variants of this trend. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's wildly popular and sentimentally didactic 1868 novel *The Gates Ajar* delighted readers as its heroine, a mere little motherly woman, taught the rigidly rationalistic Reverend Bland a thing or two about real faith. (She also teaches us a thing or two about what Ann Douglas calls "the feminization of American culture.") What Colleen McDannell calls "material Protestantism" extended the "sentimentalism and romanticism" which encouraged American Christians "to understand faith as an element of feeling rather than rationality" to their sensory experience; "[p]rovo[ki]ng the emotions by engaging the senses was believed to be one way people could encourage each other to move toward God" (McDannell, p. 68). One salient example McDannell gives of "material Protestantism" is the centrality of Bible-buying and display (along with other religious commodities) to Victorian American culture. (Consumer culture was and is one means by which the sort of secularism I am describing spreads.)

James thought that what gratified people about religious experience was the sense of continuity it brought them with something other and larger, "higher," than themselves. He is moved by the hundreds of testimonies he has read to the transformative power of such experience to conclude hopefully that man's "*higher part is continuous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality*" (James 1982, p. 508, emphasis his), "*that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self*" (James 1982, p. 515, his emphasis). The concept of continuity figures so prominently throughout James's work, in each genre of which he takes his stand on some qualified version of the "more," that one could say it is an organizing principle of his philosophy, and a pillar of his faith. To sum up his affirmation of psychological continuity, one need only recall his famous description of consciousness as a "stream": "Within each personal consciousness, thought is sensibly continuous" (James 1981/83, p. 231). His experience as a psychical researcher led him to conclude that "there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences" (James 1986, p. 374). In "What Pragmatism Means," James wrote that "everything here is plastic": "New truth... marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity" (James 1977, p. 383). He does, of course, theorize that the mind perceives discontinuities, or discriminations, as well; but he affirms, values, finds fruitful, "builds out" from, and warms to continuity in ways he does not with discontinuity. Discontinuity, in fact, is what "Reason," a capacity for discernment and discrimination, produces.

In focusing on continuity, James again is squarely in keeping with a central conceptual concern of his time; psychologists, evolutionary scientists, inventors of new communications devices, followers of increasingly universalistic faiths, practitioners of spiritualist disciplines and

parapsychology, all pursued proofs of continuity (of consciousness with the unconscious, humans with other life forms, this world with the next, etc.). At the same time that he was in this way thoroughly mainstream and "secular," James in effect revised, expanded, secularized, and democratized his father's idiosyncratic and dogmatic Christianity. In a speech given at Newport, Rhode Island, on July 4, 1861, Henry James, Sr. told his audience that the United States Constitution was at once the product of Reason, in which we can read "the scientific promise of our polity," and the messenger of spirit, which as surely as a visitation from God can convert a man:

it [the Constitution] gradually so inflames the mind with its own august spiritual meaning, so quickens it with its own vivid and palpitating divine substance, that the conscience which is governed by it of necessity finds itself regenerating, finds itself expanding from a petty drivelling and squeaking witness of one's own righteousness, into the clear and ringing and melodious testimony of God's sole righteousness in universal man. (H. James, pp. 23-24)

Henry James, Sr. imagines a man hitting bottom, like so many his son describes in *Varieties* before they find their saving "higher power," saved by the spirit of the Constitution, "regenerating," converted from a solitary squeaker into grandly "universal man."

Thanks to the work of the framers, whom Henry James, Sr. compares to the Jewish patriarchs who, he believed (as Christians generally believe), prefigured Christ (H. James, p. 22), we Americans can "affirm the inalienable sanctity and freedom of the subject as against the nation" by means of "the liberty we assert," a liberty "identical with the God-made constitution of the human mind itself, and which consists in the inalienable right of every man to believe according to the unbribed inspiration of his own heart, and to act according to the unperverted dictates of his own understanding" (H. James, p. 27). Minus Christ or any specific God, William James's defense of religious experience is remarkably and revealingly like that of his father's. Just as Henry, Sr. finds (pace Jefferson and behind him John Locke) the ("God-made") constitution of the human mind to be identical with "liberty" and individual conscience, and that conscience to be penetrable and redeemable by the superior mind of God (speaking through the Constitution), William James finds, speaking as a psychologist, an "admirable congruity of Protestant theology with the structure of the mind" (James 1982, p. 244).

Midway through *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, discussing the psychology of conversion, James describes "the feelings which immediately fill the hour of the conversion experience. The first one to be noted," he says, "is just this sense of higher control," surrender to which, he argues throughout the book, is a benchmark of religious feeling (James 1982, p. 243). The subject who is ripe for conversion finds himself in crisis, feels an abject "sadness... without limit," and throws himself helplessly upon the mercy of his deity or of, as we now say more ecumeni-

cally, thanks in large part to this very book, some "higher power." Speaking "frankly... as a psychologist," rather than as a believer, James speculates "that *if there be* higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so *might be* our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them" (James 1982, p. 242; his emphasis). Because "[t]he hubbub of the waking life" normally keeps this door closed, "higher spiritual agencies" are obliged to reach us through the "subliminal door" of the subconscious (James 1982, p. 243).

James asserts that what he hypothesizes here is neither parapsychology nor mysticism. On the contrary, it is Protestantism by other means: "It is needless to remind you once more of the admirable congruity of Protestant theology with the structure of the mind as shown in such experiences. In the extreme of melancholy the self that consciously *is* can do absolutely nothing" (James 1982, p. 244; his emphasis). "Nothing in Catholic theology," he adds, quite measures up, or "speaks to sick souls as straight" (James 1982, pp. 245-246). What does James mean by this? For one thing James equates the abject and sinful self of Protestant theology (as defined by Martin Luther), whose only hope lies in God with the "melancholy" or depressed individual who needs to feel connected to something outside of and larger than himself ("the sick soul"). For another, James gloats over the Protestant subject who, unlike the Catholic, does not require a priest to intervene for him, but rather can contact the higher power "straight." (Here again James carries on his father's Emersonian anti-clerical animus, and his culture's general anti-Catholic animus.)¹

In *The American Religion*, Harold Bloom writes that "a fundamental but scarcely ever avowed principle of the American Religion" is its "creedlessness, or the *doctrine of experience*, as oxymoronic a phrase as... [he] can imagine" (Bloom, p. 63; his emphasis). William James obviously held the "doctrine of experience" to be central to American religion, and to religion generally, but he could not, despite lifelong efforts, resolve its "oxymoronic" character, in part because its "creedlessness" is only apparent. For James the term "experience," as in the phrase "religious experience," stands for everything in our lives unaccounted for by "the reasoned argument," including the reasoned argument itself. Experience includes consciousness, but consciousness is a mere blip on the surface of experience. Experience too is necessarily limited; it is "James's

metaphysical position that experience always comes to us 'fringed by a more'" (Gavin, p. 31). Beyond this "more," "reality is not only larger than the known, but larger than the knowable. Reality transcends logic" (Gavin, p. 54).

On the one hand, James defined the essential religious experience—that is, the believer's experience of continuity with something "more," his surrender to "external control" (James 1982, p. 242) "as if 'some outside power [had] laid hold'" of him (James 1982, p. 180n)—as possibly both "divine" and "natural" (James 1982, p. 230). In so affirming, while equivocating, James meant to reject the "metaphysical monster" of theological Reason (James 1982, p. 447) in favor of the subconscious non-rational feelings that he took to be the main engine of human motivation. But on the other hand, James described this very experience of continuity as demonstrating "the admirable congruity of Protestant theology with the structure of the mind" (James 1982, p. 244), thus reinstating the "metaphysical monster" of Reason as the very core of the religious subconscious.

—*Marcia Ian is associate professor of English at Rutgers University and author of Remembering the Phallic Mother: Psychoanalysis, Modernism, and the Fetish (Cornell U P, 1993). She is currently working on a book entitled America the "Secular": The James Family and Others. E-mail = gnudle@bellatlantic.net*

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¹. The feeling seems to be mutual. In his closing remarks at the June, 2002 meeting in Dallas, Texas, of American bishops gathered to address the sex abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, Chicago's Francis Cardinal George decried what he takes to be the less than "admirable congruity of Protestant theology with the structure of the [American] mind." He criticized American culture specifically for being "a form of secularized Protestantism" (quoted in Bonavoglia, p. 11), in part because democratized Protestantism does constitute a threat to Catholic hierarchy, now as ever. The Catholic reform movement, burgeoning in response to the scandal, to some extent emulates a secularized, democratized Protestantism, demanding from the church, among other things, "an affirmation of conscience as the final arbiter in moral matters" (Bonavoglia, p. 12).

2002-3 Student Essay Competition

The William James Society is offering a \$100 prize and publication in *Streams of William James* for the best student essay (4500 words, maximum) on William James. Although this contest is intended primarily for graduate level work, we encourage undergraduates and continuing education students to submit work as well.

Essays that receive honorable mention will also be published in an issue of *Streams*.

One theme that we suggest students consider is the relationship between Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose 200th birthday is in 2003, and William James, who delivered an essay on Emerson in Concord in 1903 on the occasion of Emerson's 100th birthday. We are, however, open to other topics and streams of thought.

To submit an essay for consideration:

1) Compose an e-mail to Randall Albright. Explain for whom the essay was originally written, class level, and other pertinent information.

2) Attach an electronic copy of your article in Rich Text Format (RTF) or Microsoft Word format.

3) Use the CC option to send a copy back to yourself for inherent copyright protection and send to Randall Albright <albright177@earthlink.net>.

Deadline: May 15, 2003.

WJ at a Conference & in Books

The American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature 2002 Annual Conference, was held on November 23-26, 2002, in Toronto, Canada. The theme for Sessions A242 and A265 (Person, Culture, and Religion) was *The Centennial of The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

Russell B. Goodman's

Wittgenstein and William James

is available from Cambridge University Press, which has a website for the book:

<http://books.cambridge.org/0521813158.htm>

The Correspondence of William James, Volume 10 (University Press of Virginia) has been published. The introduction is by Hilary Putnam.

The first chapter in Louis Menand's *American Studies* (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux) is on William James.

Jacques Barzun's *A Stroll with William James* (1983) has been rereleased in paperback.

Internet Discussion on WJ

Jerry Shepperd continues to coordinate the internet discussion group on William James, now entering its fourth year. WJS members and friends may want to join the group if they are interested in getting e-mail on WJS activities, views on WJ's life and ideas, how his legacy affects people's lives today, and other related topics.

To join the group, send an e-mail to: LISTSERV@MAIL.AUSTIN.CC.TX.US

In the message area, write: SUBSCRIBE WILLIAMJAMES-L Your Name
You will then get instructions about how to address messages to the group.



*Some
Varieties of
Experience*
by R.H. Albright

WJS Business Meeting

Along with the Presidential address by outgoing president, John J. McDermott, and a wonderful panel on tragedy and meliorism, the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Annual Conference will be the time for our annual William James Society (WJS) business meeting, to be held the last half-hour of the WJS session (Sunday, December 29th from 1:30 -4:30pm). The business meeting will consist of announcements from the Executive Committee, a financial update, and (most importantly) the election of new officers for the Executive Committee, specifically, the Vice President/President-elect and one At-large Representative. Nominees chosen by the Nominating Committee are listed below.

For Vice President/President-elect (2003/2004):

Charlene Haddock Seigfried: Professor of Philosophy at Purdue University. Author of *Chaos and Context: A Study in William James* (Ohio University Press, 1978) and *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (State University of New York Press, 1990), among other works. Past President of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy.

For At-large Representative (one position, 2003-2004):

James O. Pawelski: Assistant Professor of Human and Organizational Development and Religious Studies at George Peabody College, Vanderbilt University. Ph.D. in philosophy from Pennsylvania State University with a dissertation on James entitled, "Perception, Cognition, and Volition: The Radical and Integrated Individualism of William James." Interdisciplinary work on James, both theoretical and applied. Theoretical work includes a Jamesian analysis of the new field of Positive Psychology; practical work includes the innovative application of James's psychology and philosophy in the classroom. Publications include "William James, Positive Psychology, and Healthy-Mindedness," forthcoming in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, "William James and Epiphanal Experience," in *Religion in a Pluralistic Age: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Philosophical Theology*, and (with Martin Seligman) "Positive Psychology FAQ's," forthcoming in *Psychologica*.

Robert B. Talisse: Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt University. Author of *On James* (Wadsworth, 2003), *On Dewey* (Wadsworth, 2000), and *On*

Rawls (Wadsworth, 2001). Teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in American Philosophy and social-political theory. Published articles and reviews in American philosophy for journals such as *Transactions of the C. S. Peirce Society*, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, *Metaphilosophy*, and *Review of Metaphysics*. Delivered a series of NEH-sponsored public lectures in 2002 on William James at Amarillo College in Texas as part of the Creative Minds Humanities Lectures.

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