

*Streams  
of  
William James*

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*A Publication of the William James Society  
Volume 6 • Issue 1 • Spring 2004*



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Volume 6 • Issue 1 • Spring 2004

Randall H. Albright, Editor = albright177@earthlink.net  
423 Marlborough Street • Boston, MA 02115-1209 • USA

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Randall H. Albright • Editor • *Streams of William James* •  
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# What Did James Mean by “The Brain”?

by Fred Bauer

## James’s Inconsistencies

A year or two before he died, William James expressed the hope that the day would come when an integration of philosophy and the sciences would yield “the completest knowledge of the universe.”<sup>1</sup> We who believe James’s best insights can provide the essential framework for that integration must contend with his inconsistencies. Call them what we will—inconsistencies, paradoxes, contradictions, or just tensions—they are many, and they are serious. In what follows, I will lay out the case for beginning with the question, “What did James mean by ‘the brain’?”

## The Importance of the Brain

The brain occupied a central place in James’s thinking. In his 1890 masterpiece, *The Principles of Psychology*, he explained why.

... if the brain be injured, consciousness is abolished or altered, even although every other organ in the body be ready to play its normal part. A blow on the head, a sudden subtraction of blood, the pressure of an apoplectic hemorrhage, may have the first effect; whilst a very few ounces of alcohol or grains of opium or hasheesh, or a whiff of chloroform or nitrous oxide gas, are sure to have the second. The delirium of fever, the altered self of insanity, are all due to foreign matters circulating through the brain, or to pathological changes in that organ’s substance. The fact that the brain is the one immediate bodily condition of the mental operations is indeed so universally admitted nowadays that I need spend no more time in illustrating it, but will simply postulate it and pass on. The whole remainder of this book will be more or less of a proof that the postulate is correct.<sup>2</sup>

As late as 1908, James repeated that 1890 opinion about the importance of the brain. In his fourth *Pluralistic Universe* lecture, he complained that “The organ that gives us most trouble is the brain.” Why? His reason was

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1. William James *Some Problems of Philosophy* in *William James: Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), p. 996 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1979, p. 19]. Hereinafter cited as *Some Problems*.

2. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), Vol. 1, p. 4 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1981/1983, pp. 17-18]. Hereinafter cited as *Principles*.

the same as before. “All the consciousness we directly know seems tied to brains.”<sup>3</sup>

It is not likely that anyone today can ignore the brain. After the 1990’s “Decade of the Brain,” what James postulated a century earlier as the framework for his natural-science psychology has come to seem almost self-evident. What’s more, the widespread acceptance of Darwin’s evolutionist thinking has made the connection between consciousness and brain seem as obvious as the connection between circulation and heart, respiration and lungs, reproduction and genitals. Some recent thinkers are so impressed by the role of the brain in conscious experience that they propose to identify persons with their brains. For instance, Patricia Churchland delivered a 1991 series of lectures at the University of Notre Dame entitled “Our Brains, Ourselves.” Joseph LeDoux has reportedly gone even farther in his recent book, *The Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* in which he is quoted as claiming “We are our synapses.”<sup>4</sup>

## James’s Postulate Had Serious Implications

James was deeply concerned about the consequences which seem to flow from the central role of the brain. His wide reading and endless curiosity drove him to wonder constantly about the vast cosmos outside the confines of his dark, muffled skull, and yet the organ seated inside that dark, muffled skull was the only part of the physical world that his stream of consciousness correlated with directly. The upshot is that every stream of consciousness is as personal and private as its owner’s brain. James stressed this last point with such brutally frank emphasis that solipsism became for him an enduring specter.

The only states of consciousness that we naturally deal with are found in personal consciousnesses, minds, selves, concrete particular I’s and you’s.

Each of these minds keeps its own thoughts to itself. There is no giving or bartering between them. No thought even comes into direct *sight* of a thought in another personal consciousness than its own. Absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism, is the law. It seems as if the elementary psychic fact were not *thought* or *this thought* or *that thought*, but *my thought*, every thought being *owned*. Neither contemporaneity, nor proximity in space, nor similarity of quality and content are able to fuse thoughts together which are sundered by this barrier of belonging to different personal minds. The

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3. William James *A Pluralistic Universe* in *William James: Writings 1902-1910*, p. 702 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1977, pp. 74-75].

4. Joseph LeDoux, “Interview with C. Dreifus” in *New York Times*, October 8, 2002.

breaches between such thoughts are the most absolute breaches in nature.<sup>5</sup>

James was not the only one to point out this logical implication of the brain’s skull-encapsulation. Thomas Huxley, an older contemporary of James and the “bull-dog” champion of Darwin, expressed a similar view in his highly publicized defense of animal consciousness. “It must be premised,” Huxley admitted, “that it is wholly impossible to prove the presence or absence of consciousness in anything but one’s own brain, though, by analogy, we are justified in assuming its existence in other men.”<sup>6</sup> Closer to our own time, Steven Pinker has acknowledged the same point: “Plato said that we are trapped inside a cave and know the world only through the shadows it casts on the wall. The skull is our cave, and mental representation is all that we can know about the world.”<sup>7</sup>

By focussing on the challenge of solipsism—is there anything outside our cave?—we can read James’s radical empiricist essays as attempts to replace what Huxley called “assuming” with a more reliable theory of knowing. That is, we can use James’s postulate about the skull-encased brain as the backdrop for the ninth of his radical empiricist essays, “Is Radical Empiricism Solipsistic?” (1905), and then read that ninth essay as the real gateway to the rest. Such a focus will explain why so many of his 1905-08 notes published posthumously as “The Miller-Bode Objections” are attempts to confirm his hope that two people really—literally!—can experience one and the same pen.<sup>8</sup> But pens are insignificant by comparison with the brain. Did James think two people could know the same brain?

There can be only one reasonable way to approach that question. We must ask what James meant by “the brain.” The problem of meaning was another of his major concerns, and his writings are full of clues to the fact that he was perplexed about what “the brain” should mean. That is why we ask: what did James mean by that short, two word phrase, “the brain”?

### The Fifth Pragmatism Lecture as Autobiography

Suppose for a moment that the fifth of James’s *Pragmatism* lectures can be used to sketch the development in James’s thought. According to that fifth lecture, “Prag-

matism and Common Sense,” someone with an upbringing comparable to that of James would likely go through at least three and possibly four stages in his or her thinking. The result would be that any particular phrase, such as “the brain,” might very well have radically different meanings. This most certainly was the case with James.

The first meaning of “the brain,” according to “Pragmatism and Common Sense,” will be the everyday, common-sense meaning. Like all of us, James was born into this world both thoughtless and speechless. His characterization of our first moments of life is well known. Lacking the concepts needed to discriminate one part of the stream of consciousness from another, a baby’s first “object” is “one great blooming, buzzing confusion.”<sup>9</sup> In time, however, the baby’s “one object” is transmuted into the extraordinarily complex “world” of common sense. In our common-sense mindset, the meaning of “the brain” seems perfectly clear. We all know what we think about when we hear that our brain is located in our skull, that changes in our brain cause changes in our consciousness, and that our brain is the control center for the rest of our body. In *The Principles of Psychology*, as well as in its abridgement, James normally used “the brain” to mean what all of us think about while in our unreflective, common-sense frame of mind.

To fully appreciate the value of the 1906 “Pragmatism and Common Sense” lecture, it is important to learn something of its history. For that, it is necessary to go back three years, to the summer of 1903. On August 18, 1903, James wrote the following in a letter to D. S. Miller:

I am in good condition, but in somewhat of a funk about my lectures, now that the audience draws near. I have got my mind working on the infernal old problem of mind and brain, and how to construct the world out of pure experiences, and feel foiled again and inwardly sick with the fever. But I verily believe that it is only work that makes one sick in that way that has any chance of breaking old shells and getting a step ahead. It is a sort of madness however when it is on you. The total result is to make me admire “Common Sense” as having done by far the biggest stroke of genius ever made in philosophy when it reduced the chaos of crude experience to order by its luminous denkmittel of the the [sic] Stable “thing”, and its dualism of thought and matter.<sup>10</sup>

The lectures on which he was working had as their subject “Radical empiricism as a philosophy.” In a September letter to F. C. S. Schiller, he wrote again about this belated recognition of the immense importance of

5. James, *Principles*, Vol. I, pp. 225-226 [Harvard U P, p. 221].

6. Thomas Huxley, “On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata,” (1874), reprinted in *Body, Mind, and Death*, A. Flew, Ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1964) p. 197.

7. Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 1997), p. 84.

8. William James *Manuscript Essays and Notes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1988), pp. 65-129. Hereinafter cited as *Manuscript Essays*.

9. James, *Principles*, Vol. I, p. 488 [Harvard U P, p.462].

10. William James, *The Correspondence of William James, Vol. 10*, Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, Eds. (Charlottesville: U P of Virginia, 2002), p. 292. Hereinafter cited as *Correspondence*.

common sense.

I am struck by your tribute to common sense. More than ever have I this summer been impressed by the perfect magnificence as a philosophical achievement of the *Denkmittel* by which common sense has straightened out the chaos of individual experiences—the categories of “thing” and “property,” the dualism of mind & matter, and the notion of causal efficacy. They are so adequate to ease of living, that when any more fine-spun philosophy returns to them again, we warm towards it as to something sound and sane, and redeemed from artificiality. From the pragmatistic point of view an ode has yet to be written to common sense.<sup>11</sup>

Some time during the months that followed, James began to compose that ode to common sense. “Common sense has extraordinary merits,” he began, “and performs extraordinary services, but they are so familiar that we take them as a matter of course.”<sup>12</sup> He never finished this first attempted ode, but what he did get written became part of the later, 1906, lecture. Only against this backdrop of James’s sudden, full awakening to the merits of common sense can the full autobiographical significance of his fifth-lecture paean be appreciated. The 1903 insight was expanded in 1906 as follows.

My thesis now is this, that *our fundamental ways of thinking about things are discoveries of exceedingly remote ancestors, which have been able to preserve themselves throughout the experience of all subsequent time.* They form one great stage of equilibrium in the human mind’s development, the stage of *common sense*. Other stages have grafted themselves upon this stage, but have never succeeded in displacing it.<sup>13</sup>

Read with James’s uncompromising pluralism in mind, the meaning is clear. When James wrote that the common-sense ways of thinking “form one great stage of equilibrium in the human mind’s development,” he was not speaking only of other people. He was referring to himself as well. We do not have to guess about this. He drew attention to the universality of this stage a bit further on in this revealing fifth lecture:

At this stage of philosophy all non-European men without exception have remained....and, among our race even, it is only the highly sophisticated specimens, the minds debauched by learning, as Berkeley calls them, who have ever even suspected common sense of not

being absolutely true.<sup>14</sup>

Though common sense serves as the necessary “point of view” for “all the natural sciences,”<sup>15</sup> James did not advocate remaining there. That is why, in his August 18 letter to D. S. Miller, he spoke of “breaking old shells and getting a step ahead.” Modern discoveries have shown that common sense’s magisterial concepts are “but sublime tricks of human thought.”

Science and critical philosophy thus burst the bounds of common sense. With science *naïf* realism ceases; ‘Secondary’ qualities become unreal; primary ones alone remain. With critical philosophy, havoc is made of everything. The common-sense categories one and all cease to represent anything in the way of *being*; they are but sublime tricks of human thought, our ways of escaping bewilderment in the midst of sensation’s irremediable flow.<sup>16</sup>

This 1906 rejection of common sense echoes what he had written in the earlier, 1903, draft.

But if all this praise is due to the philosophy of common sense why should we run after the empiricisms and transcendentalisms? Should we not rather settle into it as into a revelation of absolute rationality?

No, for when the purely theoretic mind handles the principles of common sense it finds them either inane or paradoxical. Substances, whether material or spiritual, are unrepresentable; and the inherence in them, or adherence to them, of properties seems a mere verbal figure. The notions of cause, power, possibility are equally unintelligible. Knowledge of one thing by another is a mystery. If things be individual (as common sense affirms) how can they interact at all?—for how can what is separate communicate? And what is meant at any rate by interaction? How, again, can an external agent like the God of Common Sense bring the world into any kind of a genuine inner unity?<sup>17</sup>

James’s second meaning of “the brain” results from “getting a step ahead” to science and critical philosophy. In fact, James announced his second, “scientific” meaning of “brain” as early as the sixth chapter of *The Principles of Psychology*.

*The entire brain is not a physical fact at all.* It is the appearance to an onlooking mind of a multitude of phys-

11. James, *Correspondence*, Vol. 10, pp. 311-312.

12. James, *Manuscript Essays*, p. 8

13. William James, “Pragmatism and Common Sense” from *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* in *William James: Writings 1902-1910*, p. 560 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1975, pp. 83-84]. Hereinafter cited as *Pragmatism*.

14. James, *Pragmatism*, pp. 565-566 [Harvard U P, p. 89].

15. William James *Psychology: The Briefer Course* in *William James: Writings 1878-1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992), p. 430 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1984, p. 398]. Hereinafter cited as *Psychology*.

16. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 567 [Harvard U P, p. 91].

17. James, *Manuscript Essays*, pp. 9-10

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ical facts. ‘Entire brain’ is nothing but our name for the way in which a billion of molecules arranged in certain positions may affect our sense. On the principles of the corpuscular or mechanical philosophy, the only realities are the separate molecules, or at most the cells. Their aggregation into a ‘brain’ is a fiction of popular speech. Such a fiction cannot serve as the objectively real counterpart to any psychic state whatever. Only a genuinely physical fact can so serve. But the molecular fact is the only genuine physical fact—whereupon we seem, if we are to have an elementary psycho-physic law at all, thrust right back upon something like the mind-stuff theory, for the molecular fact, being an element of the ‘brain,’ would seem naturally to correspond, not to the total thoughts, but to elements in the thought.<sup>18</sup>

When James abridged the *Principles*, he yanked this passage from its obscurity in that work’s sixth chapter and placed it almost dead-center in *The Briefer Course’s* epilogue, adding that “Thus the real in psychics seems to ‘correspond’ to the unreal in physics, and *vice-versa*; and our perplexity is extreme.”<sup>19</sup> That perplexity, which grows from adopting the corpuscular or mechanical, scientific philosophy, was no offhand remark. Earlier in the same sixth chapter of *The Principles*, he had written “The ‘things,’ for a clear-headed atomistic evolutionist, are not. Nothing is but the everlasting atoms. When grouped in a certain way, we name them this ‘thing’ or that; but the thing we name has no existence out of our mind.”<sup>20</sup> He repeated this claim both in Lecture V of *A Pluralistic Universe* and in Chapter IX of *Some Problems of Philosophy*. The twentieth-century discovery of the synapse-separated nature of neurons and the discrete nature of the atom have done nothing but strengthen James’s claim that science has burst the common-sense or pre-scientific view of the brain. Science has superseded the common-sense or pre-scientific “brain fiction.”

James’s third meaning of “the brain” is easily gleaned from what he said further on in his fifth lecture about “critical philosophy.” As James explains in the first part of Lecture Five of *Pragmatism*, the common-sense notion of a thing is the notion of an underlying, perduring subject of attributes. But, according to the critical-philosophy point of view, a thing—the brain is an example—is neither a single organ nor microscopic molecules, but only “so much in the way of sensations.” James had already introduced this meaning in Lecture Three.

Berkeley’s criticism of ‘matter’ was consequently absolutely pragmatistic. Matter is known as our sensations of colour, figure, hardness and the like. They are the cash-

value of the term. The difference matter makes to us by truly being is that we then get such sensations; by not being, is that we lack them. These sensations then are its sole meaning. Berkeley doesn’t deny matter, then; he simply tells us what it consists of. It is a true name for just so much in the way of sensations.<sup>21</sup>

But it is in the fifth lecture that he most sharply contrasts this phenomenalist view of such “things” as brains—“so much in the way of sensations”—against the everyday, common-sense idea to which we revert “in practice,” that is, as soon as our critical attitude relaxes.

In practice, the common-sense *denkmittel* are uniformly victorious. Every one, however instructed, still thinks of a ‘thing’ in the common-sense way, as a permanent unit subject of attributes that ‘supports’ its attributes interchangeably. No one stably or sincerely uses the more critical notion, of a group of sense-qualities united by a law.<sup>22</sup>

Is there a fourth Jamesian meaning for “the brain”? Yes, James’s radical empiricist sense. The difference between this and Berkeley’s empiricism is that Berkeley retained a belief in a substantial self distinct from “material body” phenomena. In James’s radical empiricism, “the brain” can designate either an object that is part of the world’s history or a state of some person’s mind, depending on how it is taken. Our major source for this fourth meaning is the two-part manifesto for his radical empiricism, “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” plus “A World of Pure Experience.”

“The brain,” then, meant different things in different contexts for James. If this is true, and if our hope is to somehow unify James’s best insights, then a new question now confronts us. What should we do about the radical ambiguity in his use of “the brain”? In his fifth *Pragmatism* lecture, he emphasized that in our everyday lives, the magisterial notions of common sense will dominate our thinking. That explains why we are so prone to using “the brain” as if it referred to a single, whole organ, rather than in any of its more sophisticated senses. But, in the common-sense philosophy, “the brain” names a body, and James was quite unequivocal—and consistent—in his rejection of the common-sense concept of bodies.

### Would-be Unifiers Should Begin with “The Brain”

Finding a way to unify James’s best insights is, in our opinion, one of the most worthwhile goals any of us

<sup>18</sup> James, *Principles*, Vol. I, p. 178 [Harvard U P, pp. 178-179].

<sup>19</sup> James, *Psychology*, p. 430 [Harvard U P, p. 398].

<sup>20</sup> James, *Principles*, Vol. I, p. 161 [Harvard U P, p. 164].

<sup>21</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, pp. 525 [Harvard U P, p. 47].

<sup>22</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, pp. 565 [Harvard U P, p. 88].

can pursue. No other thinker’s insights are as rich, as profound, or as life-enhancing as those of James. But can we do what James failed to do, namely, untangle his best insights and weave them into a seamless tapestry? For his 1999 *The Divided Self of William James*, Richard Gale wrote a final chapter entitled “Attempts at a One-World Interpretation of James.” Gale concluded that the unification James desired is “forever beyond our grasp.”<sup>23</sup> The author of this present essay agrees. Any successful integration of James’s best insights will call for a degree of selective revision that some interpreters will reject as a distortion, perhaps even a radical one. Gale, for instance, claims that Dewey’s essays on James gave “a blatantly distorted, self-serving account of James’s philosophy.”<sup>24</sup>

But, however others opt to interpret this or that integrating attempt, it seems to us that such an attempt is wholly in the spirit of James’s thinking. In the same way that it is critically important to notice the foundational importance of our early, common-sense philosophy, it is equally important to recognize the role that system-construction played in James’s thought. From “The Sentiment of Rationality” composed at the beginning of the 1880’s to the opening lecture of *A Pluralistic Universe* nearly thirty years later, James routinely invoked the rivalry between various philosophical systems in his writings. In “Sentiment,” he gave a psychological analysis of the cravings which drive the quest for a satisfactory system. In *A Pluralistic Universe*’s first lecture, he surveyed a variety of systems, two of which—crass materialism and theistic dualism—he rather summarily dismissed. His richest discussion of the human quest for system is found in Chapter XXI of *The Principles of Psychology*, entitled “The Perception of Reality.” Toward the end of the chapter, James begins a synthesis as follows:

Now the merely conceived or imagined objects which our mind represents as hanging to the sensations (causing them, etc.), filling the gaps between them, and weaving their interrupted chaos into order are innumerable. Whole systems of them conflict with other systems, and our choice of which system shall carry our belief is governed by principles which are simple enough, however subtle and difficult may be their applications to details.<sup>25</sup>

Among the systems he names in the same paragraph are “the various materialisms, idealisms, and hylozoisms.”

Our own approach to integrating James’s best insights stresses his “will to believe” thesis. But we would apply it to system options rather than to isolated belief options. The various meanings of “the brain” do

not stand on their own feet. Their intelligibility derives from the particular system in which they serve as a component of a whole. The Medieval Scholastics worked out various dualisms, each of which viewed the brain in the common-sense way. Many, even today, continue to opt for that approach. If we opt for a thorough-going atomism, “the brain” will be what James said it would, viz., “a fiction of popular speech.” A straightforward Berkeleyan phenomenalist will use “the brain” as shorthand for “a group of sense-qualities united by a law.” But there are other options. James hoped that his radical empiricism might be the right one.

Most of James’s inconsistencies sprang from his years-long efforts to work out his radical empiricist premises. These depart more violently from common sense than even Berkeley’s idealism. The notes James made for his courses, his lectures, and his essays show that he was acutely conscious of his problems with system consistency, and especially prominent were his worries about “the brain.” Consider, for instance, the notes he made for an 1897-98 course on the “Philosophical Problems of Psychology.”

Generalize the notion of instrumental cause. The brain thought-*of* is not entitatively the brain thought-*with*. But if diverse “entitatively,” in what sense *are* they the same? The one tho’t-*of* potentially *terminates* in the one tho’t-*with*. It is as *terminus* that it *causes* the field of which entitatively it forms a portion. Here we come up against the same diremption of real outer thing from tho’t which dualistic common sense affirms. How can we wrest it to our purposes?<sup>26</sup>

Five days after that April 10th note, James recorded his frustration.

Does n’t it seem like the wriggings of a worm on the hook, this attempt to escape the dualism of common sense? And is not the contrast I have been forcibly led to between the brain terminatively or entitatively considered and the brain “in the field” (= the brain *representatively* considered) indistinguishable from the common sense contrast between the objective brain and the brain thought-*of*? It looks so. Let me then try some one of the other problems for better luck!<sup>27</sup>

It may be overly dramatic to say so, but in the end it was James’s indecision about “the brain” that prevented him from succeeding, even to his own satisfaction, in giving us a consistent, radical-empiricist philosophy. He adamantly refused to re-acquiesce in common sense, to adopt atomistic materialism, or to re-admit Berkeley’s agent-self. But the third last paragraph of his abandoned

23. Richard M. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 1999), p. 331.

24. Gale, *Ibid*, p. 335

25. James, *Principles*, Vol II., p. 311 [Harvard U P, p. 939].

26. William James, *Manuscript Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1988), p. 247.

27. James, *Ibid*, pp.247-48

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*Some Problems of Philosophy* refers to the difficulty of dealing with the brain.

Since with this we are led immediately into the mind-brain relation, and since that is such a complicated topic, we had better interrupt our study of causation provisionally at the present point, meaning to complete it when the problem of the mind's relation to the body comes up for review.<sup>28</sup>

James died shortly after this interruption. But it is significant that it came in a chapter on causation, a topic which has challenged every thinker since the 1600s when Descartes drew an impenetrable line between the material brain and immaterial thought. James was clearly of two minds regarding the role of the brain vis-a-vis the stream of thought, specifically in relation to the question of causality. If there is any hope of carrying on from where James stopped, it seems that “the mind-brain relation” is an excellent place to begin.

### Conclusion

Reference has already been made to Richard Gale's 1999 work, *The Divided Self of William James*. This reader concurs with Gale's vigorous protest against attempts to reduce James's thought to naturalist materi-

alism. While reading James, we can never forget that he lived while monist idealism was in the ascendency. A century later, idealism has been overtaken by naturalist materialism. Idealists reduce matter—and brain—to mind, and materialists reduce mind to brain. Thus, history show that reductionism can go in opposite directions. We have no doubt that, if he had to choose, James would not favor the materialist type of reductionism.

This is why the meaning of “the brain” can serve as the Archimedean Point for testing opposing unifications of James's thought. If Gale is right in his protest against the current slide toward viewing James as a stepping stone from Darwin to Dewey, then it seems clear that the only role for anything called “the brain” to play is the transmissive role which he described in his Ingersoll Lecture on *Human Immortality*. Reinforcement for this conclusion comes from his blunt denial—in the final chapter of *Talks to Teachers*—that the brain causes consciousness.

All of which brings up the question, “Then what do ‘transmit’ and ‘cause’ mean?” But, to borrow the words which James used at a similar point, “this is such a complicated topic, we had better interrupt our study” here.

—Fred Bauer is an associate professor of philosophy at Assumption College. He is very grateful to two anonymous readers for this paper, whose gracious observations forced him to clarify his position.  
E-mail = fbauer@eve.assumption.edu

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<sup>28</sup>. James, *Some Problems*, p. 1093 [Harvard U P, p. 109].

# William James and the Postmodern Religion of John Caputo

By Ludwig F. Schlecht

Religion is a subject that is being increasingly addressed by postmodern philosophers. One very accessible and engaging account is provided by John D. Caputo in his recent work, *On Religion*.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, Caputo attempts to articulate how religion can be understood and embraced in a postmodern world. Taking Caputo's views as indicative of a postmodern perspective, what is remarkable to a student of William James is the extent to which these views are congruent with those expressed by James a century or so earlier.

Throughout the nineteenth century theism had been under increasing attack. Nietzsche's declaration near the end of the century that "God is dead" reflected the view of many; in the first decade of the twentieth century Thomas Hardy poetically acknowledged "God's Funeral."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, despite the critics' contention that theism was no longer tenable, many people were not ready to recognize God's demise.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, western culture in general, and academic philosophy in particular, has continued to debate the merits or deficiencies of traditional religious belief. There are those who would dismiss religion as a relic from the past which has lost all viability; others respond with a vigorous reaffirmation and defense of theism.

James, I believe, urges us to recognize that we are here being confronted with a false dilemma. For James, religion is of momentous importance and is not to be dismissed; but neither can it any longer be embraced in terms of traditional theistic formulations. Rejecting theism does not mean rejecting religion. "[A]lthough all the special manifestations of religion may have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories), yet the life of it as a whole is mankind's most important function."<sup>4</sup>

For James, religion was a central and continuing topic of concern for much of his life. In works ranging from essays in *The Will to Believe* to his Gifford lectures on *The Variety of Religious Experience*, he explored the role that religion could or should have in our lives.<sup>5</sup> His examination of religious issues can be found in diverse texts written over many years; his thoughts may seem somewhat diffuse and

unsystematic, and they have certainly been interpreted quite variously by commentators. References to God are frequent, and some have assumed him to be defending theism. While it may be true that James "keeps rather fluid what the 'hypothesis of God' really denotes,"<sup>6</sup> a careful reading of James's many discussions of religious experience and religious faith makes transparently clear that he does not identify religion with theism—quite the contrary. In my view, Bennett Ramsey is right on target when he writes:

I see James as absorbed, throughout most of his work, with the investigation and consideration of religious problems. More to the point, I see him attempting to broaden the definition of religion beyond the confines of theistic and super-naturalistic frameworks towards an immanentist, almost naturalistic meaning. Above all, I see James as advocating a religious way of life, a way of being based on respect for and responsibility to the immanent ties and powers that bind the self.<sup>7</sup>

In reading James, there are characteristic core ideas consistently in evidence, ideas that many have found to provide a fresh and profound understanding of religion as a vital dimension of human life. It is rather remarkable, I think, to find a writer apparently altogether unaware of James's contributions coming to such similar conclusions about the nature of religion.<sup>8</sup> Following a long and winding road through Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida, Caputo winds up where James had been some hundred years or so earlier! And what a tribute to James that he had so long ago explored the territory that others are just now discovering for the first time!

In what follows, I will illustrate how James's basic ideas on religion parallel the postmodern ideas developed by Caputo in *On Religion*. To a great extent I will present their views in their own words, lest I be thought to misrepresent them by putting my words in their mouths. It will be evident that not only is there considerable substantive agreement but also that Caputo writes in a lively and informal style as did James, a style that is evocative and provocative—quite different from the ponderous style that seems to characterize much of postmodern writing (a style which to some readers is more provoking than provocative).

**1. Religion is experientially based, not defined in terms of doctrinal or metaphysical formulations; what is central is personal commitment, not institutional membership.**

1. John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001). References to this book are given in parentheses in the text with page number following the letters OR.

2. For an insightful history of the "God question" from Hume to James, see A.N. Wilson, *God's Funeral* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).

3. Nietzsche's own view seems to be that it is just a matter of time; although we have killed God, "deeds require time even after they are done before they can be seen and heard." Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 125, as found in *The Portable Nietzsche*, translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking P, 1954).

4. *The Letters of William James*, edited by Henry James III, 2 volumes, (Boston: Atlantic Monthly P, 1920), Vol. II, p.127.

5. William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1979) and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1985). References to these works are given in parentheses in the text with page number following WB and VRE respectively.

6. H.S. Thayer, Introduction to William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1975), p. xxxiii.

7. Bennett Ramsey, *Submitting to Freedom: The Religious Vision of William James* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1993), p. 3.

8. There is not a single reference to James in *On Religion*.

At the beginning of his book, Caputo makes it clear that religion for him is not to be defined in terms of any institutional affiliation or theological position. There is no consideration of proofs of God's existence nor any analysis of divine attributes that are characteristic of the philosophy of religion for many. "I have not given up on philosophy, but I take philosophy to be a phenomenological, not a metaphysical or speculative enterprise, that is, I steer its nose close to the earth of concrete description" (*OR*, p. 57). Using an expression derived from Derrida, he is attempting to articulate "religion without religion," that is, religion not delimited by creedal formulas, theological treatises, or institutional practices. "By religion," he tells us on the first page, "I mean something simple, open-ended, and old-fashioned, namely, the love of God" (*OR*, p. 1). The rest of his book is an attempt to explicate how this is to be understood. To be religious is to be and act in the world in a way which is open to "the impossible" (another Derridean term), to the "absolute future" which we cannot predict or control. "The religious sense of life has to do with exposing oneself to the radical uncertainty and the open-endedness of life, with what we are calling the absolute future, which is meaning-giving, salt-giving, risk-taking" (*OR*, p. 14). Religion is a fundamental way in which the individual experiences life. More of what Caputo means by this will become clear as we proceed.

James invariably discusses religion in broad and non-doctrinaire terms. In "The Will to Believe," for example, James writes that "Religions differ so much in their accidents that in discussing the religious question we must make it very generic and broad" (*WB*, p. 39). He avoids any reference to specific theological or doctrinal claims. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* he indicates that he is concerned with what he calls "personal religion," rather than "institutional religion" (including matters of ecclesiastical organization and systematic theology) (*VRE*, p. 32). He there defines religion as "*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine.*" What is "divine" is not to be taken narrowly, he indicates; Buddhism, Emersonian transcendentalism, and other non-theistic conceptions are all possible ways of understanding "the divine" (*VRE*, p. 34). He later asserts that "What keeps religion going is something else than abstract definitions and systems of concatenated adjectives, and something different from faculties of theology and their professors. All these things are after-effects, secondary accretions upon those phenomena of vital conversation with the unseen divine...So much for the metaphysical attributes of God! From the point of view of practical religion, the metaphysical monster which they offer to our worship is an absolutely worthless invention of the scholarly mind" (*VRE*, pp. 352-353). He concludes: "We must therefore, I think, bid a definite good-by to dogmatic theology. In all sincerity our faith must do without that warrant" (*VRE*, p. 354).<sup>9</sup> "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" (*VRE*, p. 405). A fuller understanding of James's position will also emerge as we proceed.

## 2. Religious truth is non-propositional; religious language is non-literal.

Caputo claims that "Religious truth is tied up with being truly religious, truly loving God, loving God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), and there are more ways to do that than are dreamt of by the faithful in the traditional confessions. Loving God in spirit and truth is not like having the right scientific theory that covers all the facts and makes all the alternative explanations look bad" (*OR*, p. 111). "Religious truth, the love of God, does not have to do with approved propositions" (*OR*, p. 112). "Religious truth is not the truth of propositions, the sort of truth that comes from getting our cognitive ducks in order, from getting our cognitive contents squared up with what is out there in the world" (*OR*, p. 114). Rather, religion can be "'true' in the same way that a novel can be deeply 'true' even though it is rightly classified as 'fiction,' not 'fact'" (*OR*, p. 112). "Unlike a scientific theory, there is not a reason on earth (or in heaven) why many different religious narratives cannot *all* be true. 'The one true religion' in that sense makes no more sense than 'the one true language' or 'the one true poetry,' 'the one true story' or 'the one true culture'" (*OR*, p. 110). Indeed, what distinguishes a postmodern perspective on religion is its non-propositional character. Whereas medieval or pre-modern thinkers affirmed religion in terms of metaphysical propositions which they claimed identified the *really real* (that which belongs to a higher order of reality than our life on earth)—and modern, secular thinkers dismissed religion because they rejected such claims as *unreal* (untrue propositions, the product of escapist, reactionary superstition)—Caputo, as a postmodernist, identifies religion in terms of the *hyper-real* (reality beyond what can be articulated in cognitive propositions) (*OR*, p. 91).

For James, religion "is a man's total reaction upon life," in which we "must go behind the foreground of experience and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as everlasting presence" (*VRE*, pp. 36-37). "The character of the universe in which we dwell" (*VRE*, p. 37) transcends scientific explication.<sup>10</sup> Religious experiences are ultimately ineffable, mystical—"states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect" (*VRE*, p. 302). In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James notes that "the only material we have at our disposal for making a picture of the whole world is supplied by the various portions of that world of which we have already had experience.... All philosophers, accordingly, have conceived of the whole after the analogy of some particular feature of it which has particularly captivated their attention."<sup>11</sup> In western religions, the most basic symbols for expressing and evoking an understanding of reality and our relationship to it are

9. One must not conclude that James eschewed metaphysics as such—as Caputo seems to do. While he criticizes theism—and materialism—and absolute idealism—James proposes a metaphysics of "pure experience" in his "radical empiricism."

10. "Life in its endless variety is wondrously beyond discursive capture" is the way this point is expressed in Phil Oliver's *William James's "Springs of Delight"* (Nashville: Vanderbilt U P, 2001), p. 168.

11. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1977), p. 9.

personal. In “The Will to Believe,” James points out that “The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having personal form. The universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou*, if we are religious; and any relation that might be possible from person to person might be possible here” (*WB*, p. 31).<sup>12</sup> This is a key point in understanding James’s will to believe doctrine, as we shall see. But for now, what needs to be recognized is that James is in full agreement with Caputo’s non-propositional understanding of religious claims. Religious affirmations are not to be understood as propositions regarding what is *really real*. At the end of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James indicates his “inability to accept either popular Christianity or scholastic theism” (*VRE*, p. 410), which reflect such a pre-modern perspective. But neither are religious claims to be scorned and rejected as untrue propositions as proclaimed by modern positivists. Caputo labels the reality beyond that which can be articulated in propositions the *hyper-real*. James puts it this way: the “absolute truth” of religion that is apprehended in mystical experiences is *super-lucent*, *super-splendent*, *super-essential*, *super-sublime*, *super-everything* that can be named” (*VRE*, p. 330).<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Religion requires faith, self-surrender, passionate affirmation.

For both Caputo and James, religion means an openness to a world which includes more than what can be objectively formulated in cognitive propositions. It requires a “letting go,” a surrender of our egoistic desires to predict and control, in order to be fully responsive to a world which includes the unknowable and uncertain. “Religion kicks in,” as Caputo puts it, “when we confess our love for something beyond ourselves” (*OR*, p. 31). With this “unhinging and impassioning sense of life” (*OR*, p. 20), I am “drawn out of myself by love...to something beyond my own self-love” (*OR*, p. 32). We say “yes to the future, to what is coming, to possibilities that eye has not seen nor ear heard, to the possibility of the impossible, yes to the God of yes, to ‘Ja’-weh. *Oui, oui*, amen. Yes, God is yes. Yes, yes to my God” (*OR*, p. 24). It is a matter of faith—trust “to put it in terms that every investor in mutual funds will understand...that in the long run this pays the best returns, even though in the short run it is unnerving” (*OR*, p. 20). Caputo differentiates religious faith from Stoicism. “The Stoics were advising us to refuse religion, to refuse to make ourselves vulnerable, to

have calm and *apatheia* (no passion), whereas in the religious sense of life all that is calm is disturbed by a divine passion, a divine *perturbio*, a divine unhinging, a restless stirring with a passion for the impossible” (*OR*, p. 29).

For James, the essential affirmation of religion is that there is more to reality than we can know or control, but that with all its mystery and wonder the universe is ultimately hospitable to the human longing for harmony and meaning. Whatever be our travails, possibilities of fulfillment are ever present and can be realized if we allow ourselves to be open and responsive to them. In “The Will to Believe,” he proposes that relations between persons and the universe are analogous to those among persons. The universe is experienced as a *Thou*, as we have seen. Just as love and trust are necessary to develop and sustain a meaningful relationship with another person—“faith in a fact can help create the fact,” as James puts it—so, too, such faith is necessary to experience a sense of I-Thou intimacy with reality. Faith is “the greeting of our whole nature to a kind of world conceived as well adapted to that nature.”<sup>14</sup> We are invited to embrace life, allowing our hopes rather than our fears to prevail. In “Is Life Worth Living?” James writes: “Be not afraid of life. Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact” (*WB*, p. 56).

James is strikingly similar to Caputo in both style and substance in describing the features of “saintliness” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Included are “A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world’s selfish interests...A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections, towards ‘yes, yes,’ and away from ‘no,’ where the claims of the non-ego are concerned” (*VRE*, pp. 219-220). And, like Caputo, he sharply distinguishes the passionate affirmation of religion from the passive resignation of Stoicism. Religion involves accepting the universe “heartily rather than “grudgingly,” with “enthusiastic assent” rather than “dull submission,” with “passionate happiness” rather than “stoic resignation” (*VRE*, p. 41).<sup>15</sup>

### 4. Religion poses a “genuine option,” a fundamental decision about how to be in the world.

“We must believe *something*,” writes Caputo (*OR*, p. 23). We must decide whether to embrace religion or not. There is no “The Answer” that can be guaranteed by careful rational assessment of propositional claims, but Caputo does his best to convince us of the “meaning-giving, salt-giving, risk-taking” merits of religion. He encourages us “to

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that James here claims that religion represents the universe itself as a *Thou*; he does *not* say that it affirms the existence of an independent, external Being as a *Thou*. For James, religion provides us with a perspective on “Being itself,” as Tillich would put the matter.

<sup>13</sup> Both Caputo and James reject “theological realism” if that is understood as the affirmation of the existence of God as “a Being” as in traditional theism. But James is clearly not advocating “relativism”—and Caputo does not seem to do so either. There is a “real” world to be experienced, however limited our cognitive formulations of it—“a depth beyond words,” as Oliver puts it. *William James’s “Springs of Delight*,” p. 40. Oliver’s discussion of “Subjectivity and Reality” is instructive on this point, pp. 55-59.

<sup>14</sup> William James, “Faith and the Right to Believe,” an Appendix to *Some Problems of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979), p. 111. In attempting to articulate just what James means by “God,” Wesley Cooper writes: “As for James’s God, I interpret it as a pattern we can find in experience, when we adopt a certain stance toward it.” Wesley Cooper, *The Unity of William James’s Thought* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2002), p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Caputo and James both also indicate their differences with Nietzsche. Caputo differentiates religious faith with “its hope of a transforming future” from a Nietzschean affirmation of life as it is, the acceptance of a “tragic sense of life” (*OR*, pp. 118-125). Likewise, James sees religious saintliness as quite at odds with the Nietzschean affirmation of strength and pride (*VRE*, pp. 295-297).

answer. The way Mary answered...the way Abraham answered 'here I am'... The whole idea is to *respond*, to *do* the truth, to make truth happen... we must be responsive, responsible" (OR, p. 28). "When love calls for action, we had better be ready with something more than a well-formed proposition even if it has been approved by a council. We had better be ready with a *deed*, not a *what* but a *how*, ready to respond to do the truth, to make it happen here and now, for love and justice are required now" (OR, p. 130).

For Caputo, the question is whether to love God or to lead a loveless life. "The opposite of a religious person is a loveless person" (OR, p. 2). Using language which he claims is deservedly abusive, he asserts that "The real opposite of a religious person is a selfish and pusillanimous curmudgeon, a loveless lout who knows no higher pleasure than the contemplation of his own visage, a mediocre fellow who does not have the energy to love anything except his mutual funds" (OR, p. 3). While his description of our options may be overdrawn, ignoring the various degrees of religious spirituality that may be operative for most of us, it is clear that what we affirm makes a difference. The love of God "has to do with the transformability of our lives, with the possibility of a transforming future" (OR, p. 136). Caputo persuasively argues that religion, understood in terms of his postmodern perspective indeed "in the long run...pays the best returns, even though in the short run it is unnerving" (OR, p. 20).

In "The Will to Believe," James, as is well known, claims that religion poses a "genuine option"—one that is forced, living, and momentous—"that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds" (WB, p. 20). He argues that we have a "right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced" (WB, p. 13). A decision must be made; a forced option is one that is unavoidable. "We *may* wait if we will...but if we do so, we do so at our peril as much as if we believed. In either case we *act*, taking our life in our hands" (WB, p. 33).

James, like Caputo, attempts to convince us that we should be "risk-takers."<sup>16</sup> Not only do we have a right to believe, there is much to be gained in doing so. James believes that as we live in the world "we crave alike to feel more truly at home with it, and to contribute our mite to its amelioration."<sup>17</sup> Religion proclaims that such cravings can be satisfied—and believing this, and acting upon this belief, helps make it so. Proceeding with trust and good will, we feel a sense of harmonious relation with the universe, a universe in which we can make a difference through our melioristic efforts. As he writes in "The Sentiment of Rationality": "The world is good, we must say, since it is what we make it—and we shall make it good" (WB, p. 84).

In responding to the universe as a *Thou*, religion affirms that "we are continuous with a wider self" beyond what is objectively or scientifically identifiable. "When we

commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change" (VRE, pp. 405-406).

### Concluding Thoughts

At the beginning of the 21st century the philosophy of religion as discussed by analytic thinkers still focuses primarily on the merits or deficiencies of traditional theism. Questions of God's existence, attributes, and relation to the created world are central. One might think of the defense of theism by Richard Swinburne and by the adherents of "Reformed Christianity"—and of the various rebuttals put forth by their critics, for example. In Caputo's terminology, we could say that what seems to be at issue is whether a "pre-modern" understanding of religion is justifiable or whether it must be rejected. In the light of "modern" reasoning. Reflecting contributions from continental philosophers, Caputo is convinced that an adequate understanding of religion must move beyond the parameters of the traditional debate regarding theism to recognize the non-propositional character of religious truth. He very ably and effectively presents us with such a "postmodern" perspective in *On Religion*.

There are many similarities between Caputo's understanding of religion and the ideas developed by William James, as I have attempted to demonstrate. To be sure, there have been analytic philosophers in the twentieth century whose thought has had considerable affinity with James as well. The "Wittgensteinian fideism" of D. Z. Phillips is one notable example. Even greater kinship with a Jamesian perspective on religion is evident in the writing of philosophers and theologians such as Paul Tillich, Don Cupitt, and Gordon Kaufman. But the degree to which the issues raised and the insights developed in Caputo's *On Religion* echo James's views is especially striking. Caputo, of course, is a prolific writer, and we may well find ideas developed in other works which are quite different from anything James would advocate. Nonetheless, in *this* book, the congruence of his views with those of James is extensive indeed. And in so far as *On Religion* is representative of current postmodern thinking on the subject, one can only hope that the renewal of interest in religion among continental philosophers will contribute to the further discussion and appreciation of the kind of naturalistic understanding of religion that James espoused—an alternative to the "theistic religion" or "no religion" options that James had moved beyond a century ago.

—Ludwig F. Schlecht is a professor of philosophy at Muhlenberg College, Allentown, PA. He thanks two anonymous readers for this publication whose helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper led to significant improvements. E-mail = schlecht@muhlenberg.edu

<sup>16</sup> Faith "is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified in advance. It is in fact the same moral quality which we call courage in practical affairs." James, *Pragmatism*, pp. 142-143.

<sup>17</sup> James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 11.

# “The Echo of a Certain Mode of Thought”: William James and the Emerson Centenary Address

by John T. Matteson

“How shall we catch the escaped soul?”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, from “Address to the Inhabitants of Concord at the Consecration of Sleepy Hollow” (1855)

William James’s address at the centenary of Ralph Waldo Emerson began with startling incongruity. His audience had gathered to commemorate a momentous birth. From the outset, however, James spoke to them like a man preoccupied with death and the inadequacy of memory. To all appearances, the speech set out not to celebrate its subject, but to enfold him within the tones of eulogy. This less than obvious rhetorical choice was rendered the more complex by the fact that Emerson himself had always struggled against the elegiac mode, exhorting his readers never to build the sepulchres of their fathers and always to maintain a living relationship with both experience and language. Despite his insistence upon life, Emerson first appears in James’s address in the company of shades and phantoms; while affirming Emerson’s singularity as a man and writer, James eerily figures him as “an ideal wraith”<sup>1</sup> (*WJW*, p. 1119; *ERM*, p. 109; *POW*, p. 307). Tinged with anxiety about the impermanence of memory, James’s speech sounds notes of existential fear, the awareness of mortality, and a foreboding consciousness of how little of us will remain once consciousness has ceased to be.

James himself had been living uncomfortably close to these subjects for almost five years. Throughout his adult life, his sense of mortality had been uncommonly vivid, but it had become especially so since 1898, when an overly ambitious hiking trip had strained his heart beyond the hope of full recovery. Thereafter, James’s mind irresistibly strayed toward thoughts of his own end. James’s remarks on Emerson thus carried a significance broader than the dignity of their occasion. Through them, their author was struggling to determine what measure of immortality could exist at the end of sensory experience for one who valued life chiefly as sensory experience. James’s eulogistic treatment of Emerson

becomes all the more intriguing because Emerson, too, was a man who approached the ideas of death and memory with uncertainty. Emerson had urged the seeking of an original relation to the universe, but it was no easy task to find such a relation with death and the past. Speaking at the dedication of the cemetery that would one day hold his own remains, Emerson himself had acknowledged “the futility of [the] old arts of preserving.”<sup>2</sup> How was one to honor the dead without lapsing into pious clichés? How could one evoke a reverence for the past without burying the possibilities of the present? And, above all, how was the living philosopher to craft a body of work that could survive in a substantial, non-wraithlike form? Both Emerson and James sought to answer these questions, and their searches led them into similar paradoxes. For James, the task of commemorative oration led him to write an anti-oratory, a speech that deliberately defied the likely expectations of his listeners, questioned the purposes of commemoration, and, most decisively, challenged the limiting force of textuality.

When James was asked by Samuel Hoar to speak at the Emerson centenary, he was told that his speech was expected to last only fifteen minutes and that the Emerson family themselves were eager to have him participate. Despite the modest requirements of the occasion and the assurance of a warm reception from the attendees whose opinions mattered most, James approached the prospective engagement uneasily. He initially declined the invitation outright and wrote to his wife Alice on January 24, 1903, that his refusal had been decisive. The proposed speech, he felt, was not amenable to his style or current mode of thinking; it would be too much of a distraction from the other projects that pressed in upon his mind. He wrote, “I must work within my own lines and not be drawn away from them.”<sup>3</sup> Evidently, Mrs. James suggested that he reconsider, since on January 28 James found it necessary to reaffirm his choice, writing to her, “I am firm about the Emerson.”<sup>4</sup> Then, however, for reasons not disclosed in his published correspondence, James abruptly changed his mind. On the sixth of February, Hoar sent James a note acknowledging the latter’s acceptance of the invitation.

James’s change of heart did not, however, signify an end to all of his misgivings. His anxieties merely transferred from the question of whether he would speak to the harder issue of what he was going to say. An immediate concern was the likelihood of redundancy; it seemed to James that almost everyone had some banal remarks

1. William James, “Address at the Centenary of Ralph Waldo Emerson, May 25, 1903.” The parenthetical page numbers in this article refer respectively to three popular editions in which the address can be found: *William James Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987) pp. 1119-1125, hereinafter cited as *WJW*; *Essays in Religion and Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1982), pp. 109-115, hereinafter cited as *ERM*; and *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2000), pp. 307-313, hereinafter cited as *POW*.

2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Address to the Inhabitants of Concord at the Consecration of Sleepy Hollow,” *Miscellanies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1878), p. 430.

3. William James, “To Alice Howe Gibbens James,” 24 January 1903, *The Correspondence of William James, Volume 10* (Charlottesville, Virginia: U P of Virginia, 2002), p. 182, hereinafter cited as *Correspondence*.

4. William James, “To Alice Howe Gibbens James,” 28 January 1903, *Correspondence, Vol. 10*, p. 190.

to add to the commemoration but that few of them would merit hearing. He complained to Henry William Rankin, “I fear that poor Emerson’s memory (like all things in this monstrous age) will be maltreated through quantitative excess in its celebration.”<sup>5</sup> At first, the writing process did not go at all quickly. More than three months after his awkward acceptance, and only a dozen days before the ceremony, he confided to Alice, “I haven’t done a stroke on my Emerson.” Nevertheless, he expressed confidence in the result, adding, “It [the speech] no doubt will go.”<sup>6</sup>

And go it did. Just six days later, James reported his triumph—and an enormous feeling of relief—to Sarah Wyman Whitman: “Emerson speech also finished, so I feel emptier and freer, and more my own man than for several years past.” Part of James’s relief came from the fact that the speech was his last project at the end of a trying academic year. As he told Ms. Whitman, he could now look forward to doing “nothing ... but improve my mind and gather health all summer.”<sup>7</sup> But, significantly, James also equated his sense of liberation with a recovery of independence and manhood. In writing the Emerson centenary speech, James had found at least a temporary means of laying some oppressive existential worries to rest.

The anxiety that James moved powerfully to exorcise as he wrote his Emerson Centenary Address had troubled his thoughts periodically since the death of Henry James Sr. in 1882. During the autumn preceding the Emerson celebration, James wrote to Theodora Sedgwick on the melancholy subject of departed friends and loved ones, the “*individualists* of which one’s spiritual ‘stock’ consists.” What weighed heavily upon him was how the impression such people leave seems so terribly less substantial than the vital force they exerted while alive. He lamented, “When they are gone, each seems to shrink to one little expressive note—pitiful in its simplicity, and yet profoundly significant. I felt that curious paradox so strongly after my poor father died—just one little idea, attitude, flavor seemed all that his individuality stood for, and yet how long a daily *travail* had to be undergone to leave just that.”<sup>8</sup> While people lived, it seemed to James, their spiritual space occupied three dimensions. With death, however, that wonderful fullness collapsed within an instant; even the most vigorous and prolific mind dissolved into a remnant that was literally paper-thin. Of this kind of dissolution, James’s father was indeed an apt example. Henry James, Sr., had felt

spiritual inspirations that he labored his entire life to communicate. In the end his efforts to convey a single, saving idea produced little more than a dry mass of paper. William had tried to breathe life into his late father’s work by using his own money to publish a selection of it, significantly titled *The Literary Remains of the Late Henry James*, but the sales had been negligible. James could not help viewing the fate of his father’s work through the lens of his own prospective mortality. What dusty fate awaited even the best of thinkers and writers, whose words would outlast him like a discarded shell? As he prepared to speak upon the memory of Emerson, James had ample cause to revisit this question.

Before writing his speech, James set himself the task of rereading all of Emerson’s works. The effort paid noticeable rewards. On April 30, he wrote to Théodore Flournoy that he was finding the writings “divine things, some of them,” and that he considered the reading “nothing heavy.”<sup>9</sup> The following day, he told Katharine Outram Rodgers, “I have been reading [Emerson] straight along and like him more and more.”<sup>10</sup> His attention was especially captured by a piece from the famed *First Series* titled “Spiritual Laws,” an essay that figured with unique prominence in his finished speech. Evidently, it was his reading of “Spiritual Laws” that helped persuade James to craft his speech as a piece of anti-oratory—a declaration against the commonplaces of eulogistic discourse and the act of public oratory itself. Having so reluctantly agreed to give the speech in the first place, James was no doubt amused to find in “Spiritual Laws” the following passage:

[A] public oration is an escapade, a non-committal, an apology, a gag, and not a communication, not a speech, not a man.<sup>11</sup>

Serendipitously, Emerson was confirming for James the sham nature of his project; the subject of his proposed oration had already denounced the artificiality of oratory. To quote this passage directly to the assembled throng at Concord would have seemed bad manners. However, James did the next best thing; he quoted “Spiritual Laws” no fewer than five times in his speech—more than any other of Emerson’s writings. If Emerson considered public oratory a “gag,” James tacitly turned the joke upon his audience.

But James’s more pressing concern, like Emerson’s, was with finding a means of infusing language with authenticity and life. It was a problem, as Emerson had noted, not only with public speaking but with “all intellec-

5. William James, “To Henry William Rankin,” *Correspondence*, Vol. 10, p. 208.

6. William James, “To Alice Howe Gibbens James,” 13 May 1903, *Correspondence*, Vol. 10, p. 247.

7. William James, “To Sarah Wyman Whitman,” 19 May 1903, *Correspondence*, Vol. 10, p. 249.

8. William James, “To Theodora Sedgwick,” 21 November 1902, *Correspondence*, Vol. 10, p. 153.

9. William James, “To Théodore Flournoy,” 30 April 1903, *Correspondence*, Vol. 10, p. 153.

10. William James, “To Katharine Outram Rodgers,” 1 May 1903, *Correspondence*, Vol. 10, p. 153.

11. Ralph Waldo Emerson. “Spiritual Laws,” *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), p. 316.

tual works. We have yet to learn, that the thing uttered in words is not therefore affirmed.”<sup>12</sup> This affirmation could not come from either language or logic. Only those writers and speakers who managed to “communicate their own character and experience to the company” would overcome the dryness and essential fraud of insincere communication.<sup>13</sup> If Emerson was right, only life could impart life; James’s own speech could invigorate and inspire only if it were grounded in the speaker’s authentic concerns.

That these concerns were somewhat strangely matched to the occasion was evident from the moment James opened his mouth. “The pathos of death is this,” he began, “that when the days of one’s life are ended, those days that were so crowded with business and felt so heavy in their passing, what remains of one in memory should be so slight a thing” (*WJW*, p. 1119; *ERM*, p. 109; *POW*, p. 307). James was addressing an audience filled with people who had either known Emerson personally or who had read him so thoroughly that they imagined a personal connection with him. Until this moment, they might have considered their memories of Emerson to be rich and full. Here, however, was an orator who insisted that recollection is of its very nature thin and paltry, offering no great measure of immortality. Granted, James conceded that Emerson’s soul was so exceptional that it sounded “a note so clear as to be victorious over the inevitable pity of such a diminution and abridgment” (*WJW*, p. 1119; *ERM*, p. 109; *POW*, p. 307). Nevertheless, the diminution remained inevitable.

In so suggesting, however, James contradicted Emerson’s view of the same subject. Indeed, “Spiritual Laws” itself had begun by affirming the beautifying and redemptive powers of memory. Emerson had written:

Not only things familiar and stale, but even the tragic and terrible, are comely, as they take their place in the pictures of memory. The river-bank, the weed at the water-side, the old house, the foolish person,—however neglected in the passing,—have a grace in the past.<sup>14</sup>

James, to the contrary, found it hard to recognize this grace and beauty. Instead, he maintained that memory could preserve only “the phantom of an attitude, the echo of a certain mode of thought” (*WJW*, p. 1119; *ERM*, p. 109; *POW*, p. 307). The careful listener in James’s audience would have found herself witnessing an astonishing series of subversions. On an occasion of utmost respectability, James was first arguing the futility of such occasions and then subtly picking a quarrel with the man he had been called upon to remember—on the subject of memory!

The surprises continued. As he began to set forth

the particular qualities in Emerson that deserved honor, James said, “Rarely has a man so known the limits of his genius or so unfailingly kept within them. ... The faultless tact with which he kept his safe limits while he so dauntlessly asserted himself within them is an example fitted to give heart to other theorists and artists the world over” (*WJW*, p. 1120; *ERM*, pp. 109-110, 111; *POW*, pp. 307, 308-309). The praise was peculiar for a man who had famously declared, in his great essay “Circles,” that the only sin is limitation and had further observed, “[T]he heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses, it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions.... There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us.”<sup>15</sup> James had certainly reread these words while preparing his address; his essay “The True Harvard,” written at almost the same moment, quotes directly from “Circles.” Why, then, did James choose to represent Emerson as a man content to live within limitation, a portrayal starkly at odds with the tenor of Emerson’s writings? It seems likely that James was, for the moment, speaking not so much about Emerson as he was giving voice to some of his own concerns about limitations, ones that differed geometrically from the circles of Emerson’s conception. James was troubled by the boundaries imposed not by circles, but by a pair of rectangles: the rectangle of the printed page and the more dreadful rectangle of the grave.

In his superb study *Poetry and Pragmatism*, in which both Emerson and James prominently figure, Richard Poirier comments on the anxiety of the written word. The progress of the soul, he writes, “is forever threatened by textuality, by contraction of work into a text.”<sup>16</sup> The moment when an idea is reduced into text is a moment of figurative mortality; the thought that originated in the ecstatic fluidity of creation hardens into a physically lifeless artifact. This lifelessness is only compounded if the text becomes an object of worshipful imitation. If one reveres the text too much and invokes it only to bound by it, then the text becomes deadening in turn: deadening to innovation, to spontaneity, to the healthy, fertile functioning of the mind. So long as the author is alive, the hardening is only partial. The continuing power of the living writer to revise, comment upon, and struggle against her own creation preserves in the text a contingent, living possibility. But with the death of the author, the contraction of the text would seem to be irreversible. With death, moreover, authors, too, become textualized, since they continue to exist only through the words and images that outlast them. This attenuated, posthumous existence of the writer is, of course, precisely the specter that haunted James as he began his address, the phenomenon that he called “the inevitable pity of ... diminution

12. Emerson, “Spiritual Laws,” p. 316.

13. Emerson, “Spiritual Laws,” p. 316.

14. Emerson, “Spiritual Laws,” p. 305.

15. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Circles,” *Essays and Lectures*, p. 404.

16. Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1992), p. 24.

and abridgment” (*WJW*, p. 1119; *ERM*, p. 109; *POW*, p. 307). In his address, James undertook a struggle against the ghosts bred by textualization; he was seeking not only to give a new life to Emerson’s memory but to deploy language—both his and Emerson’s—in a way that might resist and even reverse the process of diminution that occurs when texts stand in the place of living beings.

Ironically, James’s fight against textualization takes place in a speech that makes more than liberal use of Emerson’s texts. Shortly after giving his speech, James wrote, “I let R.W.E. speak for himself,” and a breakdown of James’s remarks proves this to be the case.<sup>17</sup> In a speech barely 2800 words long, nearly 1100, more than 38 percent of the total length, are quoted from Emerson. In the second half of the speech, Emerson’s words outnumber James’s. Yet James’s ubiquitous and admiring use of Emerson’s words does not convert those words into relics. In part, this is true because the words are themselves remarkably good. As James points out, Emerson was particularly adept at finding “the right verbal garment” for his truths (*WJW*, p. 1120; *ERM*, p. 110; *POW*, p. 308). But the words also do not calcify because the gloss James gives them denies them the opportunity to become static even if they were inclined to do so. James begins his address by framing a problem of mortality, but as he involves himself more and more deeply in Emerson’s language, his idea becomes clear: contrary to what James insinuated in his opening paragraphs, there is a thickness and a durability in some uses of language. Some language does not contract inward upon itself because it points toward some eternally revivifying principle, because, as Emerson put it, it speaks sincerely “to the constant mind of man.”<sup>18</sup> According to James, that principle in Emerson was “the matchless eloquence with which [he] proclaimed the sovereignty of the living individual” (*WJW*, p. 1122; *ERM*, p. 112; *POW*, pp. 309-310). By proclaiming the past person irrelevant and emphasizing the primacy of the current moment, Emerson’s writings escape the dust that consumes texts that insist on their own moment above all others.

And yet, of course, if Emerson remains permanent by gesturing always toward readers in their own time, a paradox arises. For James in 1903, and the more so for us in 2003, Emerson is a “past man,” and it was against the overbearing influence of past men that Emerson strenuously warned. Ironically, we can respect Emerson’s wishes only by freeing ourselves from his influence. Emerson escapes the death of the text by recognizing his own impermanence and exhorting us to love the living. Literature is not an enshrinement of static verities, but an exhortation to discover and live truth on one’s own terms.

Affirming the paradox of Emerson’s influence, how-

ever, was only the first step in James’s search for the sources of Emerson’s literary immortality. His next point was more telling, for it identified precisely the nexus between Emerson’s idea of literature and his understanding of democracy. In one of the longest quoted passages in the address, James recalls Emerson’s assertion that, although he may love and honor Epaminondas, he does not wish to be Epaminondas. Emerson’s point, as James explains it, is that “nothing can harm the man who rests in his appointed place and character” (*WJW*, p. 1122; *ERM*, p. 112; *POW*, p. 310). Everyone, according to Emerson, has an appointed role in life, and no such role is intrinsically more august than any other. The kind of action that will be deemed great and heroic is simply that which is fitted to the circumstance. Although this concept, in the tradition of Puritan theology, appears to justify social inequality as divinely ordained, it also has the effect of democratizing greatness. Under it, even an obscure life lived at the highest levels of duty and awareness can lay claim to the highest honor. By quoting this passage, James alters the terms by which we are to understand Emerson’s greatness. He becomes not necessarily a man of exceptional genius on absolute terms, but one who was supremely fortunate in his opportunities and whose brilliance lay in his superb adaptation to them. It was, of course, a hallmark of James’s pragmatic thought to observe the usefulness of things according to their aptness to their contexts. James’s quotation of Emerson on the subject of Epaminondas adroitly reveals Emerson as a pragmatist before the letter. It also serves to reinforce James’s central idea of Emerson’s most enduring legacy: his ability to convince us that all moments are potentially imbued with extraordinary possibility, provided only that the people who live in them can perceive and rise to that potential.

To say “provided only” is, however, to elide what may be a significant undercurrent of anxiety in James’s address, for satisfying this proviso is no minor task. Emerson’s elect, those who could discover and embrace all that was offered by their circumstances, were but a tiny few. James echoes the Emersonian lament that most men are “as alike as their barns and pantries, and soon as musty and as dreary” (*WJW*, p. 1124; *ERM*, p. 114; *POW*, p. 312). Pedestrian existence is the rule; the sort of life that is not a mere rehearsal for death belongs only to “worthy specimens,—sincere, authentic, archetypal.” And by what sign might these specimens be known? “[T]hey must in some way act as symbolic mouthpieces of the Universe’s meaning” (*WJW*, p. 1124; *ERM*, p. 114; *POW*, p. 312). The criteria for salvation were new, but the gate remained as narrow as for the most anguished Calvinist.

Nevertheless, the peroration of James’s address is staunchly optimistic. Indeed, it ends by appearing to refute the melancholy premises with which it started. He had begun by telling his audience that the work of even the greatest person narrows, at death, to a tiny mote of finitude and that “the whole of a man’s significance” must

17. William James, “To Frances Rollins Morse,” 26 May 1903, *Correspondence*, Vol. 10, p. 252.

18. Emerson, “Spiritual Laws,” p. 317.

**“The Echo of a Certain Mode of Thought” by John T. Matteson**

dwindle “into a mere musical note or phrase” (*WJW*, p. 1119; *ERM*, p. 109; *POW*, p. 307). In the final two paragraphs of James’s speech, this process of diminution is reversed as if by a miracle; the tendency of existence is not toward reduction but toward ecstatic fullness. Earlier, the world had seemed to be contracting to a pinpoint. Now, seen through the eyes of Emerson, “the point of any pen can be an epitome of reality; the commonest person’s act...can lay hold on eternity” (*WJW*, p. 1125; *ERM*, p. 115; *POW*, p. 313) The text is no longer a grave. At the very last, the single note of a dead man’s life broadens again into a symphonic score; one can almost hear an Ode to Joy in James’s closing words: “As long as our English language lasts, men’s hearts will be cheered and their souls strengthened and liberated by the noble and musical pages with which you have enriched it” (*WJW*, p. 1125; *ERM*, p. 115; *POW*, p. 313). Emerson’s texts achieve life because they refer incessantly away from themselves and toward the living heart and spirit of the reader. James left his audience with a confidence in the enduring power of language to convey spiritual truth and lay claim to immortality. And, as Emerson had written forty-eight years earlier, “The being that can share a thought and a feeling so sublime as confidence in truth is no mushroom. Our dissatisfaction with any other solution is the blazing evidence of immortality.”<sup>19</sup>

In lauding Emerson’s facility of language, James deployed an apt metaphor. He said of the former clergy-

man, “thoughts which would be trivial expressed otherwise are important through the nouns and verbs to which he *married* them” (*WJW*, p. 1120; *ERM*, p. 110; *POW*, p. 308, emphasis added). At the Emerson centenary, it seemed that the spirit of the ex-minister performed one last, posthumous wedding. James wrote the day after the gathering that the setting, the orators, and the fine spring weather had “all made a matchless combination, took one back to one’s childhood, and made that rarely realized marriage between reality and ideality, that usually only occurs in fiction or poetry.”<sup>20</sup> The occasion that James had feared would be an oppressively pious funeral turned out instead to be a triumphant wedding of fact and idea. The writing of his speech, James had implied, had restored him to manliness; delivering it gave him back a moment of his youth. Like Emerson’s writings, the centenary accomplished for James an almost miraculous union of time past and time present.

—*John T. Matteson is an assistant professor of English at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. E-mail = matteson151@earthlink.net*

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<sup>19</sup> Emerson, “Address at the Consecration of Sleepy Hollow,” *Miscellanies*, p. 436.

<sup>20</sup> William James, “To Frances Rollins Morse,” 26 May 1903, *Correspondence*, Vol. 10, p. 251.

# First-hand Experience and Second-hand Language in the Varieties

by David Perley

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* William James focusses on experiences with a “more”: a deeper, religious dimension of experience. The *hither* side of the “more” is the “subconscious continuation of our conscious life”<sup>1</sup> while the *farther* side shades off into obscure territories of religious belief. James remains for the most part discussing the *hither* side of the reality of religious experience. If we extend the metaphor of a continuum to mystical experiences, the *hither* side emphasizes the linguistic aspect of mysticism while the *farther* side shades off into profound, ineffable experiences. I propose to remain on the *hither*, linguistic side of the discussion of mysticism, focussing on statements in the chapter entitled “Mysticism” (Lectures XVI and XVII) that address the relation between thought, language, and mystical experience.

While ineffability is described as one of the characteristics of mystical experiences in this chapter, he also alludes to a proactive view of language that loosens the rigid dichotomy between thinking and feeling. I intend to expand the usual focus on mystical experience in the *Varieties* to incorporate James’s analogy between the evocative power of mystical writings and musical and poetic language. Building on the prominent role of metaphor in James’s thought highlighted by Charlene Haddock Siegfried, this analogy reveals his understanding of thought and language: the metaphorical capability of language enables it to serve as a mediator between thought and feeling, or between the conceptual world and the more elusive parts of what James called the stream of experience. The significance of James’s exposition is augmented by understanding the interstitial nature of metaphorical language. Mystical language is not merely descriptive: the more evocative or illustrative the language, the better the immediate sense of an individual’s experience is both conveyed and sympathetically appreciated.

When James begins his introduction to “Mysticism,” he disavows any first-hand knowledge of his subject. “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.”<sup>2</sup> In the intro-

duction to the Harvard edition of the *Varieties*, John E. Smith catches the paradox involved in James’s second-hand demonstration that first-hand experience is the primary authoritative material in religion.<sup>3</sup> Smith’s answer to the paradox lies in James’s sympathetic understanding of the material, the differences between first and second-hand being a matter of degrees of sympathetic intensity,<sup>4</sup> but I would also add the necessary distinction between the secondary nature of thought and first-hand perspectives of mystical experience. The “first-hand authority” involves the authority of the experience over the individual alone, so James would not want to claim first-hand authority in this context, namely, where he is presenting many different descriptions of religious experience.<sup>5</sup> In one sense he intends to focus on intimate experiences of religion, not parasitic formulas based on these experiences. In another sense he is emphasizing that he is not claiming any prestige and authority from a first-hand account. In a further sense he is saying that this discussion must proceed necessarily from a second-hand perspective due to the secondary, retrospective nature of thought. When we pursue the secondary nature of thought further, we see that, in a Jamesian world, between the abstract poles of the second-hand glance of strict analysis and the intimacy of first-hand immediate experiences, there is a complex *range* of activities that lies somewhere between the two.

On the one hand the “mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own.”<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, “[w]e are thinking beings, and we cannot exclude the intellect from participating in any of our functions. Even in soliloquizing with ourselves, we construe our feelings intellectually.”<sup>7</sup> He seems to suggest that there is a necessary interrelation between all experiences and thinking but no necessary connection between *specific* intellectual content and *specific* mystical experiences. However, James wants to go further, claiming that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that “philosophical and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.”<sup>8</sup> Intellectual activity is therefore “after the fact, consequent upon religious feeling, not coordinate with it, not independent of what it ascertains.”<sup>9</sup> I understand James to be saying that while the intellect is involved in our immediate experiences, religious formulations, like all

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982 [1902]), p. 512.  
2. James, *Varieties*, p. 379. He is not telling the whole story to his audience. There are at least two counterexamples to this claim that were experienced by the time of the *Varieties*. He refers anonymously to a sick soul experience and describes his experiences with nitrous oxide in the *Varieties*, p. 160; pp. 387-388. He also writes about his hiking experiences in a letter to his wife Alice, in I.K. Skrupselis and E.M. Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James, Vol. 8* (Charlottesville, VA: U P of Virginia, 2000), pp. 390-391. In spite of these experiences, James felt that he was “almost entirely” barred access to first-hand experiences. I believe he intends to shy away from claiming first-hand access to the more profound heights of religious mysticism. He believed that he could only access these experiences through mystical writings.

3. John E. Smith, Introduction. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1985), p. xvi.  
4. Ibid.  
5. James, *Varieties*, p. 422.  
6. Ibid., p. 425.  
7. Ibid., p. 432.  
8. Ibid., p. 431. This mirrors a letter to a critic where James explains that “all theologies, and all ecclesiasticisms are secondary growths superimposed” and religious experiences “have no proper intellectual deliverance of their own, but belong to a region more deeper, more vital and practical than that which the intellect inhabits.” William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1985), p. 434, n. 33.20. The subject of religious experience prompts James to posit the dichotomy to emphasize the importance of feeling in religion, even though concepts and percepts, thoughts and feelings, “interpenetrate and melt together, impregnate and fertilize each other. Neither, taken alone, knows reality in its completeness. We need them both, as we need both our legs to walk with.” William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1979 [1911]), p. 34.  
9. James, *Varieties*, p. 433.

other formulations, are articulations of some form of immediate experience.<sup>10</sup>

Language is used to exchange ideas among people about experiences and feelings:

Both our personal ideals and our religious and mystical experiences must be interpreted congruously with the kind of scenery which our thinking mind inhabits. The philosophic climate of our time inevitably forces its own clothing on us. Moreover, we must exchange our feelings with one another, and in doing so we have to speak, and to use general and abstract verbal formulas.<sup>11</sup>

Our interpretations are acclimatized to the contemporary conceptual scenery, then further experienced and communicated through language. In order to exchange experiences we must speak and formulas must be used. While any and all mystical writings and reports remain secondary in a conceptual sense, some of them are more intimately related to immediate experience than others. The study of poetic and mystical language moves between these intellectual and intuitive poles. Given James's understanding of religion as involving a "total reaction" to life<sup>12</sup> and the general role concepts play in obtaining *complete* pictures of reality, conceptualization interacts necessarily with the feelings and experiences of religion. Metaphorical forms of language found, for example, in mystical language and poetry maintain an intimate relation between the two trends in experience.

In *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*, Charlene Haddock Seigfried accurately places analogy and metaphor at the center of James's thought. Metaphors "enable us to see the familiar in unfamiliar ways," while also familiarizing the unfamiliar, and analogy aids in recognizing experiences that are eclipsed by senses dulled by convention.<sup>13</sup> As she points out, in the essay "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" James connects poets and philosophers through their use of metaphorical language. He writes: "What everyone can feel, what everyone can know in the bone and marrow of him, they sometimes can find words for and express."<sup>14</sup> I would urge that mystical writers also "find words for and

express" feelings like philosophers and poets, and this suggests that the aim of articulation is common to all three. Metaphor is an illustration of a person's experiences and worldview, even when these experiences appear to operate outside of language. Therefore mystical language somehow expresses what is typically inexpressible.

In the conclusion to the *Varieties* James uses the metaphor of the stereoscope and kinetoscope to contrast the vitality and myriad dimensions of feeling with the paleness of "generalized objects."

Individuality is founded in feeling; and the recesses of feeling, the darker, blinder strata of character, are the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making, directly perceive how events happen, and how work is actually done. Compared with this world of living individualized feelings, the world of generalized objects which the intellect contemplates is without solidity or life. As in stereoscopic or kinetoscopic pictures seen outside the instrument, the third dimension, the movement, the vital element, are not there.<sup>15</sup>

As we see from this passage, it is not simply feeling but the blind and dark recesses of feeling that contain the vitality of experience. I suggest that metaphor is one instrument that approaches the vitality that is missing in some forms of thinking. Metaphor serves as stereoscope by revealing the missing depths lacking in abstract intellection. Through the use of metaphor, literature, poetry, and religious language can approximate this "third dimension," articulating the "blinder strata."

Extending the purpose of James's own use of the stereoscope metaphor, mystical language intends to draw listeners and readers towards the intimacy of mystical experience. In "Mysticism" he describes a spectrum of mystical experiences ranging from the less extreme forms of experiences that result from literary, poetic, or scriptural inspiration to much more profound, religious experiences that appear severed from language.<sup>16</sup> We can also think of the spectrum as a range of mystical language that creates more or less intimacy with experience. The chapter begins with a discussion of the experience of the power of words as a less extreme form of mystical experience.

Most of us can remember the strangely moving power of

10. Eugene Taylor is also aware of the problem of "immediate experience and our categories about it" and sees the *Varieties* as a cross-cultural study of "accounts of immediate experience rather than the comparison of texts, schools of thought, or ecclesiastical history of different traditions," but James's complex interrelation between thought and immediate experience also deserves a closer look. Eugene Taylor, *William James on Consciousness beyond the Margin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 1996), p. 118. See also p. 139. The connection between thought and experience is richer than the limits set by opposing categories such as intellect vs. feeling or thought vs. experience. Further investigation into the issue of James's motivations for this oscillation in the *Varieties* deserves separate treatment. It is sufficient for the present purposes to understand the two options James presents in his writings and how the discussion of metaphor and mystical language relies on a more coordinate and optimistic view of the relation between immediate experience and language.

11. James, *Varieties*, p. 432.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

13. Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 1990), p.23; p. 209.

14. William James, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," in John J. McDermott, ed., *The Writings of William James* (New York: Random House, 1977), pp. 346-347.

15. James, *Varieties*, p. 502.

16. While G. William Barnard's *Exploring Unseen Worlds* does an excellent job connecting James's wider thought with his understanding of mystical experience, some of what I believe to be the more interesting and philosophically relevant portions of "Mysticism" are overlooked. Barnard discusses the "ladder" or spectrum of experiences in James's "Mysticism" chapter from the lower, less extreme rungs up to the discussion of Dr. R. M. Bucke's trance-like experience, but instead of continuing on—there are twenty more pages in the chapter after the discussion of Bucke before its concluding remarks—Barnard finishes describing the ladder and moves on. James does end talking about spontaneous mystical experience, but continues on with Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim experiences, moves into an extended discussion of Christian mysticism and concludes with, among others, Dionysius the Aeropagite, Plotinus, Suso, Hegel, Eckhart, Boehme and the theosophist Helena Blavatsky, where the language of the mystics in question is at its greatest intensity. G. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 1997), p. 36.

passages in certain poems read when we were young, irrational doorways as they were through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them. The words now have perhaps become mere polished surfaces for us; but lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch the vague vistas of a life continuous with our own, beckoning and inviting, yet ever eluding our pursuit. We are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility.<sup>17</sup>

In this passage James succinctly describes the activity of poetic language and music. The goal of the poet is to draw the reader closer to the “vague vistas of a life continuous with our own.” James is saying that words do more than evoke the experiences of the writer: they also actively provoke sympathetic experiences in the listener or reader. James describes the movement of metaphorical language to be towards the individual as well as drawing the individual towards the now articulated experiences. The “doorways” allow mystery *into* the world; they present the mystical horizon to the reader/listener. The words beckon and invite the vague vistas, but the individual is also drawn after or desirous of such a “continuous life.” Both the language being used and the reader/listener must be alive to the message. The dynamic movement is bi-directional and approximates a union between the reader/listener and the experiences such language has expressed. It is never an absolute union; it “ever eludes our pursuit,” remaining a never-ending approximation. Unfortunately these poetic and lyrical aspects of mysticism that James touches on are often overlooked in favor of a focus on the more extreme, non-linguistic experiences. In the initial cases of the chapter at least, such as Luther’s insight into scriptural descriptions of sin or the power of poetic words, clearly words dynamically affect the sympathetic reader.<sup>18</sup>

The evocative abilities of poetic, mystical language prompt James’s analogy with music. Like mystical language, music expresses intimate experiences, communicating in vague ways by beckoning and calling.<sup>19</sup> From the listener’s perspective, music evokes memories, emotions, and vague experiences. However, James makes an even more specific analogy between music and paradoxical language. In “Mysticism,” after discussing figures such as Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Hegel, Boehme and Silesius, he writes:

In mystical literature such self-contradictory phrases as “dazzling obscurity,” “whispering silence,” “teeming

desert,” are continually met with. They prove that not conceptual speech, but music rather, is the element through which we are best spoken to by mystical truth. *Many mystical scriptures are indeed little more than musical compositions* [emphasis added].<sup>20</sup>

At this point of the discussion James is clearly not focussed on personal accounts of religious experience but rather language’s ability to perform and produce a response. Music and paradox speak mystical truth, but conceptual speech does not. Through paradox and contradiction, language is pushed to its logical limits and the reader/listener enters an ambiguous, poetic field of experience not unlike the experience of music. Similarly, we do not experience music in the same way we might experience working through and understanding a logical problem.<sup>21</sup> Paradoxical language and music push intellectual activities from the abstract end of the experiential spectrum aside and usher in feeling, while, as a result of being forms of expression, they still remain tied to the conceptual.<sup>22</sup> Although he assigns cognitive status to mystical language, the qualifier that mystical scriptures are “little more than musical compositions” suggests that James is not technically at home in the world of paradoxical mystical language, but is nevertheless fascinated by its expressive power.

While James shies away from claiming first-hand knowledge of mystical experiences, he nevertheless believes that a second-hand perspective is beneficial when it provides an illustration for those individuals whose first-hand access is denied. He recognizes that the second-hand perspective provided by mystical language directs the reader/listener to one’s own marginal regions of memories, feelings, and thoughts, thereby initiating sympathetic understanding. He is therefore suggesting that there is a modicum of participation reached through language.

At a climactic point in the chapter James responds to a quote from Helena Blavatsky’s *The Voice of the Silence*—a popular piece of theosophical literature at the time—whose title alludes to its relation to the paradoxical statements like “dazzling obscurity” seen above.<sup>23</sup> Whereas at the beginning of the chapter James discusses the less extreme, *hither* side of his spectrum, at a key moment of the mysticism chapter, when he has approached the *farther*, more extreme and ineffable end of his spectrum of

17. James, *Varieties*, p. 383.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 382.

19. It would be useful to investigate James’s understanding of music further; he mentions music frequently in the *Varieties*; he critically refers to monism as “mystical music” in *Pragmatism* and again connects a pejorative comment about monism to music in his late essay “A Pluralistic Mystic.” William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1975 [1907]), p. 76; William James, published in *Essays in Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1978), p. 178. Music evokes a notion of the vague that is either powerful, provocative and poetic or pejorative, muddled and obscure, depending on the context of James’s discussion.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 421.

21. This is not to say that thinking is not an aspect of musical composition or appreciation; it is rather to emphasize the lack of a necessary feeling element in intellectual activities such as symbolic logic, to take an extreme example. There are certainly logicians who would find aesthetic beauty and emotional inspiration in discovering logical solutions to persistent conundrums, but this is not a necessary component of the solution. Likewise it is possible there are composers who compose for purely mathematical reasons, but music generally serves as an example of requiring the combined efforts of artistic and intellectual abilities.

22. For an excellent comparative discussion of mystical language and paradox, see Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: Chicago U P, 1994).

23. James quotes Blavatsky: “When to himself his form appears unreal, as do on waking all the forms he sees in dreams; when he has ceased to hear the many, he may discern the ONE—the inner sound that kills the outer.... And then to the inner ear will speak THE VOICE OF THE SILENCE.... Thou art THYSELF the object of thy search....” James, *Varieties*, p. 421.

## First-hand Experience and Second-hand Language in the *Varieties* by David Perley

mystical experiences, he still discusses the power of words. He writes:

These words, if they do not awaken laughter as you receive them, probably stir chords within you which music and language touch in common. Music gives us ontological messages which non-musical criticism is unable to contradict, though it may laugh at our foolishness in minding them. There is a verge of the mind which these things haunt; and whispers therefrom mingle with the operations of the understanding, even as the waters of the infinite ocean send their waves to break among the pebbles that lie upon our shores.<sup>24</sup>

The climax of the discussion of mysticism in fact revolves around linguistic psychology and language's effect on the individual; language is an intermediate between profound experiences of mystics and the appreciative understanding of the reader/listener. It is at this point that we reach the limits of James's comfortable familiarity with the topic. Music and language evoke responses from the verge of the mind and communicate by "stirring chords" within, i.e., they resonate with aspects of the inner life. What is evoked lies on the borderlines of the mind and the messages sent are cognitively vague, i.e., they are on the borderline between the extremes of thought and feeling.

Although "Mysticism" appears as a series of descriptions of personal experiences that progressively increase in religious intensity, experiences that typically suggest a turn away from language, James begins the chapter with a discussion of words and music and ends it with a discussion of words and music. This should sound odd coming from an essay dealing with the *Varieties*, a work known for its autobiographical accounts that stress experience over words, but it appears he is not only interested in the experiences of these accounts but also in the techniques of language that convey experience. Mystical language enriches the sympathetic minds of those shut off from the direct and ultimate experiences typically understood as constitutive of mysticism by hinting at cognate experiences of the vague and obscure as well as the transcendent. By viewing analogies the second-hand "outsider" can see similarities between their experience and that of mystical virtuosi. Such a second-hand experience is a "feeling-thought," something on the tip of the tongue, something potentially definite, with a seemingly stable core that becomes increasingly unstable around its edges. It is precisely such fringed phenomena that James was most drawn to in psychology and philosophy. He was intrigued by the ability of powerful language to be an isthmus between individuals, between thought and feeling and ultimately between philosophy and mysticism, insofar as philosophical and mystical language both attempt to find words for what lies hidden within the intimacy of first-hand experience.

James's stylistic taste is clear through his textual choices. As I mentioned, one of Seigfried's successes in *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* is the

emphasis on metaphor as a key feature of his thought due to his belief that analogy is a primary function of the mind.<sup>25</sup> My interpretation further augments her work by extending the discussion from philosophy and poetry to mystical language, a subject that tends to be overlooked in her study. James gravitates towards powerful metaphors in mystical language because such language radically articulates the depths of experience and the limits of reason. This suggests that the heights of reason ultimately shade off continuously into the depths of feeling. While the motivations for philosophy and mysticism might be ultimately different, he admires the techniques of mystical writers because philosophers also attempt the difficult and Sisyphean task of articulating realities and experiences that can never be completely conceptualized.

In "Mysticism" James's own metaphorical abilities augment the metaphors of mystical language and the combination reveals the power of language. Mystical language beckons, and James dynamically shows us how. He philosophically relates to the mystical, immediate experiences of others through his own ability to be highly sympathetic. If the fruits of his philosophy resemble the experiences of some mystics, then his philosophy was, in his mind, on the right track; that is, he had philosophically and, by extension, linguistically fulfilled at second-hand what he himself could not achieve through a specifically profound first-hand mystical experience.<sup>26</sup> His writing partially makes up for the experiential shortcomings of thought itself; he attempts to provide the missing dimension of the stereoscope, rather than being a view "outside the instrument." Language always misses some of the myriad aspects of immediate experience, but it is still useful when it directs a sympathetic reader or listener towards further and broader experience. Mystical experience might be experienced first-hand as transcendent, or something else specific, but for James mystical language provided the bridge between the feelings of his own inner life and those of others.

—David Perley is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto. He is grateful to his supervisor, Graeme Nicholson, Hunter Brown, Paul Jerome Croce, Randall Albright, Charlene Haddock Seigfried, and an unnamed Streams reader for their feedback in the process of writing this article.  
E-mail = david.perley@utoronto.ca

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction*, p. 133.

<sup>26</sup> John E. Smith corroborates this when he explains that James was "convinced that his sympathetic temperament could make up for whatever he lacked in the way of direct acquaintance." Introduction. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. xvi.

# *Freedom and Morality in William James's Philosophy*

by Celal Türer

The issue of freedom has many aspects: psychological, anthropological, moral, metaphysical, religious, and sociological. This implies that “freedom” is a many-sided term, and reflects various facts and realities from life. However, it is in ethics where the term “freedom” has been debated the most. As an essential part of human life, the moral life requires freedom as people’s own will in their actions. This implies that the lack of freedom in action will remove moral responsibility from that person’s actions. Thus, most ethicists have accepted freedom as a fundamental part of morality. In the history of philosophy, the freedom-morality relation has been considered in various ways. Freedom has been described as an idea, an existential state, a postulate, or as a life. In this essay I will examine the implications of freedom and morality in William James’s philosophy.

Although James’s philosophy begins with a psychological understanding that puts personal tendencies and demands in the forefront, his work is valuable in the realm of morality or ethics, using the method of pragmatism and the metaphysics of radical empiricism, which made it possible for his system to widen the field of philosophy.

James defines pragmatism as:

*The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, categories, supposed necessities: and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.*<sup>1</sup>

He sees pragmatism as an attitude, a method that uses the practical outcomes as a criterion to define ideas and beliefs. According to James, “it unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work.”<sup>2</sup> James gives an example from the Italian pragmatist Papini to explain that pragmatism is a method that follows practical results in order to define the meanings of philosophical arguments:

[I]t lies in the midst of theories, like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume: in the next some one on his knees praying for faith and strength: in a third a chemist investigating a body’s properties. In a fourth a system of idealistic metaphysics is being excogitated; in a fifth the impossibility of metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms.<sup>3</sup>

The function of this pragmatic method is to put forth meanings and truths of ideas and beliefs for practical consideration. This is why an idea is true and good if only it has a meaning, a benefit, for some functional role in our life and leads us to some concrete results. On the contrary, a philosophical proposition or system does not pragmatically have a meaning if it has only abstract results. For this reason, meaning and truth are related to personal practical conclusions.

James takes pragmatism to be a philosophy that obeys experienced facts. This serves as a large frame for returning philosophy to more effective paths. While others focus on the abstract, untouchable sides of life, without mentioning any concrete parts of it, he sets forth arguments for a philosophy which can improve concrete cases of life and then to refer to these changed concrete cases.

James admits that radical experience and pragmatism might seem to be different from each other, yet he believes that both are related to each other in terms of support, guidance, and explanation. This is why pragmatism and radical empiricism prepare a good philosophical ground for James’s moral understanding in general, and the freedom-morality relation in particular. James’s radical empiricism deals with factual matters, and is concerned not only with scientific experiments but also with rough experience. It considers any kind of experience, such as religious and mystical moments, although these experiences must be fruitful for human life. He leads his empiricism away from the “vicious intellectualism” of absolutism which dissolved moral entities into abstractions and also away from “half-hearted” British empiricism<sup>4</sup> which veered towards positivism and the atomization of experience. James instead implicitly follows the American philosophical tradition, including Emerson and Thoreau,<sup>5</sup> for insisting on the acceptance of all of one’s experience.

James states that philosophy must indeed be empirical in its most radical manner. To know reality, we must plunge into our own experiences. We must accept and respect sensational life; view the relations of time, space, difference, likeness, change, rate, cause, and effect as integral members of the sensational flux; see that the essence of life is its continually changing character; respect our own vital functions, such as our enthusiasms; and see that only concrete things exist. We must respect all the facts of our moral and intellectual lives, too. On all levels, James encourages us to accept data ranging from the concrete physical perception to the specific “necessary truths” which are given to us in our various mental, moral, and aesthetic experiences. In this way, his empiricism is truly radical.

Empiricism, presented in this way, accepts the existence of moral data, which are facts of experiences. These kinds of inputs have a realm that is introduced to us by

1. William James. *Pragmatism* (New York: Longmans, 1907), pp. 54-55 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975, p. 32].

2. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 53 [Harvard UP, p. 32].

3. James, *Pragmatism*, *Ibid*.

4. William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, 1911), p. 198.

5. See, e.g., Bernard P. Brennan, *The Ethics of William James* (New York: Bookman, 1951), p. 20.

experience. The realms of moral data do not need additional support. When they are experienced, they should be accepted as self-sufficient until new experience supersedes them, just like any other experience.

Pragmatic realities can be structured, and this structure can be heightened by the flow of experiences that are put into terms. James describes reality as a totality of our mental creations, and he does not understand "reality" as another word for the universe, since he does not hold that the universe is our mental creation. The world as we know it is our construction of it. That is why reality for each person can be defined by his opinion about what constitutes satisfactory realities. The term "satisfactory belief" is a very important term in James's philosophy. Things may be satisfactory for only so long, however. Consequently, realities can be created merely by somebody believing something.

Believing in strict determinism is to be condemned, because it banishes moral responsibility from the universe, as he wrote in his early "The Dilemma of Determinism" (1884). If determinism were true, it abolishes any purpose for feelings of remorse or exhibitions of regret over a wrong action. Determinism reduces human beings to a state of ethical indifference, which inevitably brings moral dissolution in its train. In determinism the future has no ambiguous possibilities hidden in its womb: the part we call the present is compatible with the only one totality; the thing ought not to be, not something else in its stead. This conception of a state that nothing else can be in its stead defines the universe as a place in which *what ought to be* is impossible. Chance is banished from the determinist universe; individual actions make no difference. Determinism cannot permit the existence of moral responsibility in experience. When determinist philosophers are planning for the future, they use the terms "chance" and its synonyms like "possibility," "risk," or "suddenness" as negative and unsuitable words. This is how James explains why he is not a Hegelian, since "moral judgment may lead us to postulate as irreducible the contingencies of the world."<sup>6</sup>

James's pragmatic world is a world of chances: not the dead chance of the materialist, for whom chance finally meant nothing at all; and not the certain chance of the rationalist, for whom chance was something that could be grounded; but rather an open chance, a working chance for chance. James's world contains a promise given without a covenant of assurance or a contract. When one looks forward in the radical empiricist world, one finds freedom. This is the new element that James's philosophy adds to his revisioned psychology: freedom as the pragmatic possibility of experience.<sup>7</sup>

Pluralism creates a better place for the human soul, transforming the universe's monolithic nature into a cos-

mos whose parts possess some relations to each other. As James says:

Pluralism, in exorcising the absolute, exorcises the great de-realer of the only life we are at home in, and thus redeems the nature of reality from essential foreignness. Every end, reason, motive, object of desire or aversion, ground of sorrow or joy that we feel, is in the world of infinite multifariousness, for only in that world does anything really happen, only there do events come to pass.<sup>8</sup>

The relation between metaphysics and ethics should be well grounded in order to satisfy the moral needs. James repeats in various writings that his preference for pluralism is ethically based. For example, he states, "Your relations with it [a pluralistic universe], intellectual, emotional and active, remains fluent and congruent with your own nature's chief demands."<sup>9</sup>

James's pluralism provides a place for moral experience by escaping from atomist approaches, characterized by Hume's empiricism. While radical empiricism affirms that each form is the external form of reality and the form of temporal appearance, it does not thereby imply that we have an incoherent multiverse. As a matter of fact, the radical empiricist sees that every part hangs together with its immediate neighbors, though it may not be an immediate connection with every other part, however remote. James tries to reconcile traditional empiricism, which claims that everything is loose and separate and disconnected, with rationalism, which claims that everything is connected with each other, by means of his radical empiricism. This approach accepts the existence of all kinds of experiences and gives a special importance to pluralism. In other words, his arguments reject the approach that gives a reality for outer connections and claims that inner connections does not have a reality. According to James "*reality MAY exist in distributive form, in the shape of an all but of a set of eaches, just as it seems to.*"<sup>10</sup> "Pragmatically interpreted, pluralism or the doctrine that it is many means only that the sundry parts of reality *may be externally related.*"<sup>11</sup>

Since the pieces of the perceptual flow are not identical with each other, there is always a new and different thing in each experience. "Time keeps budding into new moments, every one of which presents a content which in its individuality never was before and will never be again. Of no concrete bit of experience was any exact duplicate ever framed."<sup>12</sup> Novelty in experiences provide opportunities to change the universe. Like biological mutations, our part in the universe can be accumulated and constructed in specific directions. If one selects the right directions, one could make a better world for one's self and one's fel-

6. William James, "On some Hegelisms" [1882] in *The Will to Believe and other essays in popular philosophy* (New York: Longmans, 1897), p. 294.

7. See, e.g., Bennett Ramsey, *Submitting to Freedom: The Religious Vision of William James* (New York: Oxford U P, 1993), p. 119.

8. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Longmans, 1909), pp. 49-50.

9. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 319.

10. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 129.

11. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 321.

12. James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, p. 148.

low people. If one picks the wrong directions, the result would be a worse-off world. Conditioned freedom of parts makes reality and declares the existence of changes in the world. Our experiences convince us of the existence of such changes. The destiny of being is open and undetermined, which makes human freedom and morality possible.

Understanding the universe as an unfinished issue is an essential part of the pluralist approach that suggests the universe is not static. James denies intellectualism, for it "is the belief that our mind comes upon a world complete in itself, and has a duty of ascertaining its content; but has no power of re-determining its character, for that is already given."<sup>13</sup> The universe's total character can be expressed only by hypothetical and not categorical propositions. This unfinished character of the universe means that, as Brennan says, "the introduction of novelty, which comes in, as we empirically discover, not by jump and jolts, but by leaking 'insensibly,' as James says, because 'adjacent experiences are always interfused.'"<sup>14</sup>

Acceptance of freedom is an unavoidable result of renewal, chance, pluralism, and becoming in the universe. Since human consciousness deals with the world, and consciousness is a selective power that absorbs world, consciousness is the peak of awareness or sensitivity that can help us to build a better world with our selective powers. Freedom is, then, the capacity to use these powers.

Although the prevailing notion of freedom has a more political context, James concentrates initially on the core of human life that grounds all social and political ideas. James does not need to prove the existence of freedom. He accepts its existence as a postulate. Freedom must be recognized as simply essential to the reality of morality; our obvious factual experience of morality is our experience of freedom.

Since freedom is a factor in the selective powers of consciousness, our first act of freedom in all inward propriety ought to affirm that we are free. We are free to control things and ideas in the world today, because thinking and participating in any action is a matter of making selections that do not depend on other people's actions. Freedom belongs to all humanity and the world. Our use of freedom involves our taking a moral perspective in order to make appropriate decisions.

Our sense of freedom is an inseparable aspect of our moral efforts and expectations. The meaning of our lives mostly depends on the reality of freedom. People seek the meaning of life in their own struggles for survival, and to concretize this meaning, freedom should be available. If one does not realize one's goals and does not work for them, one cannot actualize one's existence and wholeness. One makes selections to realize certain aspirations. If these selections jeopardize another aspiration, choices need to be made.

Human freedom is formed in a social environment.

The roots of freedom are personal, but freedom pushes one into the worlds of others. Each person seeks the meaning of his or her own life, but sometimes our options conflict with each other. In other words, one's selection may clash with someone else's selection if there are encounters and chaos in social system. James addresses this most succinctly in his "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (1891).

There should be a balance between our use of freedom and social integration. Our meanings of life can be developed together if only we maximize our freedom and respect others' freedoms, too. When we study freedom, we must proceed to a higher political stage so that it has a social and political dimension necessary for harmonious society. Consequently, the realization of freedom and unity depends on both social and personal dimensions of life.

Freedom is not an agent that intrudes into the natural process. The existence of freedom merely implies that there may be more than one possible alternatives that tempt our will and is actualizable. The alternatives that do tempt our will are vastly fewer than the physical possibilities that we can coldly fancy. Freedom means only the character of novelty in each fresh activity-situation. In such situations, we can say that there are many alternatives before us, making our decisions difficult.

Our actions and our beliefs have causal effects on the universe. James writes that faith "may be regarded as a formative factor in the universe, if we be integral parts thereof, and co-determinants, by our behavior, of what its total character may be."<sup>15</sup> A world that answers to our causal effects is neither the best nor the worst world. "The world...may be saved, on condition that its parts shall do their best. But shipwreck in detail, or even on the whole, is among the open possibilities."<sup>16</sup>

Freedom helps us fight against evil. Conditions that would permit the salvation of world still exist, and we can try to fulfill these needed conditions to achieve salvation. James talks about the world like a great arena, a battleground, where mankind is called upon to contribute freely, for better or worse, to the development of that potentially melioristic world which may be made to emerge. Our world, moreover, is probably a world that is enveloped in a larger world of some sort, of whose residual properties we cannot at present frame any positive idea. As James says, "we our selves may be authors of genuine novelty [,which] is the thesis of the doctrine of free-will."<sup>17</sup>

—Celal Türer is an assistant professor of philosophy at Erciyes University, Kayseri, Turkey.  
E-mail = cturer@erciyes.edu.tr

<sup>13</sup>. James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, p. 221.

<sup>14</sup>. Brennan, *The Ethics of William James*, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup>. James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, p. 225.

<sup>16</sup>. James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, p. 142.

<sup>17</sup>. James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, p. 145

# *James's Empirical Assumptions: On Materialism, Meliorism, and Eternalism*

by Henry Jackman

William James is well known for his rejection of materialism and his lifelong defense of what he referred to as, among other things, the "religious hypothesis."<sup>1</sup> Part of this defense can be understood in terms of James's frequent identification with the "sick souls" who are highly sensitive to the evils in our world, rather than the "healthy minded" who are more disposed to either ignore or downplay the significance of such features.<sup>2</sup> The sick soul feels a deep need for assurance that lies beyond the material world, and so a dissatisfaction with materialism would be understandable. However, James often gives the impression that even the "healthy minded" should be dissatisfied with materialism, and that the problems with the view go beyond the emotional needs of the sick soul. This more general critique of materialism may seem to be in tension with the often naturalistic tenor of James's writings, and those of us who are more sympathetic to the naturalistic side of James obviously hope that James's critique of "philosophical materialism" can be separated from those elements of his thinking that are essential to his pragmatism.

Such a separation is possible once we see that James's critique of materialism grows out of his views about its incompatibility with the existence of objective values. Objective values (as James understands them) are incompatible, however, not with materialism in its most general form (according to which the natural world is the only one), but rather with a materialism that understood the "material world" in terms of the sciences of the late nineteenth hundreds. In particular, one could not defend the potential objectivity of value in the way that James hoped if one endorsed the particular "pessimistic" cosmology characteristic of the sciences at the turn of the last century. Consequently, if one rejects certain "empirical assumptions" associated with the science of James's day, the possibility of a type of "melioristic materialism" opens up, and *this* sort of materialist could still understand value in the way that James proposes.

1. Most famously in *The Will to Believe and other essays in popular philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1979) [originally published in 1897], *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1985) [originally published in 1902], and *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1975) [originally published in 1907].

2. James, *Varieties*, chapters IV-VII. See *The Divided Self of William James* by Richard Gale (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 1999) for a useful discussion between the tension in James's philosophy between those aspects of his work that fit with the healthy minded perspective and those that seem to stem from James's sympathy with the sick soul.

Given the state of the sciences of the time, it may have been reasonable for James to reject any sort of thoroughgoing materialism, but if James's view that even the healthy minded should reject materialism stems partially from his *empirical* rather than from purely *philosophical* commitments (empirical commitments that a contemporary pragmatist need not share),<sup>3</sup> then one should be able to endorse materialism while keeping James's philosophical perspective intact.

James's philosophical dissatisfaction with materialism was connected to his understanding of value as ultimately resting on nothing more than our subjective practice of *valuing*. With this picture of value in place, James takes the existence of permanent and objective values to require our ultimate and eternally ongoing agreement about what to value. The real existence of objective values in the world thus requires the real endurance of a valuing community, and if all valuers disappear, the existence of objective value will have turned out to have been an illusion.

This line of thought shows up the most explicitly in James's discussion of ethical value in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," where ethical objectivity is understood as requiring an *actual* settlement about what competing preferences should be satisfied. As he puts it, "If one ideal judgment be objectively better than another, that betterness must be made flesh by being lodged concretely in someone's actual perception."<sup>4</sup> A merely *potential* settlement clearly does not seem to be enough for James, so if our valuing practices die out before any settlement is made between competing preferences, then they can never be more than just that, competing preferences with no "objective" fact about which one should have been satisfied.<sup>5</sup>

This strand of thought runs through James's writings on all normative issues. In particular, it can also be understood as affecting his views on the nature of truth and representation. Objective or "absolute" truth requires that we *actually* reach a stable consensus about various questions, and it is not enough for there to be one which we *would have* reached had we been able to investigate longer.<sup>6</sup>

3. Another empirical commitment of James's that motivated his rejection of materialism may have been his belief in the existence of telepathy (for a discussion of this, see Marcus Ford, "James's Psychological Research and its Philosophical Implications," *Transactions of the C.S. Peirce Society*, Summer 1998, Vol. XXXIV, No. 3: pp. 605-624). James's views about free will and determinism may have given him other reasons to be uncomfortable with the scientific worldview (though, once again, such concerns are less pressing on the "healthy minded").

4. James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 147 [Longmans 1897 ed., p. 193].

5. For a more extensive discussion of James's recipe for generating objective values from our subjective starting point, see Henry Jackman, "Pragmatism, Normativity and Naturalism," forthcoming in Paulo Ghiraldelelli (ed.) *What is Pragmatism?* (Londrina: South America Theology Institute, 2004). Also available at [www.jackman.org](http://www.jackman.org).

6. This is discussed, once again, in Jackman, "Pragmatism, Normativity and Naturalism."

Consequently, if our investigative practices die out, truth and meaning die out with them. If truth is tied to taking true and objectivity to agreement, then objective facts require that the consistent taking-true be understood as a permanent feature of reality, and this "taking" as a permanent part of reality is a possibility that James takes materialism to rule out.

For James, then, reality's "normative" dimension requires the existence of evaluators. In the absence of another evaluator, or group of evaluators, to pick our ideals up, the demise of our evaluative community brings with it the demise of ideals such as truth, goodness, and beauty. Further, it is not as if things really were true, good and beautiful, but stopped being so once we disappeared. Rather, it turns out that nothing ever was "really" any of these things. Life turns out, after all, to have been "meaningless." James is an "eternalist" in the sense that he requires judgments about value to be eternal for them to be objective.<sup>7</sup> For the eternalist, the ultimate passing away of our evaluative practice is thus a very "bad" thing, and James takes such a passing to be an inevitable consequence of the truth of materialism.

James's assumptions about what materialism ultimately entails for us ("the picture of the last state of the universe which evolutionary science foresees") can be seen quite clearly from this passage from Balfour's *The Foundations of Belief* which James quotes at length in his *Pragmatism*:

The energies of our systems will decay, the glory of the sun will be dimmed, and the earth, tideless and inert, will no longer tolerate the race which has for a moment disturbed its solitude. Man will go down into the pit, and all his thoughts will perish. The uneasy consciousness which in this obscure corner has for a brief space broken the contented silence of the universe, will be at rest. Matter will know itself no longer. 'Imperishable monuments' and 'immortal deeds,' death itself, and love stronger than death, will be as though they had never been. Nor will anything that is, be better or be worse for all that labour, genius, devotion and suffering of man have striven through countless generations to effect.<sup>8</sup>

7. Of course "eternal" can be used to mean either *outside of time* or *everlasting (but not atemporal)*. James's view only requires that our valuing practice be eternal in the latter of these two senses. This is fortunate, since any materialist would be hard pressed to make sense of any valuing practice being eternal in the former sense. (Thanks to an anonymous referee from this publication for encouraging me to stress this.)

8. A. J. Balfour, *The Foundation of Beliefs* (London: Longmans, Green, 1895), p. 30. Quoted in James, *Pragmatism*, p. 54 [Longmans 1907 ed., p. 104]. See also the following passage from James's "Reason and Faith": "the *last* word everywhere, according to the purely naturalistic science, is the word of Death, the death-sentence passed by Nature on plant and beast, and man and tribe, and earth and sun, and everything that she has made." In *Essays in Religion and Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1982), p. 127.

If, as suggested above, James's eternalism requires that our practices endure through time for any sort of normative order to be sustained, then the materialist's claim that these practices will forever disappear strips everything of its possible meaning. By contrast, James feels that precisely such ideals can be underwritten by religious faith. As he puts it:

The notion of God...however inferior it may be in clearness to those mathematical notions so current in mechanical philosophy, has at least this practical superiority over them, that it guarantees an ideal that shall be permanently preserved. A world with God in it to say the last word, may indeed burn up or freeze, but we then think of him as still mindful of the old ideals and sure to bring them elsewhere to fruition; so that, where he is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things.<sup>9</sup>

God preserves precisely the evaluative practice that the normative order needs to keep up.<sup>10</sup> It is our *ideals* (rather than our *existence*) that the religious hypothesis is concerned with, and as James puts it in his Harvard lectures from 1906-07, while the "truth of materialism in any form...must mean the final defeat of ideals; the truth of mind-supremacy...must warrant the final triumph of those ideals."<sup>11</sup> Mind supremacy helps ensure the final triumph of our ideals since mind is (at least for James) an essentially valuing substance, and so mind supremacy makes valuing a permanent feature of the universe.

However, while James claims that "Materialism means simply the denial that the moral order is eternal, and the cutting off of ultimate hopes,"<sup>12</sup> what he really has in mind is the particular cosmology associated with the materialism of his contemporaries. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James ties pessimism about our future (and how it effects the present) explicitly to the cosmology associated with current science.

The lustre of the present hour is always borrowed from the background of possibilities it goes with. Let our common experience be enveloped in an *eternal* moral order... let faith and hope be the atmosphere which man breathes in;—and his days pass with zest; they stir with prospects, they thrill with remoter values. Place around them on the contrary the curdling cold and gloom *and absence of all permanent meaning* which for pure naturalism and the popular science evolutionism of our time are all that is

9. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 55 [Longmans ed., p. 106]. An almost identical passage shows up in James, *Varieties*, p. 407 [Longmans 1902 ed., p. 517].

10. As James makes clear in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (in *The Will to Believe*), God also underwrites our hope that we will eventually reach the convergence of our ideals required to make values objective.

11. William James, from *Manuscript Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: 1988), p. 398.

12. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 55 [Longmans ed., p. 107].

visible ultimately, and the thrill stops short, or turns rather to anxious trembling.

For naturalism, *fed on recent cosmological speculation*, mankind is in a position similar to that of a set of people living on a frozen lake, surrounded by cliffs over which there is no escape, yet knowing that little by little the ice is melting, and the inevitable day drawing near when the last film of it will disappear, and to be drowned ignominiously will be the human creature's portion. The merrier the skating, the warmer and more sparkling the sun by day, and the ruddier the bonfires at night, the more poignant the sadness with which one must take in the meaning of the total situation.<sup>13</sup>

There is, however, nothing *essential* to materialism that suggests that our practices, and thus our ideals, would have to die out.

We could, after all, adopt a more optimistic cosmology where an enduring community would survive eternally and preserve our individual ideals. Our sun may die out, but we may have moved on by then. We may be on a frozen lake, but the cliffs can be escaped. The sort of optimism embedded by the space program and much science fiction points to a "melioristic materialism" according to which humanity will certainly die out if we refuse to act, but can continue to thrive and flourish elsewhere if we have the will to do so.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, even the hope for personal immortality no longer seems out of reach for the materialist, who can soon hope that one could, through a succession of new bodies, live forever.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, James's feelings about personal immortality were never of "the keenest order" and he considered it "a secondary point", since if "our ideals are cared for in 'eternity'," he did not see why "we might not be willing to resign their care to other hands than ours."<sup>16</sup> So even if materialism were ill placed to underwrite our hopes for immortality (and so would be pessimistic on a *personal* level), it would still be in a position to allow for the eternal care of our ideals, and that seems to be all that James needs. After all, James only requires of God that he be "mindful of the old ideals and sure to bring them elsewhere to fruition,"<sup>17</sup> and, provided that we do not ultimately die out, future generations of ourselves could do precisely that.

James famously rejected both the optimism he asso-

ciated with absolute idealism and the pessimism he associated with materialism, favoring instead a type of meliorism where success was possible, but only if we worked towards it. However, there is good reason to think that, if anything, a materialistic framework is the one best suited for such a melioristic position. It has been argued above that James's eternalism is compatible with materialism, but it should also be noted that spiritualism typically involves more than the mere "letting loose of hope"<sup>18</sup> that James envisions.

Indeed, spiritualism most commonly underwrites the optimistic position, and James is no exception to this. James contrasts the optimistic view of the future that comes with religion and the pessimism associated with materialism in the following passage from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: "God's existence is the *guarantee* of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. This world may indeed, as science assures us, some day burn up or freeze; but if it is part of his order, the old ideals are sure to be brought elsewhere to fruition."<sup>19</sup> However, if meliorism is what we want, we should not embrace such a conception of God. Rather than merely letting loose hope, it is bound to encourage a type of complacency stemming from the confidence that our ideals will finally triumph whether we try to promote them or not.<sup>20</sup> If God's existence guarantees that "an ideal order that shall be permanently be preserved," then we need not strive to maintain it. The sick soul may need such an optimistic picture to prop it up, but the healthy minded seem able to make do with the more starkly melioristic alternative.

This is not to deny that there are versions of spiritualism that are friendlier to meliorism and pessimism. A pessimist could certainly have a conception of a higher power that was indifferent (or actively hostile) to our hopes and goals while we exist, and quite willing to forget us once we have gone. However, it is noteworthy that James is one of the few thinkers who defends a melioristic conception of the divine, and even he often seems to slide to a more optimistic conception of religious faith.

It should be noted, however, that the claim that materialists are better placed to be meliorists than most spiritualists need not entail that James should have, after all, been a materialist. There is, to say the least, no compelling evidence for the belief that our community will persevere through eternity. Consequently, our faith in such a possibility should be understood as, in James's terms, a "will to believe" case, and such cases require that there not be a preponderance of evidence going against the

13. James, *Varieties*, pp. 119-120, italics mine [Longmans ed., pp. 141-142].

14. This is not to deny that there are science fiction inspired versions of the future that are also quite pessimistic, but what both the optimistic and pessimistic views of the future share is the idea that, for good or ill, our future is open-ended, and is not necessarily bounded by the life of our planet.

15. Of course, such hopes rely on non-trivial assumptions about personal identity, but this is also the case with those views that we could survive through, say, the preservation of a non-material soul.

16. James, *Varieties*, p. 412 [Longmans ed., pp. 524].

17. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 55 [Longmans ed., p. 106].

18. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 55 [Longmans ed., p. 107].

19. James *Varieties*, p. 407 [Longmans ed., p. 517], italics mine, as noted above, almost the identical passage occurs in *Pragmatism*, p. 55 [Longmans ed., p. 107].

20. Unless we are also meliorists about God's existence. However, while James is certainly open to this idea at times (see James, "Is Life Worth Living?" in *The Will to Believe*, p. 55 [Longmans ed., p. 61]), this seems to be during his more 'healthy minded' moments, since such a conception of God would not give the sort of assurance he discusses in these passages.

belief in question.<sup>21</sup> The unsettled nature of current cosmology leaves our long, long, long-term future undecided in just the way required for our having the right to believe in our survival. Nevertheless, such melioristic materialism might have run too strongly against the received scientific wisdom of James's day for the option to be 'live' enough to be a will to believe case. If the sciences of the time seemed to conclusively rule out the possibility of a melioristic materialism, then moving the melioristic faith in the eternal preservation of our ideals to a less naturalistic context might have seemed the more reasonable option.

However, this raises the question of just how seriously James should have taken the cosmological speculation of 19<sup>th</sup> century science. If James really was an instrumentalist, and did not take the sciences of his day to be really tracking the underlying structure of the reality we experience, why did he take so seriously science's prediction that life would ultimately die out?

One suggestion might be that such cosmological speculation took place on a macroscopic level, and that James' instrumentalism applied only to theories that dealt with microscopic or otherwise 'unobservable' phenomena. Scientific theories about the things we actually do 'experience' must, on such a view, be understood realistically. However, James's "instrumentalism" should not be understood as stemming from such a positivistic prudishness about "unobservables" (so that if we had a single coherent theory of the world, we should still refuse to commit ourselves to the existence of the theoretical entities postulated in it). Rather, it is better understood as deriving from a recognition that we had a number of indispensable yet incompatible models of the world, no single one of which is adequate for all of our purposes, and no two of which could be 'absolutely true' together.<sup>22</sup> Our scientific models are useful instruments to cope with experience but their theoretical incompatibility prevents them from being viewed as absolutely true descriptions of reality. As James famously put it "Common sense is *better* for one sphere of life, science for another, philosophic criticism for a third; but whether either be *truer* absolutely, Heaven only knows."<sup>23</sup> All of the competing theories presented in the passage just quoted deal with the world on a macroscopic level, so there is no reason to trust cosmology more than atomic physics simply because it deals with the universe at the macroscopic level. However, if the presence of conflict is what justifies adopting an instrumentalistic attitude towards a science,

then widespread agreement about cosmological questions in James's time would legitimate a realistic attitude towards the sciences in question. It may have thus been the level of disagreement that distinguished scientific discussions of cosmological questions from similar discussions of, say, the world's underlying microstructure.

Nevertheless, given the nature of the topic (what will happen to the world billions of years into the future), one might have thought that no theory, whether it had competitors or not, could have been epistemologically secure enough to rule out all types of melioristic materialism. The cold version of the future that James presents may have had a good deal of support, but not so much that the warmer version could not still be a live option for us. Still, the liveliness of this option for us may be from our being brought up on science fiction and the Apollo missions, and this possibility may have been dead for James in precisely the way that, say, Islam was. He could have recognized it as a coherent possibility, but that would not be enough to make the option "live" for him.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that melioristic materialism, in spite of being a type of materialism, may still be compatible with James's "religious hypothesis." James's religious hypothesis was comparatively abstract, and involved no commitment to the details of any particular religious faith. Rather it involved the affirmations that (1) "the best things are the more eternal things" and that (2) "we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true."<sup>25</sup> While the religious hypothesis is incompatible with the pessimistic materialism of James's day (since the "best things" will not survive humanity's passing),<sup>26</sup> there is no compelling reason to think that a melioristic materialist could not endorse it. The materialist thus need not even argue that one should dispense with James's religious hypothesis. Rather, he can argue that James could keep his religious hypothesis and still be a materialist.<sup>27</sup>

21. For a more extended discussion of James's position in "The Will to Believe", see Henry Jackman, "Prudential Arguments, Naturalized Epistemology, and the Will to Believe" in *Transactions of the C.S Peirce Society*, Winter 1999, Vol. XXXV, No. 1: pp. 1-37.

22. This view of James's instrumentalism is defended in more detail in Henry Jackman, "James' Naturalistic Account of Concepts and his 'Rejection of Logic,'" Presentation at Meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, February 1999. Available at [www.jackman.org](http://www.jackman.org).

23. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 93 [Longmans ed., p. 190].

24. See James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 14 [Longmans ed., p. 3]. As he puts it elsewhere, "In general whether a given idea be a live idea, depends more on the person into whose mind it is injected than on the idea itself." (James, *Essays in Religion and Morality*, p. 157). Indeed, whether the possibilities embodied by melioristic materialism are live for one or not may be one of the features that distinguishes the "healthy minded" from the "sick soul."

25. James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 29-30 [Longmans ed., pp. 25-26].

26. As he puts it in his *Pragmatism*, at the end of the materialist story:

"absolutely *nothing* remains, to represent those particular qualities, those elements of preciousness which they may have enshrined. Dead and gone are they, gone utterly from the very sphere and room of being. Without an echo; without a memory; without an influence on aught that may come after, to make it care for similar ideals. This utter final wreck and tragedy is of the essence of scientific materialism as at present understood. *The lower and not the higher forces are the eternal forces*, or the last surviving forces of the only cycle of evolution which we can definitely see." (James, *Pragmatism*, p. 54 [Longmans ed., p. 105], first set of italics James; second set of italics mine)

### James's Empirical Assumptions by Henry Jackman

James's opposition to materialism, and even his conviction that materialism was not compatible with his "religious hypothesis," thus seems to rest on his assumptions about what empirical claims about the future materialism commits us to, and once such assumptions are given up, one can endorse a type of materialism that does not conflict with any of the particularly *philosophical* commitments that a healthy minded pragmatist should have. Whether such a view would satisfy a pragmatist who was also a "sick soul" is, of course, another story.<sup>28</sup>

That said, one might think that some of James *philosophical* commitments *should* be given up, and that he would be better off without his eternalism. If he were not an eternalist, one could be a Jamesian about value and a materialist even if one thought that humanity would eventually die out. Charity might thus seem to dictate trying to avoid attributing eternalism to James, since his purported eternalism seems much more counterintuitive than his empirical views about the future of the universe. However, while giving up eternalism would, ultimately, make for a more defensible position, it would serve less well as a reading of James's philosophy. In particular, implausible

as his eternalism might seem, giving it up would require some fairly drastic changes to his overall view. For instance, it would involve taking a more realistic attitude towards counterfactuals about "the agreements we would reach" in inquiries that may never actually come to a conclusion. Peirce, of course, famously adopted this approach and took it to be one of the main differences between his pragmatism and James's more "nominalistic" pragmatism. Perhaps James would be better off without these nominalistic inclinations, but they were dear to him, and his eternalism is the price he pays to keep them.

In conclusion, then, it is far from obvious that a pragmatist, simply in virtue of being a pragmatist, must give up on materialism. Of course, James (and many pragmatists) might still find a melioristic materialism far less satisfying than more traditionally religious views. That said, it is important to see that this is a fact about James, not one about his pragmatism itself.

—Henry Jackman is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Toronto's York University. He thanks Richard Gale, Randall Albright, three anonymous referees for this publication, and audience members of the December 2002 meeting of the William James Society for comments on earlier versions of this article.  
E-mail = hjackman@yorku.ca

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<sup>27</sup>. This "could" here being understood in the "logical" sense that materialism was compatible with James's other philosophical views. It may still be the case that James couldn't (in a more purely psychological sense) hold on to both materialism and the religious hypothesis.

<sup>28</sup>. See, for instance, James's worry that materialism could never satisfy those who feel the need for a being "who will inwardly recognize them and judge them sympathetically" in *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1975), p. 103 [Longmans 1909 ed., pp. 189-190].

## Book Review

David Harmon, *In Light of Our Differences: How Diversity in Nature and Culture Makes Us Human*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002, 224 pages, \$38.00.

Reviewed by Megan Mustain

In recent decades, concerns about the homogenizing effects of globalization on human culture have grown up alongside increasing warnings about impending large-scale losses in global biodiversity due to ecological mismanagement. David Harmon's *In Light of Our Differences* finds its starting place at the intersection of these crises, and through the investigation of what Harmon terms "biocultural diversity," seeks to underscore the practical, ethical, and theoretical importance of an attitude which takes full account of the interpenetration of the social and the ecological.

The book begins with an examination of the ways in which Western philosophy has failed to adequately account for diversity. Since Plato's time, Harmon tells us, we have been largely driven by a belief that "there must be an eternal world of Oneness where God and harmony reign...that earthly diversity therefore must be subordinated to the ideal of heavenly harmony" (6). And even our most praiseworthy attempt to confront the fact of diversity—the Great Chain of Being and its principle of plenitude—has failed by describing either a world without change, or a world where the "unbridled pursuit of individual idiosyncrasy" (16) leads us into the worst forms of egoism and ethnocentrism.

As our understanding of speciation and extinction grows, we are led to the unsettling realization that the best science of our day indicates that biological diversity is being threatened by our behavior. These indications, along with research which suggests that cultural diversity, too, is on the decline, leads Harmon to restate the questions and update their terms: How are we to define and assess diversity? What, if any, is the value of diversity? How do our experiences of natural and cultural diversity impact our personal, biological, and social viability?

As the subtitle of this book indicates, Harmon argues that biological and cultural diversity are integral parts of what it means to be human beings. He defines diversity as the range of difference to be found in the products of the natural and cultural processes of speciation and language genesis, respectively. Although we measure diversity by counting the number of distinct species and languages, Harmon's focus on diversity as an ethical principle leads him to profess that the *processes*, rather than the products, of evolution provide our moral imperatives. He looks to William James's psychological work as a link between the fact of the biocultural variety and the value of diversity as an element in the structure of human consciousness. James's contention that consciousness is an activity of selection from among "what is itself an undistinguishable, swarming continuum" (*The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1,

pp. 284-285) allows Harmon to put forth diversity as an ethical imperative on the grounds that this selective activity, the very essence of human consciousness, *requires* experiential diversity in order to function. The loss of biological and cultural diversity threatens the field in which consciousness functions, Harmon insists, and "our innate ability to distill sameness from diversity will begin to atrophy" (139). Extinction of species or languages diminishes the raw materials of evolution and, therefore, the medium through which the creative activity of consciousness operates. The ethical correlate of this observation becomes, then, "the world is better for the diversity it contains" (160).

Harmon is careful to avoid stepping into the contention that the world is better for *all* the things it contains, at least when it comes to species. The extinction of some species, most notably those which cause infectious diseases, is perhaps warranted on the grounds that their existence is so detrimental to human interests. But Harmon shrinks from advocating a similar stance regarding languages, claiming "no language is inherently inimical to human interests in general" (159). If we presume that Harmon is not overly narrow in his use of the terms "culture" and "language," and that he would concede that there is some sense in saying that there is a language and a culture of white supremacy, we are left to wonder why he would preserve the linguistic forces of destruction, but not the biological. Surely compelling arguments may be given here; Harmon simply fails to produce them.

Indeed, the incongruity in Harmon's treatment of the biological and the cultural is not confined to the consideration of planned extinctions. In many sections of the book, Harmon becomes entangled in a nature/culture dichotomy which serves to undermine his central thesis, namely, that biological and cultural diversity are irretrievably intermeshed. He ponders, for example, whether "generations of city-dwellers [might] become so detached from the natural environment that their interest in preserving nature will eventually wane," (94) implying thereby that the city is an unnatural environment. He suggests later that "real," "authentic" diversity is "that which evolved without conscious human direction" (143). Harmon's sentimentalism for what he claims was once a process of "unmediated cultural and biological evolution" (142) detracts from his overall aim to such an extent that, while reading, I found myself all but dismissing even the claims with which I would generally agree.

Harmon's inclusion of James's philosophy and the promise to make practical application of the work of a thinker so dear to my heart at once drew me to this book. Though I was disappointed to find that much of the section on James was made up of a concatenation of extended quotes from James's works with little in the way of elaboration, I applaud Harmon's basic insight that James has something to say to those of us concerned to understand the ways in which losses in the world's diversity impact the prospects for meaningful human life.

—Megan Mustain is a graduate student in philosophy at Southern Illinois University. E-mail = [mustain@siu.edu](mailto:mustain@siu.edu)