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Roy R. Behrens

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Table of Contents

Mysticism ("Rainbow Blesser")
by Cher Lynn <www.cherlynn.com>

The Ideal Life as a Life of Ideals: "What Makes a Life Significant"

by Eric Vogelstein

In "What Makes a Life Significant," William James expounds upon a kind of motivation that permeates one's whole life, and upon which all other motivation must be based if we are to live a spiritually satisfying, fully significant life. James's commentary amounts to a recipe for milking all the meaning out of the human condition so we can soak it up. According to James, such a life is twofold. We must first adhere to *ideals* that motivate us spiritually and actively. This is the basis of any meaningful life, since all we do is thereby greater than something done merely for our own sake. Our ideals must be novel, in that they reflect our individuality and the freedom that comes from nonconformity. Our ideals must also, however, have a significant degree of strength. This is what we might call *courage*—the steadfastness of one's ideals in the face of stark opposition, as well as constant vigilance and willful application of one's ideals in one's activity. Together, ideality and courage sustain a deep purpose, joy, energy, and compassion in one's life, which is nothing other than the full expression of what it means to be human.

IDEALITY

The most important result of consecrating one's ideals within an active, stern, joyful will, is that one begins to see the lives of others as manifesting their own willful ideals. James's "ancestral blindness" dissolves as we regain sight of *ourselves*, and the ability to relate to others in *their* novel ideality is nurtured by the ability to relate to our own. James indeed discovers a "principle to make our tolerance less chaotic": to activate ideals within ourselves, and as a natural consequence of that growth to recognize the lived ideals of others. A recognition of the common novelty of a life lived through ideals can engender real empathy; and might *that* not be the most novel and important ideal with which to furnish our virtuous will? Cannot the fruits of active ideality become part of one's ideals, indeed the *basis* of one's ideality? I believe this to be the real lesson to be learned from James's work here. If we cannot live a life of ideals, then we cannot live a spiritually satisfying life. And, in such a way, if we cannot relate fully to ourselves, then what hope do we have of relating in any significant way to others? One's life is significant to the extent that one's relationships are as they should be. And as the foundation of a proper relationship with anything else, we must learn how to relate to our own lives. The notion of a life lived actively through ideals fulfills that relationship. And once the seeds of ideality are in place, we can immediately begin to relate genuinely to others. Indeed, even before our ideals are fully settled, we may live actively through *the ideal of a life lived through ideals*, and as long as *that* notion is firmly within our hearts, we

can recognize with empathy the ideal lives of others in their own sacred novelty.

Of course, the most felicitous avenue towards the recognition of others in their active ideality is the recognition of our own. Yet sometimes the ideals and willfulness of another are so overwhelming, or so novel, or for whatever reason so conspicuous or interesting, that one cannot help but be taken aback and transformed. A new view is opened, and the human condition is empathized retroactively: one begins to see the possibility of one's own ideality through that of another. The significance of such an encounter is, of course, mitigated by one's ability to accept it, and to embrace novelty for oneself, i.e., by one's willingness to change. And if one is not so willing, then there is little hope. How, after all, can one *become* willing to change, if that itself is a change? If one is utterly unconvinced by the reality of ideality, then ideality can scarce be an option for that person. To tell this person, "Live heroically, through ideality!" would be like asking a staunch atheist to develop faith in God. It is not an easy task to revamp one's spirit, even in the case when one is willing, and let alone when one is utterly unsympathetic to such an enterprise. Thus, an important question becomes, How do we engender ideality in the first place? How do we show people that it is a realistic option for them? If one is in a spiritual crisis, then it might not be so hard. But what of those who are seemingly content in their non-ideal lives, in their sorrows and pains lived without purpose, and their joys lived for their own sake? What of those not-so-young men and women in whom the momentum of habit has grown virtually insurmountable? James offers nothing practical here; and yet maybe that is all there is to offer. Perhaps the ideal life must be nurtured rather than instilled. For a life lived through common heroism is nothing other than dream maintained and incorporated into real life. Perhaps it is of the same nature as childhood dream, merely in a form suited for adults. And as dream usually dies as innocence grows away, so does the ability to see oneself as a hero and as novel, to live a life of ideality within commonality.

By the time I was 21, I knew I wanted to study philosophy at the graduate level. I was, however, having trouble envisioning any substantial meaning behind such an endeavor. At times, it seemed like a trite diversion; the exercise of the intellect merely for its own sake. Could I justify devoting my energy to academia when I was aware of the real existence of suffering throughout the world, or could I only rationalize it? I was confronted with a mitigated analog of Tolstoy's distaste for intellectual and cultural pursuits, insofar as one takes them to be the mark of a meaningful life. They aren't *important*, but are merely "charming pastimes." What is important? Tolstoy thought that it was the unwavering will of common people, who struggle to survive and appreciate whatever good life affords them. I thought that it was an invariable will to help those in need, to whatever extent one's abilities and circumstances permit. The devotion of one's talents to the

alleviation of suffering is easily idealized, and meaning in such a life is not hard to find.

I was conflicted, however, because I still felt deeply drawn towards a life of scholarship and philosophical thought. I was looking for ideality in such a life, and I found it in a book that I had first read as a high-school senior, while taking Introduction to Philosophy at the local community college. The book is called *The Heart of Philosophy* by Jacob Needleman, and it reminded me that there is a real human need that authentic philosophy fulfills. Needleman believes that modern academic philosophy too often resembles the fossilized remains of what was once a living, breathing human endeavor – something to be experienced not merely with the intellect, but with one's entire being. The goal of real philosophy, says Needleman, is not to solve problems, but to experience questions. It is to initiate a deep and meaningful confrontation with oneself that blurs the line between the mind and the spirit. Such an event cannot spring from scholastics alone, but requires a more primary mental activity: *a sense of wonder*—something that the pragmatism and habit of adulthood have siphoned from most of us. Real philosophy nurtures such a sense. Well-fashioned intellectual curiosity can compliment and even enliven a sense of wonder, but it cannot replace it. Needleman tells us that authentic philosophy has no other task but to help people remember this very fact, to remember a part of themselves they too easily forget. To live a life in a world of wonder, and to help nurture and pass on that world to those who would have it, is the ideal Needleman helped me discover. Needleman was that rare individual who allowed me to recognize the ideality in my own life through the ideality in his. (The fact that we share the *same ideal* might have been instrumental; indeed being jogged into one's own ideality through the recognition of the ideals of another would seem impossible unless one sees some dimension of those very ideals in oneself.)

James, it appears, was correct when he observed that Tolstoy "does…overcorrect our social prejudices." The cultural-intellectual life is not *ipso facto* without meaning, nor do such pursuits rule out a meaningful encounter with life and humanity. It is the presence or absence of an ideal, in any life, that determines the potential such a life has for being truly significant. Ideality, however, is not sufficient for a meaningful life; to any ideal we must add the courage to live according to it.

COURAGE

According to James, a life lived without the pangs that allow for courage and bolster the willful in us, a life lacking the struggle that solidifies, deepens, and gives true meaning to our ideals, is lacking in significance. Does James think, after all, that a Chautauquan utopia would be an empty society, devoid of real human significance? He would, only if the utopians failed to *remember* their struggling ancestors, only if they failed to be in such a position as to embrace that struggle, braced by their ide-

als, if the need arose. To have no circumstance in which the will struggles in the fulfillment of its ideals is not to abolish that will altogether; but these utopians would have to remain vigilant in their preservation of heroism, since it would have nothing external to be tested by.

In this way, James's response to the question of what makes a life significant can be readily applied to the question of how we should form our society. James, it seems, would agree that a society is well-formed which significantly fulfills the lives of its people. With the previous discussions in mind, we can see that the foundation of such a society is twofold. First, the people must instill and reinforce the notion of active ideality. It must be made an *institution*. Then genuine relatedness can flourish, within an explicit knowledge and adaptation of the joyful, ideal novelty at the heart of the human condition. Such ideality must, however, remain firmly *within* the human condition. If ideality is its heart, then courage is its backbone, and only with a firm recognizance of the struggle implied by heroism can the human condition be celebrated and fulfilled. And while social and economic goods are to be striven for, only by incorporating real human heroism, novel at heart yet common to each of us, can we "make any *genuine vital difference*" in peoples' lives, in terms of what is truly important.

Perhaps James's theory of heroic ideality explains the subtle and yet, in some ways, rather radical transition in the level and scope of peoples' ideality in times of war, and especially after one's nation is thrust into war. Since September 11, for example, I have seen my friends, most of whom are generally distrustful of the government and none of whom are what one might call a patriot, become proud Americans. Why? Because they have been given the conspicuous opportunity to live according to an ideal; because they realized that they had taken their lack of ideality for granted. Now, they can no longer afford to lack a patriotic or moral ideal. The lack has been exposed. The extent of our ideality was tested, and we realized that there *was* something missing; not just now, but before as well. We had lived in the absence of an ideal that speaks to the magnitude and depth of the human condition; an ideal that extends humanity, pushes it to its profound extremes, and fulfills a need we didn't even know we had. Freedom. Democracy. Human rights. Justice. Equity. Tolerance. Since the attacks, many of us have learned how to incorporate such ideals into our lives, and how to make each our own, how to be novel in what before seemed almost cliche; and we're still working on living and being courageous according to their full extent as ideals. But we can now feel the importance, depth, force, and necessity of a life thus lived.

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"Their Facts Are Patent And Startling": WJ and Mental Healing (Part Two)

by John T. Matteson

Note: This is the concluding part of an essay, the first part of which was published in *Streams of William James*, Volume 4, Issue 1.

III. "A Certain Impediment in the Mind": James and the Limits of Belief

At the foundation of James's resistance to the legislation was a broader antinomian bent; he believed that law—any law—was an inadequate and potentially dangerous tool with which to approach matters of conscience and, more importantly, consciousness. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., James's illustrious friend and fellow member of the short-lived Metaphysical Club, famously declared in *The Common Law* that "The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience."[1] James certainly agreed that law as a system derived from experience, but this did not mean that he necessarily considered law a very adept describer of experience. In James's eyes, the fatal limitation of the law was that it was rooted in *logos,* that is, in verbal and logical symbolism. Consisting solely of verbal attempts to describe and categorize conduct, law is inherently a creation of the rationalizing, formula-creating portion of human awareness. But this system of verbal symbols can give only a pale, two-dimensional representation of lived experience. For James, the phenomena that could be rendered in terms of language were not the important ones; for the things that constituted the true, irreducible phantom of life, there were, there could be, no signs and symbols. A human being reasons and communicates reason by way of words and images. If, however, as James believed, there were aspects of awareness that cannot be represented linguistically, imagistically, or symbolically, then those aspects will forever evade explanation to other persons. Indeed, because people consciously understand in terms of words, the parts of the brain that do not operate in terms of language must remain incomprehensible to the parts that do.

Religion, as James understood it, was not rooted in sacred texts or statements of doctrine. It was, rather, much more closely allied to inexpressible feeling than to articulable logic. It seemed foolhardy to James for the law to attempt to regulate something that it could neither isolate nor comprehend. He wrote:

Common-law judges sometimes talk about the law, and schoolmasters talk about the latin tongue, in a way to make their hearers think they mean entities pre-existent to the decisions or to the words and syntax, determining them unequivocally and requiring them to obey. But the slightest exercise of reflexion makes us see that, instead of being principles of this kind, both law and latin are results.… [I]magine a youth in the courtroom trying cases with his abstract notion of "the" law, or a censor of speech let loose among the theatres with his idea of "the" mother-tongue, … and what progress do they make? Truth, law, and language fairly boil away from them at the least touch of novel fact.…Laws and languages…are thus seen to be manmade things.[2]

For James, the grandeur of faith lay in the fact that it existed before the letter, in three dimensions. To the believer, religion did not *explain* experience. It *was* experience. To express this notion, James offered an analogy to "a bill of fare with one real raisin on it instead of the word 'raisin.'"[3] The raisin might not suffice as a meal, but it was real in a way that its verbal representation could not be. Although one might naturally assume that the logical, linguistic, law-producing functions of the mind might be more easily applied to the spiritual life than to the world of things, the contrary was true. Far from finding itself "most at home in the domain of its own intellectual realities," it was precisely here that the logical mind "finds itself at the end of its tether. We know the inner movements of our spirit only perceptually. We feel them live in us, but can give no distinct account of their elements, …while things that lie along the world of space, things of the sort that we literally *handle*, are what our intellects cope with most successfully."[4] Therefore, let the law operate upon the tangible worlds of torts, contracts, and crimes; but should it try for a moment to regulate and coerce the workings of thought and belief, it would fail. Consciousness (as well as conscience) was multifarious and pluralistic; the law strove toward monism and uniformity. The strictures of the one were unsuited to the meanderings and wild flights of the other. Here, perhaps, was the greatest irony of James's defense of Christian Science. When James spoke against the Registration Bill, he argued for pluralism in its broadest sense: the right to choose one's own forms of worship and therapy, even at the potential cost of one's life. And yet the immediate beneficiaries of his effort, the mind-cure practitioners, numbered

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1. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., *The Common Law* (1881), *The Collected Works of Justice Holmes: Complete Public Writings and Selected Judicial Opinions of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, ed. Sheldon M. Novick (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995-), vol. 3, p. 115.

2. William James, *Pragmatism*, in *Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), pp. 591-92.

3. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in *Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), pp. 447-48. Hereinafter cited as *VRE*.

4. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, in *Writings 1902-1910*, pp. 741-42.

among the most fiercely monistic devotees of cosmic emotion the country had ever produced.

As spirited and selfless as James was in his fight against the Registration Bill, it is surprising to observe the private contempt he sometimes expressed toward those whose rights he publicly defended. The ungenerous remarks about Mary Baker Eddy and her followers that James inserted into his letters were noted in the first installment of this article. Moreover, his private statements at the time of the legislative hearings speak more of his enthusiasm for tolerance and intellectual laissez-faire than for the mind-curers themselves. In the aftermath of the hearings, he wrote a sharp answer to James Jackson Putnam's suggestion that he was "fond" of the mind-cure movement:

> It seems to me it is not a question of fondness or unfondness for mind-curers (heaven knows I am not fond, and can't understand a word of their jargon except their precept of assuming yourself to be well and claiming health rather than sickness which I am sure is magnificent) but of the neccessity [sic] of legislative interference with the natural play of things. There surely can be no such neccessity [sic]. From the general sense (?) of medical insecurity, a law can hardly remove an appreciable quantity.…the profession claims a law simply on the grounds of personal dislike. It is antisemitism again. It is the justification of Armenian massacres, which we have so often heard of late, on the ground that the armenians [sic] are so 'disagreeable.' The one use of our institutions is to force on us toleration of much that is disagreeable.[5]

Part of James's motivation, it must be noted, probably had nothing at all to do with the merits of mind-cure. His sympathies were apparently moved, as they often were, by the spectacle of a large and powerful concern – the medical profession – imposing its will on a weaker adversary. The year after he had defended the practitioners for the second time, James admitted, "I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms, and with the invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets.… The bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more mendacious is the life displayed. So I am against all big organizations as such, … and in favor of the eternal forces of truth which always work in the individual and immediately unsuccessful way, under-dogs always."[6] James loved the plucky smallness of the mind-cure movement; indeed,

he seemed to ascribe some of its apparent successes to its outsider status. He noted in *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* that popular acceptance might be mind-cure's undoing: "If mind-cure should ever become official, respectable, and intrenched, [its] elements of suggestive efficacy will be lost. In its acuter stages every religion must be a homeless Arab of the desert."[7]

But James's instinctive love of the underdog goes only part way toward explaining the marked differences between his public and private attitudes toward religious healing. It does not answer a fundamental question: what was James's true opinion of Christian Science and mental healing in general? This query cannot be settled by referring either to his public statements or his private letters alone. In the former, James knew that complete candor would compromise his effectiveness as an advocate. In the latter, he needed to reassure his more conventionally scientific comrades that he had not embraced beliefs that he knew would discredit him in their eyes.[8] James's true opinions on the subject cannot finally be understood until one has examined his history as an active seeker of mental cures. However, as will be seen, this conduct, too, suggests ambivalence. If there was such a person as "the real James" on the question of mental healing, that person was an unresolved contradiction.

George Santayana suspected a certain condescension, perhaps even an insincerity, in James's study of religious healing and his other psychic research. He accused his Harvard colleague of "religious slumming" and called *The Varieties of Religious Experience* "the religious slumming for all time."[9] Yet this was a slum that James visited not only in his writings but in many phases of his lived experience. In 1886, at the suggestion of a friend, James sought the services of a mind-cure "doctress" who "disentangles the snarls out of my mind."[10] Despite initial disappointment, James later averred that he had acquired "a new lease on youth" through her ministrations. In 1894, the year he first spoke out against the Registration Bill, James again sought mind-cure treatments, this time for relief "from … really awful melancholy."[11] In the summer of 1906,

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5. William James, "To James Jackson Putnam," 10 March 1898, *The Correspondence of William James*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2000), VIII, p. 351.

6. Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1996), pp. 248-49.

7. *VRE*, pp. 108-09.

8. James's son Henry, who edited his father's correspondence, was no more eager than James himself had been to emphasize James's personal fascination and sympathy with mental healing. Henry's editorial treatment of the Registration Bill controversy strives to depict James as a heroic, lonely champion of First Amendment freedoms. The possibility that James may have believed in the efficacy of mind-cure is steadfastly unexplored. See *The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), II, pp. 66-72. Cited hereinafter as *Letters*.

9. Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), p. 462.

10. William James, "To Alice James," 5 February 1887, quoted in Linda Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998), p. 211.

bothered by insomnia, he again employed a mind-curer, this time reporting a successful experience.

Although James did not refrain from disparaging religious healing in his letters to professional colleagues, he could sometimes bristle when he heard such denunciations on the lips of others. For instance, after his one meeting with Sigmund Freud, James came away with a sense of disappointment because "Freud had condemned the American religious therapy (which has such extensive results) as very 'dangerous' because so 'unscientific.'" James's monosyllabic response to Freud's opinion was "Bah!"[12] Moreover, when he was not writing to his professional peers, James's assessments of mind-cure were generally laudatory. An excellent example is a 1902 letter to Rosina Emmet, in which James explained the mind-cure theory "that health of soul and health of body hang together and that if you get *right*, you get right all over by the same stroke." James pronounced this idea "a great discovery."[13] James's disposition toward mental healing appeared to vary with his audience, perhaps even with his mood.

It is difficult to imagine ambivalences deeper than those that beset James on the subject of religious healing. He was so genuinely divided between a desire to belief and an incapacity to accept belief that it is difficult even to decide what is the most important question to ask. Should we ask why his scorn for the alleged "humbug" of Mary Baker Eddy and her followers did not cause him to keep silent when the Examination Bill was brought forward? Or should we ask why, in view of his spirited public defense of mind-cure and his continual resorts to its practitioners, he never formally committed himself to the movement? The answers to both questions seem to lie in James's philosophies of truth and tolerance — ideas not compatible with thorough devotion to a religious healing movement.

James and the Christian Scientists fundamentally differed as to whether truth is a static, knowable thing or whether truth inheres in process. In the vision of Mrs. Eddy, the nature of truth is so powerful and absolute that it renders the idea of the process of attaining truth relatively insignificant. For James, to the contrary, the dialectical process of seeking truth was more important than the end of the process. In James's view, the debate over the nature of truth must be kept forever alive and on the move, such that the arrival at any particular conclusion would negate the objective of the search, precisely because truth can not be regarded as a commodity whose value and identity have become

finally settled. The value of a search for truth resided, perhaps exclusively, in the search. No end to the search was either necessary or even especially desirable.

The Jamesian idea of truth as process demands tolerance and flexibility because it holds that all points of view are entitled to consideration. But this idea, in its dependency on tolerance, must reject the possibility of ever arriving at truth, because the establishment of truth would shut down the process of inquiry––a process too valuable in itself ever to be abandoned. The truth of an idea is recognized by no other quality than the usefulness of the idea to the person who holds it. Because truth can not be demonstrated by any means other than empirical usefulness, and an idea that has never been found useful before may be useful to the next person who tries it, James was forbidden by the premises of his own philosophy to reject even those ideas that he found to be logically absurd. For James realized that human minds, on a primitive, biological level, do not operate on strict grounds of logic. The most bizarre, extravagant falsehood may, at the right moment, give indispensable comfort to a person whom logic and truth would at that same moment destroy. It was crucially important not to decide the nature of truth for someone else.

Faith is sometimes perceived as intolerant because it requires the believer to assert her own correctness in the face of challenge. A believer may tolerate the existence of others who do not believe likewise. However, the believer courts peril if she accepts, as a valid possibility, the chance that her belief is founded on thin air. To declare its own correctness, faith must at some point deny other possibilities. This denial was impossible for James. In *The Will to Believe*, James offered a distinction between "live" and "dead" hypotheses. A live hypothesis was "one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed." A dead one, on the other hand, was a notion that "makes no electrical connection with [one's] nature––it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all."[14] The strange thing James observed was that there was no impartial way to distinguish the two according to their objective content. Hypotheses lived or died in the mind of the individual, not according to their merits, but depending on the particular biases of the person considering them. Because the truth of a religious hypothesis could not be rationally proven, the question needed to be referred to the emotions. James asserted the proposition in italics: "*Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds.*"[15] But the pluralistic mind of James was passionate in all direc-

11. Simon, p. 253.

12. William James, "To Theodore Flournoy," 28 September 1909. *Letters* II, p. 328. James did not point out, as Jacques Barzun later noted, that Freudian psychoanalysis was itself "the most elaborately scaffolded mind cure of them all." (*A Stroll With William James*. New York: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 232.

13. Simon, p. 311.

14. William James, *The Will to Believe*, in *Writings 1878- 1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992), p. 458.

15. James, *The Will to Believe*, in *Writings 1878- 1899*, p. 464.

tions; the intellectual and emotional house in which he lived was full of windows and doors, and he wanted them all to be open.[16] In editing his father's "literary remains," James had attempted metaphorically to preserve his father from death; he was no more eager to let the hypotheses of others die within him. To keep as many hypotheses alive as he could, James required a concept of truth that remained perpetually open-ended and never final, for to reach the end of the discussion meant killing hypotheses in multitudes. Mental healing, at least of the kind championed by Mary Baker Eddy, demanded the rejection of possibilities of which the material world gives powerful evidence, including the existence of imperfection, illness, sin, and death. For most people, these hypotheses are unconquerably alive; they are not even questions for "our passional nature," but are the most palpable matters of fact. James did not wish to foreclose the possibility of Christian Science for others; because it had evidently helped so many, it met James's criterion that ideas "become true…in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with the other parts of our experience."[17] Moreover, its very activism struck him as inspiring. "For the pragmatist," he wrote, "full truth [is] the truth that energizes and does battle."[18] The battling nature of Christian Scientist truth irresistibly appealed to James. On the other hand, its radical rejection of sensory evidence stopped him cold.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James was led to contemplate some problems that must be encountered by anyone who attempts a "science of religions." Imagining who the ideal scientist of religion might be, James stated the paradox that "the best man at this science might be the man who found it hardest to be personally devout."[19] Stating that knowledge about a thing is distinct from the thing itself and noting that, for example, to understand the causes of drunkenness is not the same as being drunk, James drew a distinction between clinical observation and lived experience. James had little doubt as to the side of the line on which he found himself. When he wrote of the quintessential religious scientist, keenly observing though never quite feeling the full force of his subject, James was writing about himself. It was not that he did not try to feel devout, he suggested; he simply found it impossible. As has been shown, James asserted his distance from the mind-cure movement by reassuring his audience that "we," as correct, respectable scholars, "are incapable of taking any part in [the contemporary vagaries of mind-cure] our-

selves."[20] If one senses the condescension in James's tone, one should also take account of its wistfulness. As Gay Wilson Allen has observed, James "longed for a religion, for faith in a spiritual world existing back of or parallel to the visible material world. Yet as a scientist he could do no more than accumulate data and hope for verifiable proof."[21] Near the end of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James commented, "I am almost appalled at the amount of emotionality which I find in it." In a seemingly apologetic tone, James conceded that his reader had been literally bathed in sentiment."[22] But James was only "almost" appalled, and the apology for his sentimentality went only so far. For James knew that it was only by the lowly channels of sentiment that he could get in touch with his healthy-minded subjects. But always the critical pitch of his intellect prevented a deeper identification and denied him the benefits of religious healing—benefits that he was so eager to observe and document in others.

With less than a year to live, James made perhaps his most sustained effort to achieve a religious cure for himself when he purchased a series of twenty-one treatments from a Christian Science practitioner in Boston. Two-thirds of the way through this therapy, James reported in his diary that he had felt a "Good mental effect." However, the physical symptoms remained unchanged. Nevertheless, true to his philosophy and self-reliant character, James blamed neither the practitioner nor the method of cure; all the failure resided with the patient himself. He wrote to Alice Runnells in December 1909, "I think there is a certain impediment in the minds of people brought up as I have been, which keeps the bolt from flying back, and letting the door of the more absolutely grounded life open. They can't back out of their system of finite prudences and intellectual scruples, even though in words they may admit that there are other ways of living, and more successful ones."[23] Words had again betrayed James. Not only had they proven insufficient as a means of comprehending and communicating true consciousness, but they also enabled the prudent intellectual to descend into self-deception, to talk a good game about wanting to dwell in the healthy-minded infinite, even when he was spiritually incapable of following through. There was deep irony in James's identification of his education and upbringing as impediments; surely this was the last thing Henry James, Sr., would have wanted them to be. But curiously, the impediment lay in the fact that James's mind had been given so many windows, opening upon so many contradictory vistas. As a thinker,

16. It is symbolically fitting that, when James purchased a summer home in Chocorua, New Hampshire, he hailed its "eleven outside doors" as one of its leading features. William James, "To Henry James," 1 September 1887, quoted in *Perry*, p. 173.

17. James, *Pragmatism*, in *Writings 1902- 1910*, p. 512.

18. James, *The Meaning of Truth*, in *Writings 1902- 1910*, p. 929.

19. *VRE*, p. 438.

20. *VRE*, p. 105.

21. Allen, p. 378.

22. VRE, p. 435.

23. William James, "To Alice Runnells," 15 December 1909, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

James had found indeterminacy and pluralism to compose the most satisfactory philosophical terrain; however, they failed him as a believer.

Epilogue

James succeeded in his effort to rescue Christian Science practitioners from the requirement of passing medical examinations; the Registration Bills were never passed. In the longer term, however, the success of mental healing as a movement has been mixed, and its story has been complicated. The most recognized embodiment of the movement, the Christian Science Church, has, in the view of at least one commentator, experienced steady decline since its zenith in the 1950s.[24] The reasons for the Church's gradual contraction are various, but part of the cause, the efforts of William James notwithstanding, may be traced to the continued antagonism of the legal system. Although the agitation to require practitioners to pass medical boards has long ago subsided, official sanctions relating to Christian Science practice have persisted in a different form, namely in the occasional criminal prosecutions of Christian Scientist parents who choose not to seek medical care for their critically ill children. During the 1980s, for instance, at least seven criminal cases were brought against such parents, the charges ranging from child endangerment to manslaughter.[25] Although the convictions in most of these cases were overturned on appeal, the chilling effect of these prosecutions on the religion is undeniable. Religious traditions are most effectively preserved when they are passed down through the family. When parents may observe and communicate these traditions only under threat of imprisonment and public disgrace, the faith cannot fail to suffer.

Just as significant in the apparent decline of Christian Science has been the paradox that, while the institution has faltered, its basic principles have acquired an independent life, albeit in diluted form, in the culture at large, such that they seem no longer to need a church to propagate them. As John K. Simmons has observed, the general message of positive thinking has flowed freely into the mainstream of American Protestantism, abetted by such self-help theologians as Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller. On a more secular level, Simmons cites such commercial mantras as "Just Do It" and "Be All You Can Be" as evidence of the belief that people can create their own perfected reality by readjusting their mental outlooks.[26]

The tangible nexus that James believed to exist between healthy-minded religiosity and physical wellness continues to be the subject of serious medical inquiry. The medical profession that, in James's day, appeared to look on mental healing with almost unanimous disdain, is no longer so monolithically resistant to exploring connections between faith and health – a softening illustrated by the fact that more than a third of America's medical schools now offer courses examining spiritual and religious influences on health.[27] In his book *God, Faith, and Health*, Jeff Levin alludes to approximately 200 studies for the proposition that "religious affiliation, whatever the religion, seem[s] to be associated with lower rates of disease and death." He concludes his own study with the assertion that "the weight of published evidence overwhelmingly confirms that our spiritual life influences our health."[28]

Levin's observation that these positive effects exist for believers of all affiliations presents a question of serious concern for the adherents of Christian Science and other metaphysically based churches: if the salutary effects of belief are available to all believers, what is to be gained by joining any particular church, especially one whose members have often to contend with social prejudice and, in extreme cases, with actual prosecution? In a society that warms quickly to the word "spiritual" but feels discomfort with the word "religious," it is hardly surprising that the bold, uncompromising declarations of Mary Baker Eddy should lose ground to the less demanding therapeutic messages of the new age. James was likely correct when he predicted that mind-cure would collapse at the moment it became "official, respectable, and intrenched." Yet he could hardly have prophesied the curiously ironic position of Christian Science in our time, its general outlook absorbed into everyday life, but its actual practice still the subject of harsh legal scrutiny.

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[24.] John K. Simmons, "Christian Science and American Culture," in Timothy Miller, ed., *America's Alternative Religions* (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 1995), p. 66.

[25.] James R. Lewis, *The Encyclopedia of Cults, Sects, and New Religions* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1998), p. 121.

[26.] Simmons, p. 67.

[27.] Larry Dossey, "Foreword," in Jeff Levin, *God, Faith, and Health: Exploring the Spirituality-Healing Connection* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), p. viii.

[28.] Levin, pp. 23 and 223. Other recent works that embrace a similar premise include Herbert Benson, *The Power and Biology of Belief* (New York: Fireside, 1997) and Deepak Chopra, *Perfect Health: The Complete Mind-Body Guide* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000).

Déjà Vu: "What Makes a Life Significant?"

by J. Lynn McBrien

> That element of tragedy, which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and understanding of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat; and we should die from that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.
>
> —George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 1871

> We have unquestionably a great cloud-bank of ancestral blindness weighing down upon us, only transiently riven here and there by fitful revelations of the truth. It is vain to hope for this state of things to alter much.
>
> —William James, "What Makes a Life Significant," 1899

Though I struggled through *The Principles of Psychology* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* wondering what I could possibly understand of this complex philosopher, I felt an immediate kinship with William James after reading "What Makes a Life Significant." Many years prior, I found the same sentiments in my favorite novelist, George Eliot, and the quote above from her masterwork, *Middlemarch*, has stayed with me for 20 years. Though James quotes Tolstoi but not Eliot, all three were contemporaries and kindred spirits. Their empathy for the working class and desire to truly understand the other resonates with my own personal journey and career goals.

Some of my childhood was spent living a half-hour from Chautauqua Institute, and my family would occasionally go there for concerts. James describes it well as "a foretaste of what human society might be, were it all in the light, with no suffering and no dark corners" (James, 1992/1899, p. 863). The sophisticated equivalent of mass media's "take me away" Calgon, Chautauqua and similar institutes can revitalize when one's aim is to go back, recharged, into the world. To stay in the utopian embrace is to stagnate.

Of course, James's departure from utopia led him to a keen, new observation, as it has done for me. I led a somewhat antiseptic life during my undergraduate years, indulging in my deliverance from adolescent cliques and the small-mindedness of the top 40 and Friday evening beer parties down deserted dirt roads. Suddenly, access to classical concerts, operas, plays, and lectures were a short walk from my dorm room, and I could find a handful of peers with similar interests. I chose challenging professors for my courses, and I filled semesters with literature, history, and philosophy offerings. Full fellowships for my master's, then for more graduate work at Trinity College Dublin kept me in a heady, intellectual daze. If I thought of the "other" at all, it was in the abstract.

Life in Ireland was a small introduction to reality for me, even while I studied the giants of Irish literature. As I walked along the Liffey to attend my classes in Trinity, I passed countless ragged traveler children along the sidewalks. By December I realized that in my 10 x 10 "bedsit" in a 200 year-old building with no central heat, cracks in the wall to the outside air, and a communal bathroom, still, I was living better than most people in the world.

One of many characters I discovered as a student in Ireland was Stephen Dedalus. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he found that he could not stay in that place of pure redemption, orderly and simple with its "White pudding and eggs and sausages and cups of tea. How simple and beautiful life was after all!" (Joyce, p. 145) In the end, he leaves Ireland, saying, "I go to encounter for the millionth time the *reality of experience* and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of our race" (Joyce, 1976/1916, p. 253, emphasis mine). Along with William James, Irish author James Joyce sees experience as a place in which the reality of human existence is shaped and recognized.

I was to learn that lesson, and soon. After leaving Ireland I married and gave birth to a 3-pound boy who was two months premature. He wouldn't allow me to be the textbook perfect mother. He never acquired a sucking reflex so I couldn't nurse, and he slept all day and fussed all night. He didn't bond with me, or with anyone else. Brendan kept pediatricians, child psychologists, child neurologists, and other specialists guessing for years. By the time he was nine months, I felt sure that my son was autistic, but no one listened. Instead, professionals told me it was just prematurity or ADD or atypical epilepsy. They prescribed medications that made Brendan ill, as the diagnoses were incorrect. Preschool teachers asked me what I did to make my child so unmanageable. Neighbors said he needed to toughen up. My brother said I needed to punish him. My parents wanted to avoid him. I became the other, along with my son, and people chose to judge us harshly rather than try to understand. I wished desperately to spend even one day in the mind of my son, just to have some idea of what his tortured mind was experiencing.

At nine years, Brendan became too violent to handle, and he was hospitalized for an agonizing month two hours from home. Meanwhile, I nearly depleted the shelves on special needs children in bookstores and discovered Asperger's Syndrome, a somewhat rare condition related to autism. I finally found a specialist who agreed that Brendan's symptoms did indeed match the syndrome. Ten years later, my son graduated from high school with honors, and he is now a college student

studying marine biology. He has learned to cope, but he will never experience the world and relationships in the way that I do, nor can I ever truly understand his otherness. Yet by respecting his humanity and struggle, I have been able to learn things that no "normal" person could ever teach me. Brendan's triumphs in Special Olympics also introduced me to the value, dignity, and joy of working with human beings who are typically outcast from an "educated" and cultured society, but who are as valuable as any Ph.D. student on campus.

My personal value of the "other" extends beyond those with special needs. James's discussion of working class experience and heroism reflects my own deep appreciation and gratitude for my mother's family. Uneducated and tough as nails, Mom's kin were the coal mining families who lived in one-room shacks dotting the western hills of Kentucky in the early half of the century. Grandpa Lowrey was a coal-car operator. I remember the large dent he had in the left side of his forehead, received when a car cable snapped and struck him in the head, nearly killing him.

Mom says the townspeople would point and call them "hillbillies." Her family was part of the "nobody others" who built the United States. These rough, poor, but proud people of the mines supplied fuel to keep the refined and educated people warm in their nice homes. I encounter similar people where I live, 40 miles east of Atlanta, well "outside the perimeter," a phrase used to distinguish the city and its sophistication from the less cultured towns outside of I-295. This is becoming less true as ongoing rapid growth causes residents to spill into the suburbs, but I am still certainly in an area that can feel countries distant from the culture of Emory University. My neighbors hang dead deer heads on their walls and decorate their yards with abandoned vehicles. They struggle from paycheck to paycheck. But they provide services—trash collection, septic tank cleaning, hay for my horses, construction, and much more— that are essential to the community. They love their children. They believe in their god and their country, and they have just as much right to respect as the powerful executives in gleaming Atlanta office buildings.

James begins by romanticizing the laborers, "enormous multitudes of them happy with the most perfect happiness, although deprived of what for us is the sole good of life" (James, 1992/1899, p. 869). He progresses, after describing the men with no trade, who must "sell to the highest bidder our mere muscular strength for so many hours each day" (James, 1992/1899, p.871) to state that "such hard, barren, hopeless lives, surely, are not lives in which one ought to be willing permanently to remain" (p. 872). For a while, he came to despise those of his own class: "It came about not only that the life of our society, of the learned and of the rich, disgusted me – more than that, it lost all semblance of meaning in my eyes" (p. 869). He then finds the redemptive element, not only in the lives of laborers, but also in those of his class, the educated, to be in combining an inner meaning, joy, courage, and endurance with an ideal, something conscious and unique to each person, and something which can be increased through education. James wrote, "Education, enlarging as it does our horizon and perspective, is a means of multiplying our ideals, of bringing new ones into view" (James, 1992/1899, p. 875).

James understood a significant life to be one in which some refinement, ideals, and strength of mind or body are all fused and working in an individual. Singly these qualities are not enough "to redeem one from insignificance" (James, 1992/1899, p. 877). While I might agree that this combination of education, introspection, and motivation can effect a distinguished life, I think that *significance* requires less. As the twentieth-century Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko writes in "People," "Not people die but worlds die in them" (Yevtushenko, 1990/1962 trans., p. 1148). The amount we do not know about others, our "certain blindness," prevents us from seeing the vast interior and significance of every life, but surely it is there: in the traveler children on the wet sidewalks of Dublin, in the Kentucky coal miners, in the hearts of men who must sell their brute strength just to buy food for the day.

This, however, is not James's final point. He continues by returning to that blindness and "the unhealthiness [that] consists solely in the fact that one-half of our fellow-countrymen remain entirely blind to the internal significance of the lives of the other half," with the result that poor and rich alike judge each other with malice (James, 1992/1899, p. 878). This problem remains true to this day, and mass media perpetuates it. Ethnic and racial stereotypes are most prevalent during "prime time:" "The eight o'clock 'family hour' is the least racially diverse hour on television. Only one in eight (13%) of the programs broadcast during this hour have mixed opening credits casts" (Children Now, 2001).

Information media may be more problematic as news selection reinforces bias, and people expect news reporting to be accurate. This fact struck me profoundly when I attended the United Nations World Conference against Racism in South Africa during August-September 2001. While there I learned for the first time about the plight of millions of Dalit in India, particularly the physical and mental abuse suffered by Dalit women. I heard a Roma woman describe the ways in which her people are denied education, housing, and jobs. I listened to a Kurdish woman describe 15 days of torture at the hands of Turks. A Colombian woman tearfully narrated how she had to watch her own brother be dismembered while alive, then finally beheaded. A Rwandan couple, one Hutu and one Tutsi, told how they escaped the slaughter of civil war but both witnessed family members be brutally clubbed, macheted, or shot to death. A young doctor from Mexico explained how

transnational corporations sent representatives to small villages to "befriend" the natives and learn about the medicinal properties of native plants; then they patented them and took away villagers' rights to their own plants and medicines. An Australian aboriginal woman informed attendees about the "lost generation," a time when thousands of indigenous children were stolen from their homes, jailed, abused, and made to be servants. A Pakistani student living in England described the riots near Manchester and ways in which the police supported the violence. An 84-year old sharecropper from the Transvaal told of his eviction two years prior when the farm owner said he was no longer useful, disinterred his daughter from the property, burned his house, and sent him to the street, where he now lives in boxes because he has no money.

These are the people to whom James refers when he quotes from Stevenson, "If I could show you these men and women, all the world over, in every stage of history, under every abuse of error, under every circumstance of failure, without hope, without help, without thanks, still obscurely fighting the lost fight of virtue, still clinging to some rag of honour, the poor jewel of their souls!" (Stevenson in James, 1992/1899, p. 870). It was for these people and millions like them that this UN conference was held. There was an opportunity to let the world hear the voices of the oppressed.

But this was not the news you read about the conference. If your source of information was the U.S. mainstream news, the only information you had for judging the conference was found in articles with these headlines: "Arafat: Summit must condemn Israel" (CNN, 2001); "Israel branded 'racist' by rights forum" (CNN, 2001); "U.S., Israel quit forum on racism: Language attacking Jewish state cited" (Washington Post, 2001); "The racism walkout: U.S. and Israelis quit racism talks over denunciation" (New York Times, 2001). One issue at the conference, the clash between Israelis and Palestinians, was made to look as though it were the only issue being raised, and headlines distorted the truth to make readers think that most of the conference attendees were anti-Jewish. The media presentation of that one element to the exclusion of other important discussions made it appear as though the conference had been "hijacked" by the Palestinians, when, in fact, the media hijacked the conference by unbalanced news selection.

CNN posted a "quickvote" asking, "Are the United States and Israel right to pull out of the UN racism conference?" (CNN, 2001) Sixty percent of respondents answered "Yes." I have to believe that if U.S. citizens had balanced reporting about the events at the conference, at least 60% would have loudly proclaimed, "No!" On that same day (and for two succeeding days), the web homepage of CNN ran a story entitled, "Mother Teresa underwent exorcism." It was difficult to find the stories about a major UN world conference, but a sensationalized story about a beloved, deceased nun made

the top of the cover page three days in a row. This is a case not of individual blindness, but of manipulated blindness. We believe what we are shown, and we often have to avidly search to find the perspective of the other. We also have to be made aware that there is another side for which to look. Most people do not think to search unless they have been trained to do so and have been shown why the search is critically important. In my own work, I am as intent as ever to continue pointing out the need for media literacy skills in the classroom, as in this media age particularly, citizens must be able to analyze information sources to eliminate some of the blindness created by the messages.

James closes his lecture as he opened it, with a plea for his audience to remove their blinders, and in so doing, to become tolerant and respectful of the other. In his introduction, he states, "The first thing to learn in intercourse with others is non-interference with their own peculiar ways of being happy, provided those ways do not interfere by violence with ours" (James, 1992/ 1899, p. 861). He continues by saying that judging others is the basis for "most injustices and cruelties." My trip to South Africa taught me how my own thoughts and fears are shaped by stereotypes. Friends and family thought I was crazy to fly to South Africa unaccompanied, and they were genuinely worried about my safety. I began to wonder if I should cancel. I found myself fearful as I drove along roads where many locals were walking in crowds as the sun set. I worried when my gas tank got low, as I'd have to interact with attendants who spoke little English at the petrol stations.

My fears were unfounded. The people I met in South Africa, Black and White, were kind and helpful. One pulled me out of a sand dune I could not avoid while traveling to remote Sodwana Bay. Black guards and an Indian parking lot attendant helped me find my car when I became lost late at night after attending a stadium concert. Young children politely pounded on my car window at a one-lane bridge in the Drakensberg Mountains to sell me colorful animals they made from river clay. Yes, there are certainly violent people in South Africa, as there are in the United States, Japan, Ireland, and everywhere. I am as likely to meet them in one place as in another. Stereotypes cause one to miss the beauty of the individual.

James concludes by wishing that rich and poor men could see each other through unprejudiced eyes: "What tolerance and humor, what willingness to live and let live, would come into the world!" (James, 1992/1899, p. 880) I concur with James that the goal is to help people go beyond the surface to learn about, appreciate, and cherish the other. I am back in school in order to spend the remainder of my life working in human rights education. Its essential element is motivating people to understand what it is to be somebody else, the "other," whom I have both been and have tried to come to know, understand, and love.

Perhaps human rights education is the "So what?" of my life. But I do not believe so. In fact, it is only one part. Eventually it may distinguish my life. But if not, was my life worth living? Absolutely. I do not know that there is anything beyond this life. Like James, because I find it impossible to accept a ready-made dogmatic explanation of the universe, life, god, and eternity, I must ask the questions, "Is life worth living?" and "If yes, why?" And like James, I must loudly proclaim an affirmative answer. As he says in *The Will to Believe*, "Need and struggle are what excite and inspire us; our hour of triumph is what brings the void" (James, 1992/ 1899, pp. 491-492). The desire to make the world a kinder, more peaceful place, less wealth and consumer-driven, is what inspires me and is what I hope to pass on to those whose lives I touch. And that is truly enough to make life significant, even if, in the end, the flesh passes only to dust.

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Note: This essay won the 2002 William James Society essay contest for "What Makes a Life Significant?"

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Saint Francis

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On the Reality of Evil: A Jamesian Investigation

by Sami Pihlström

Introduction

Just keep your eyes open and take a look at the world you live in. It is not difficult to notice the overwhelming amount of evil – undeserved and unnecessary pain, suffering, and death – that your fellow humans must endure. If this world was, as Christians and many other religious believers hold, created by an omnipotent, omniscient and infinitely good Being, God, then why does all this evil exist whose existence is an undeniable factuality? Why doesn't the benevolent God, the creator of all things, simply eliminate such terrible evil, if s/he can?

This reasoning has often been taken to be fatal to theism. The existence of evil presents a logical argument against the theistic world-picture (i.e., the metaphysical view according to which there is an omnipotent and benevolent creator, a personal God), because it seems, as innumerable authors have pointed out, that given the amount of evil there is around us, the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience and (absolute) goodness cannot all be simultaneously present in any single entity. Thus, there cannot be any such being, traditionally conceived as God, that possesses all these attributes. Either an omnipotent God should eliminate evil, or if s/he does not do that, then s/he cannot be wholly good. Even those who do not regard this as a logically demonstrative atheological argument may admit that the existence and amount of evil in our world provides a powerful set of evidence against theism. In a way or another, the intellectually oriented theist ought to be able to explain away this troubling feature of the world which (in her/his view) was created by a benevolent God. In a word, God's failure to eliminate evil should somehow be *justified*, if one is going to believe in God.[1]

The present investigation does not contribute to the solving of the problem of evil in the terms of the traditional debate. No "theodicy" will, thus, be provided. Rather, I shall employ William James's pragmatist views in my attempt to find a promising perspective from which the reality of evil could be approached, and I shall compare his position to that of some other interesting philosophers who have rejected the standard "theodicist", or justificatory, approach. The meta-level result that emerges from this investigation is the need to see metaphysical and ethical issues and arguments as deeply entangled. In this way, an engagement with the problem of evil leads us to the heart of James's pragmatism.[2]

Pragmatism and the Reality of Evil

Recognizing the reality of evil is a key element of James's pluralistic pragmatism and its conceptions of religion and morality. In James's philosophy, the critique of monism, especially the attack on monistic Hegelian absolute idealism, is a recurring theme. An investigation of the problem of evil can show how he argues against monism and defends pluralism on an ethical basis and how, therefore, his pragmatic metaphysics is grounded in ethics (rather than vice versa).

James was troubled by the problem of evil already at an early stage of his intellectual career, during the time of his spiritual crisis in 1870. He felt that the existence of evil might be a threat to a "moralist" attitude to the world, leading the would-be moralist to despair. "Can one with full knowledge and sincerely ever bring one's self so to sympathize with the total process of the universe as heartily to assent to the evil that seems inherent in its details?", he wondered, answering that if so, then optimism is possible, but that for some, pessimism is the only choice.[3] Already at this stage, he saw a problem with the idea of a "total process" optimistically taken to be well in order. According to Ralph Barton Perry, both optimism and pessimism were impossible for James, because he was "too sensitive to ignore evil, too moral to tolerate it, and too ardent to accept it as inevitable".[4] It is here that we can perceive the seeds of his *melioristic* pragmatism, which he later developed in more detail. This view says, in short, that we should try to make the world better, bravely fighting evil, without having any guarantee that the good cause will win.

James worked on this issue throughout his life. In the eighth chapter of the posthumously published *Some Problems of Philosophy*, he offered several arguments against monism, among them the argument that monism creates (and will not be able to solve) the problem of evil.

[1.] For a number of formulations of the problem of evil, and for some ways in which it has been faced by theists, see, e.g., Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), chs. 19-30. For an earlier but not at all dated account of some of the main opposing perspectives, see the exchange between Richard Swinburne, D.Z. Phillips and John Hick in Stuart C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell UP, 1977), chs. 4-6. For introductory discussions, see B.R. Tilghman, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), ch. 5; and Robin Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), ch. 7. I shall return to some of these authors' arguments in due course.

[2.] This paper can actually be seen as a sequel to another recent article of mine, "William James on Death, Mortality, and Immortality," forthcoming in *Transactions of Charles S. Peirce Society*, Fall 2002. It is also one more case study in a series of explorations of the fruitfulness of reinterpreting pragmatism in general and James's pragmatism in particular in a (quasi-)Kantian transcendental manner. For this broader project, see my two books, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology: Understanding Our Human Life in a Human World* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), especially chs. 5-6; and *Kant Naturalized, Pragmatism Transcendentalized* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus/Humanity Books, forthcoming in 2003).

Evil, for pluralism, presents only the practical problem of how to get rid of it. For monism the puzzle is theoretical: How – if Perfection be the source, should there be Imperfection? If the world as known to the Absolute be perfect, why should it be known otherwise, in myriads of inferior finite editions also? The perfect edition surely was enough. How do the breakage and dispersion and ignorance get in?[5]

That pragmatists, unlike monists, must take evil and imperfection seriously, refusing to (as James elsewhere put it) "be deaf to the cries of the wounded", was presented as one of the ethical motivations grounding the entire pragmatist method in the first lecture of *Pragmatism*. Referring to the actual fate of some unhappy people, such as an unemployed and discouraged ill man who found his family lacking food and eventually committed suicide, James argued, against "the airy and shallow optimism of current religious philosophy",[6] that what such desperate human beings experience "*is* Reality": "But while Professors Royce and Bradley and a whole host of guileless thoroughfed thinkers are unveiling Reality and the Absolute and explaining away evil and pain, this is the condition of the only beings known to us anywhere in the universe with a developed consciousness of what the universe is."[7] Thus, idealist, optimistic philosophers "are dealing in shades, while those who live and feel know truth";[8] a Leibnizian theodicy with the postulation of a harmony of the universe is "a cold literary exercise, whose cheerful substance even hell-fire does not warm".[9] In order to overcome this ethically unbearable condition of the philosophical (and theological) tradition, James offers pragmatism as a practice-oriented philosophy which can, pluralistically, accommodate all sorts of experiences, including genuine loss and evil – without tolerating such experiences.

Despite its first appearance as an active "pro-life" philosophy made for the brave and the strong, pragmatism is primarily a philosophy not for the "healthy-minded" person who "deliberately excludes evil from [her or his] field of vision",[10] but for the "sick soul" who views evil as the very essence of life and of the world.[11] Already in the context of this distinction, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James attacked the monistic, pantheistic view which saw the foundation of evil in God.[12] He found it necessary to allow the world "to have existed from its origin in pluralistic form" in which evil is, though real enough, not essential and is something "we might conceivably hope to see got rid of at last".[13] Toward the end of the chapter on the sick soul, we find one of James's most elaborate discussions of the attitudes we can take to the evil we find in our world:

The method of averting one's attention from evil and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. […] But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes; and even though one be quite free from melancholy one's self, there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth. […]

It may indeed be that no religious reconciliation with the absolute totality of things is possible. Some evils, indeed, are ministerial to higher forms of good; but it may be that there are forms of evil so extreme as to enter into no good system whatsoever, and that, in respect of such evil, dumb submission or neglect of notice is the only practical resource. […] But provisionally, […] since the evil facts are as genuine parts of nature as the good ones, the philosophic presumption should be that they have some rational significance, and that systematic healthy-mindedness, failing as it does to accord to sorrow, pain, and death any positive and active attention whatever, is formally less complete than systems that try at least to include these elements in their scope.

3. Notebook sheets from 1870, quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James: Briefer Version* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1964 [first published 1948]), pp. 120-121. Here James saw that fighting evil – holding that "though evil slay me, she can't subdue me, or make me worship her" (p. 121) – required freedom of the will, and was thus connected with the key problem of his spiritual crisis. I have to neglect James's struggle with freedom here, although the topic will turn up again in relation to his pluralism. (Freedom, of course, was necessary, according to James, for any serious ethical philosophy. Perry notes that "moralism" is just one name for what might be described as James's "fundamental seriousness"; see p. 388.) For a discussion of the problem of evil in relation to the determinism vs. indeterminism and compatibilism vs. incompatibilism controversies, see Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism*, ch. 7.

4. Perry, *Thought and Character*, p. 122.

5. William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy* (1911), (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1996), p. 138. [Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1979, p. 79]

6. William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), ed. by Frederick H. Burkhard, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1975), p. 20. (Reissued in a one-volume Harvard edition together with *The Meaning of Truth*, 1978.)

7. Ibid., p. 21.

8. Ibid., p. 22.

9. Ibid., p. 20.

10. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902) (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 88.

11. Ibid., p. 131 ff.

12. Even though Christian theism, for instance, is of course not pantheistic (but on the contrary emphasizes that the created world is distinct from its divine creator), James eventually saw little difference between the theist's affirmation of the infinity of God and the pantheist's conception of the world as a whole as divine. The problem of evil is equally pressing for both.

13. Ibid., p. 132.

The completest religions would therefore seem to be those in which the pessimistic elements are best developed.[14]

Pluralism, a picture of the world as a place in which evil is a reality but in which an individual can make a difference by fighting against it, is thus already present in the *Varieties* but reaches its culmination in the latest works James published: *Pragmatism*, *A Pluralistic Universe*, and *Some Problems of Philosophy*.[15] Throughout these books, he tried to find a philosophical expression for the feeling aptly described by Perry, viz., that "the redeeming quality of life was that heroism which can exist only when there is a live evil to be resisted and overcome; and thus to recognize in evil an indispensable condition of good is to condone it".[16] The possibility of a "real fight" with genuine risks, which can make life meaningful, is what pluralism, as opposed to monism, attempts to make sense of philosophically. Far from being peripheral to James's pragmatism (understood primarily as a method of "making ideas clear"), pluralism is in fact its principal metaphysical outcome; the pragmatic difference that a clear-sighted acknowledgment of the reality of evil makes in our lives is that monism cannot, ethically, be true *for us*, because in order to be genuinely ethical agents we must be able to make a difference in resisting the evil whose reality we take seriously.

Now, arguably, even James saw evil as a "condition of good" in the sense that it was required in order for there to be such a real fight. Did he, then, "condone" evil, against his own warnings? We can perceive a tension in his view at this point, manifested, e.g., in the quote from the *Varieties* given above. On the one hand, it is wrong – morally wrong and therefore also metaphysically suspect – to simply "accept" evil as a condition of goodness, as the background against which goodness may become visible, as some theodicists might put it; on the other hand, James's own pluralism, insisting on the need for a real fight against the evil we must refuse to tolerate, is committed to the reality of evil as its own condition of intelligibility. In a world without evil there would be nothing to fight against, nothing for a "moralist" to do, no vital tasks for religious or ethical thought to perform. Thus, evil has a "rational significance" even in James's own pluralist and anti-theodicist view.

This paradox was in a way seen by James himself as early as 1870, when he was recovering from his personal crisis: "I can't bring myself, as so many men seem able to

do, to blink the evil out of sight, and gloss it over. It's as real as the good, and if it is denied, good must be denied too. It must be accepted and hated and resisted while there's breath in our bodies."[17] So, evil presents us with a seemingly impossible task: we must both accept it and try to make it absent, eliminate it, destroy it.[18] This "must" is an ethical one, but it can also be seen as the "must" of what Kantian philosophers call transcendental principles. The necessity to both accept and to resist evil, as James viewed it, can be interpreted as a transcendental requirement for the possibility of living a meaningful, ethically structured life. Monistic attempts to explain evil away are examples of ethical corruption.[19] Insofar as we are able to live a meaningful life, monism *cannot* be an adequate attitude to that life. This argument of course by no means shows that life *is* meaningful but only that *if* it is, then monism must be rejected.

Among recent commentators dealing with evil in relation to the monism vs. pluralism opposition, some (though not many!) have taken the side of absolute idealism, however. T.L.S. Sprigge, offering a rich systematic and historical comparison between the philosophies of James and the British Hegelian F.H. Bradley (probably the most famous absolute idealist among James's contemporaries, and thus, along with Josiah Royce, one of James's main intellectual enemies), finds himself forced to think that evil is a necessary part of the absolute, which exists necessarily and is "good and worthwhile", though "not improved by the evil it must contain".[20] From the Jamesian point of view, this compromise helps very little, because it gives up our human freedom to really fight evil. As the absolute exists necessarily, whatever we do is already necessarily contained in the absolute's scheme of things; there is no genuine difference we can make with our individual contributions. Sprigge does not seem to think this is a problem for the absolute idealist, but even he admits that Bradley had moments that show his "lack of concern with evil", against which James's moralistic and voluntaristic attacks are legitimate.[21] Indeed, Bradley himself pointed out, in a letter to James on September 21, 1897, that he found

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14. Ibid., pp. 163-65.

15. In addition to the passages of *Pragmatism* and *Some Problems of Philosophy* already cited, see William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), ed. by Frederick H. Burkhard, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1977), *passim*. In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James once again argues that the idealists' absolute inevitably leads to the problem of evil (among other difficulties) and proposes his own pluralistic view as an alternative.

16. Perry, *Thought and Character*, p. 237.

17. Ibid., p. 388.

18. One might argue that this is problem even if we only want to *understand* what evil, or wickedness, is all about. As Mary Midgley puts it, "We have somehow to understand, without accepting, what goes on in the hearts of the wicked." (Midgley, *Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay* [London and New York: Routledge, 2001; first published 1984], p. 4.) Midgley's work is an important contribution to the understanding and acknowledgment of the natural reality of evil as part of human life, combined with a setting of the task to reject or fight against this natural feature of our existence.

19. Cf. T.L.S. Sprigge, *James and Bradley: American Truth and British Reality* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1993), p. 181: "[The Absolute] includes all evil, and has [...] in a manner willed it. Thus absolute idealism forces us to think that all partial evil is greater good misunderstood. And to think thus, in James's opinion [...] is morally corrupting."

20. Ibid., p. 558; also pp. 579, 581.

21. Ibid., p. 572; also pp. 181, 581.

"abominable" the view that "a moral agent designed sinners like myself and in short planned the evil of the world and is responsible for it".[22] It remains a mystery how the conclusion that the evil that must be acknowledged was somehow "planned" or at least tolerated in the world's absolute system can be avoided, if one believes in Hegel's or Bradley's monism. James's argument appears to be ethically superior to Bradley's – and from a pragmatic perspective, this, of course, is a crucial consideration in its favor, not merely ethically but also metaphysically (or, rather, in such a way that metaphysical and ethical considerations become inseparable). In this way, pragmatism makes metaphysics dependent on ethics, rather than (only) vice versa.

What we, a hundred years later, can see James as attacking in the passages I have quoted above is, among other things, the standard (analytic) philosophy of religion in which the reality of evil is primarily presented as an intellectual problem for theism, calling for a theodicy. Few philosophers endorse a monistic idealism any longer, but this by no means makes James's arguments inapplicable in the contemporary situation. We should bear in mind that, for James, the acceptance of evil is actually a precondition for a viable form of religion. It is, as Sprigge puts it, "only on the basis of a pluralistic metaphysics that we can have a morally reputable theism", according to James.[23] Of course, James notoriously gave up some of the standard assumptions of (Christian) theism, particularly the conception of God as omnipotent and infinite. The finite nature of his God(s) – his view of God not as the absolute sovereign of the universe but as a "great cosmic fighter for goodness" who is not responsible for evil[24] – is the most important dividing issue between his views and those of traditional Christian theologians and philosophers of religion.[25] No wonder that James's pluralistic resolution of the problem of evil has not been particularly popular either in his lifetime or in more recent philosophy of religion, excluding works by some of his commentators.[26] Indeed, in traditional theology, the philosophical choice required by the reality of evil has been conceptualized as a decision between monistic and dualistic world-views;[27] James's pluralistic option has seldom been seriously considered.

On the other hand, the view that evil and suffering are, in God's larger scheme of things, all to the good has not been universally accepted in the theological tradition, as one might perhaps be led to think after having read James. Instead of opting for James's solution (viz., a finite God within a pluralistic metaphysics), one might argue that it is actually an important aspect of God's completeness and absoluteness that s/he is able to suffer along with the suffering humanity. This idea of a "suffering God" has been developed, for instance, in the tradition of process theology (though not exclusively there), a tradition which, as is well known, has to some extent been influenced by the pragmatist tradition.[28] It remains to be seen whether a successful synthesis of these points of view could be possible, against the theodicist mainstream of analytic philosophers' contributions to the problem of evil. Instead of attempting any such synthesis here, I shall further illuminate James's position, both its virtues and difficulties, by briefly comparing his argumentation (which I am willing to interpret as transcendental) to that of some prominent anti-theodicist thinkers closer to our own days. Such a comparison will throw some more light on the way in which James's views are radical in relation to standard analytic engagements with the problem of evil, even if we disentangle them from the peculiar idea of a finite God.

James's Transcendental Argument: Some Comparisons

The pragmatist and pluralist position examined in the previous section can be summarized as an outcome of a transcendental argument in a quasi-Kantian fashion.[29] The reality of evil is understood by James to be a necessary condition for the possibility of meaningful, valuable or good life (in a pluralistic metaphysical setting), including any true religious meaning one may find in one's life. Evil is not intrinsically, metaphysically, necessary to the universe itself, as the absolute idealist would be forced to hold (given that each part of the absolute is equally necessary as the absolute as a whole),[30] but it is necessary in a presuppositional sense: provided that there is a legitimate role for a religious (theistic) outlook to play in people's *weltanschaulich* lives (which is something we might take

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22. Quoted in the appendix to Sprigge, ibid., p. 587.

23. Ibid., p. 197.

24. Ibid.

25. For useful discussions of the idea of a finite God, in relation to James's preference for pluralism, see Patrick Kiaran Dooley, *Pragmatism as Humanism: The Philosophy of William James* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1974), pp. 148-161; Edward H. Madden, "Introduction", in William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), ed. by Frederick H. Burkhard, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1979), pp. xi-xxxviii (especially pp. xxv-xxx); Wilma Koutstaal, "Lowly Notions: Forgetting in William James's Moral Universe", *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 29 (1993): 609-635; and Sprigge, *James and Bradley*, especially pp. 236-237.

26. Shortly after James's death, a discussion of the problem of evil "faithful to James's spirit and method" appeared, though: see Hugo Oltramare, *Essai sur la prière d'après la pensée philosophique de William James* (Geneva: H. Robert, 1912); for this reference, see John R. Shook, *Pragmatism: An Annotated Bibliography 1898 – 1940* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1998), p. 257. (I have unfortunately been unable to find Oltramare's book.)

27. See, e.g., Hans Schwarz, *Evil: A Historical and Theological Perspective*, trans. Mark W. Worthing (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), ch. 5.

28. See, e.g., Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 213-219, 227-228, 232-233.

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for granted, simply because of the multifariousness of religious experiences and the importance people attach to them), such an outlook must acknowledge the reality of evil while resisting the "corrupted", immoral idea that an ultimately moral creator "planned" it and is prepared to pay the price in order to secure a greater good.

Furthermore, the metaphysical acceptance of evil and the fight against it constitute a pragmatic criterion of adequacy of pragmatism itself. Pragmatism proves to be a philosophy which takes evil seriously, without hiding it or trying to explain it away (as monistic idealism does, according to James), but which encourages us to join in a struggle against it, melioristically trying to make our world a better one. The problem of evil is, then, pragmatically resolved in James's pluralistic pragmatism – and this is a reflexive pragmatic argument in favor of pragmatism and pluralism themselves. By enabling us to make a difference, pragmatism offers a more satisfactory picture of the nature and role of evil in human lives than monistic idealism (or *mutatis mutandis*, contemporary philosophers' analytic theism). This may even be construed as a reflexive transcendental argument, referring to the conditions for the possibility of a viable pragmatism. The price to be paid, however, is permanent metaphysical and theological insecurity: there may be no final solution to the problem of evil, as new experiences of ever more horrendous evils may eventually make it impossible for us to go on actively fighting evil, as pragmatism urges us to do.[31] Insofar as a pragmatic defense of pragmatism is available here, such a defense will have to remain fallibilistic. We may just be unable to react pragmatically to the problem of evil, and for many thinkers this may be a ground for rejecting religious beliefs altogether.

Be that as it may, James's views can at this point be compared to some more recent philosophers' of religion attempts to deal with the problem of evil. His position may seem to lie somewhere between the typical analytic (mainly evidentialist) philosophy of religion and the non-evidentialist ("fideist") way of thinking inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein, represented most prominently today by D.Z. Phillips.[32] The basic contrast between these two viewpoints can here, in the case of the problem of evil, be framed in terms of the contrast between *theodicism* and *anti-theodicism*. We shall see in what follows that James was, on the whole, closer to the anti-theodicist approach.

Like theodicist thinkers, James does appear to think that there is a kind of moral oughtness that is prior to God's will. It would be immoral for God, or anyone, including the philosophers' absolute, to let innocent children die, for instance, with some greater good in sight. Such a sacrifice would simply be immoral and corrupt, or insensitive at best, as we have seen, and no ethically concerned thinker should, even for purely intellectual reasons, postulate such an absolute or God in her/his metaphysics (or so pragmatists will argue). On the other hand, ethical considerations are in James's view applicable only to human beings thinking about how to live a human, perhaps religious, life in this world in which evil is an apparent factuality. The problem of evil is, above all, an ethical problem for humans. It is not primarily – in a way not at all – a dry intellectual exercise of philosophical rationalization. In this way, James can be seen as joining those Wittgensteinian thinkers who worry that theodicist rationalizations in fact blind us to the evil that makes people's religious faith fragile and may even, for ethical reasons, lead them to lose that faith.[33] This emphasis on the profoundly ethical character of our problem is a possible bridge between Jamesian pragmatism and Wittgensteinian moral philosophy, hitherto insufficiently explored.

Not unlike James, moral philosophers and philosophers of religion inspired by Wittgenstein (and to some extent by Kierkegaard) have argued that the problem of evil should receive an ethical scrutiny rather than a purely intellectual one. In Jamesian terms, they can thus be said to resist the abstract intellectualization of this metaphysico-religious issue. As one author puts it, God's motivations would be even more deeply evil than we had realized if we were to see the starving of a child, for instance, as a part of his allegedly good overall plan.[34] Thus we are introduced to the Wittgensteinian-Kierkegaardian perspective, according to which it is, in a word, blasphemous to try to bring God to the justice or to offer an apology in favor of

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[29.] Kant himself, as far as I know, did not argue in this manner with respect to evil. James's views are here "Kantian" only in the sense that this specific argumentative structure is inherited from Kant. Still, Kant may be seen as an interesting background figure for James's moral philosophy, perhaps a bit surprisingly. In Kant, we may also find the idea of a morally motivated religious faith, as well as (more specifically in the context of the present inquiry) the idea that evil actions – any more than any ethically responsible actions – cannot be causally explained in the way in which the events of the phenomenal world are explained and that, therefore, moral evil remains something like a mystery from the point of view of theoretical reason, although this notion does have a use in our self-conception of responsible agents from the point of view of practical reason. Cf. here, e.g., Christine M. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), pp. 149, 171 ff. For comparisons between James and Kant, see my *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology*, ch. 5.

[30.] Cf. Sprigge, *James and Bradley*, p. 588.

[31.] See the discussion of "unhuman evil" in the final section of this paper.

[32.] I shall not refer to Wittgenstein's own views on religious belief here. I shall only loosely speak about the "Wittgensteinian" tradition in the philosophy of religion, assuming that what is usually meant by this expression is sufficiently familiar to my readers. For a good introduction, see Tilgham, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*.

[33.] For such a picture, inspired by Wittgenstein, Dostoyevsky, and Simone Weil, of evil as an ethical challenge rendering religious faith vulnerable, see David Wisdo, *The Life of Irony and the Ethics of Belief* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 92-101. Wisdo's critique is primarily directed against Alvin Plantinga's well-known "free will defense"; it is in many ways parallel to Phillips's attack on Swinburne's theodicy, to be referred to shortly.

[34.] Stephen Mulhall, *Faith and Reason* (London: Duckworth, 1994), p. 18.

God's plan, as theodicists do. It is simply wrong, both ethically and religiously, to try to set objective ethical criteria which God ought to obey. Moreover, it is conceptually impossible to do any such thing; the very attempt is without sense.[35] If we see the problem of evil as an intellectual problem, a puzzle to be solved, what we end up with, according to Stephen Mulhall, is a picture of God as an "evil demon". "Such a justification of the ways of God to man amounts to little less than blasphemy", he concludes.[36] Instead of intellectualist puzzle-solving, the truly religious believer abandons all attempts for theodicy and thereby all attempts to explain or to justify evil and suffering.[37] Another Wittgensteinian thinker speaks about the "conceptual oddness" of the theodicist's attempt to "justify the ways of God to man".[38] Therefore, one may argue that the real problem of evil "is not theoretical, but is the practical problem of how one lives a religious life in a world of evil and misfortune, a life that includes, among other things, worship, prayer, and faith in God".[39] James would undoubtedly have recognized this problem as his own.[40]

Apparently, James's position is not entirely hostile to the theodicist's. When Richard Swinburne states that "it is a good thing that a creator should make a half-finished universe and create immature creatures, who are humanly free agents, to inhabit it",[41] he does sound like James, affirming the central values of freedom and individual responsibility within the created universe. But upon closer scrutiny it turns out that Swinburne here employs the notion of moral goodness in a problematic sense, referring to something's being good prior to God's will. God, it seems, is bound by humanly set moral rules and standards, in Swinburne's (and other theodicists') scheme. Swinburne still thinks, basically like the monistic theodicists James attacked, that all is well in God's overall plan, which includes the creation of "humanly free agents" whose world is only "half-finished". Furthermore, he seems to think that human beings can understand this

plan at least to the extent that we can realize that it is good, despite the sacrifices that must be made.

Hence, if the unfinished character of the world is taken to be just an element of an overall plan which is in itself entirely finished (and rationally understandable), Swinburne's and James's differences become more clearly visible. It seems to me that James would rather opt for D.Z. Phillips's view that the Swinburnean theodicist offers us, instead of genuine freedom and responsibility, a vulgarized "pseudoresponsibility".[42] Rather than justifying God's ways to men by referring to his having created us free and responsible, we should admit that *any* purportedly "higher" reasons God might have for tolerating the evil there is in the human world, including the "reasonable" preservation of moral responsibility among humans, is unavailable to us; as Phillips puts it, if there is such a "'higher' form of reasoning among God and his angels", then "so much the worse for God and his angels".[43] Here, I believe, James would whole-heartedly agree. Much like James's "sick soul", the Phillipsian believer is someone who finds her/himself living in "a world where disasters of natural and moral kinds can strike without rhyme or reason", unable to join the theodicist's vision of "order, optimism and progress".[44] It is for the sick soul only that the problem of evil is a genuine (ethically significant) problem; such a person hardly needs to be told that there is a hidden order in God's absolute mind in the end. In brief, there is a crude "moral insensitivity" in theodicies.[45] This is exactly what James argued, too.

The dispute between the theodicist and the anti-theodicist is not, of course, settled by an appeal to moral sensitivities and insensitivities. Swinburne's response to Phillips is, in short, that no argument has been offered for the lack of rational order behind evil.[46] The wide gulf separating these thinkers' philosophical temperaments is demonstrated by Phillips's statement that theodicies are part of the "rationalism" that "clouds our understanding of religious belief".[47] The very attempt to offer an argument,

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35. Can something which is nonsensical also be morally wrong? Isn't it meaningless to say that something that makes no sense is morally prohibited? These notions are, however, connected more intimately than we might initially think. See the final section of this article on the notion of "unhuman", ethically "unthinkable" evil.

36. Ibid., p. 19.

37. Ibid., pp. 67-68. Cf. also Le Poidevin's statement (*Arguing for Atheism*, p. 102): "If it turned out that, from God's perspective, any amount of human suffering is perfectly acceptable, that would be a horrible discovery to make. We simply could not go on believing that God was genuinely benevolent, at least as we conceive of benevolence." The difference between the accounts of Le Poidevin and someone like Mulhall is, however, that the latter and his kin seem to resist the metaphysicist's tendency to imagine what it would be like if something turned out to be true "from God's perspective". Suffering and evil are problems that arise from a human perspective.

38. Tilghman, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, p. 192.

39. Ibid., p. 194.

40. Unfortunately, Wittgensteinian philosophers like Mulhall and Tilghman do not compare their views, or Wittgenstein's, to James's.

41. Richard Swinburne, "The Problem of Evil", in Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion*, pp. 81-102 (here p. 99). Cf. also John Hick's statement that "moral responsibility and hence moral growth require a world in which there are genuine contingencies" (Hick, "Remarks" [on Swinburne and Phillips], ibid., pp. 122-128; see p. 126).

42. D.Z. Phillips, "The Problem of Evil", in Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion*, pp. 103-121 (here p. 110). It should be noted that I am only referring to Swinburne's and Phillips's relatively early formulations of their positions. Both have, for decades, written voluminously on most topics in the philosophy of religion, including the problem of evil. Since this paper is not a study on the development of their views, it will be sufficient for me to cite their early confrontation in the 1970s. It seems to me that no major changes have taken place in their positions – or in the basic opposition between theodicies and anti-theodicies – since then.

43. Ibid., p. 116.

44. Ibid., p. 119.

45. Ibid., p. 118.

46. See Richard Swinburne, "Postscript", in Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion*, pp. 129-133.

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or even the question of whether there could be such an argument pointing to a rational order, leads the religious thinker astray, in Phillips's view, or is even to be judged blasphemous. Again, we may phrase Phillips's position in Jamesian terms: religious belief should not be over-intellectualized by attempting to justify God's ways to men. Instead of such intellectualization, religious belief should be seen as a natural pragmatic response by some – though by no means by all – ethically concerned human beings to the various problematic situations they encounter in their often insecure and challenging environment. For some people, for some reasons (and not just for intellectual reasons), the religious response is pragmatically adequate.[48]

Another interesting alternative worth briefly taking up here, drawn from more mainstream philosophy of religion than Phillips's view, is Eleonore Stump's discussion of a human being's relation to God as a relation to a "second person", with the Book of Job as an illuminating example.[49] Stump argues that suffering can be explained and rendered meaningful in a relation to God conceived of as another person, like a loving parent, even if it can never be explained or justified *in abstracto*, from an objective, "third person" point of view. This is something that might be appealing to a Jamesian philosopher of religion who yearns to live in a universe in which intimate and personal relations are possible, in which one can have a personal communion with the "more", with some superhuman (albeit finite) "Thou". Yet, again, it is quite impossible, from the philosophical-theological perspective of someone like Stump (or the author of the Book of Job, for that matter), to give up the infinity of God. On the other hand, from the Wittgensteinian-Kierkegaardian anti-theodicists' point of view, Stump does not go far enough in her repudiation of the traditional (third-person) task of justification. Her position is still fairly strongly rooted in the theodicist tradition, although its conception of the justification and explanation of evil is somewhat different from, say, Swinburne's. Insofar as Job, for instance, really faces God as a "second person", as a "you", he does receive a justification or an explanation, an answer to the question of why he must suffer – or so Stump argues.

It is – from either a Jamesian or a Wittgensteinian perspective – a merit of this view that the justification required and received is "personal" rather than abstract and objective; yet, it is a problem that we are still dealing with justification here.[50] Moreover, the religious believer might above all be concerned with *others'* suffering instead of her/his own. For such a person, Stump's "second-personal" approach offers little comfort. If one receives a justification for another human being's suffering in one's own personal contact with the God one believes in, one ends up with acting like a companion in the guilt in an evil demon's plan rather than a compassionate fellow-sufferer. At its best, Stump's view may thus comfort the suffering believer who asks why s/he her/himself has to suffer. This does not help the one who encounters evil mainly through the evening news in television, asking why, for instance, God lets the children of Afghanistan starve.

Where Stump does strike the right key is in her final conclusion that believers and non-believers need not deal with the problem of evil (as it emerges in the context of their own lives) in a similar manner.[51] The suffering person's personal history must be taken into account in accounting for the justifiability of her/his suffering. The presence or absence of religious faith in that history is obviously highly relevant. It makes all the difference in the world whether the sufferer is, in James's terms, a "healthy-minded" believer or a "sick soul". Neither Stump nor James would thus sympathize with the very idea of presenting the problem of evil as an atheological argument whose intellectual structure poses the same challenge objectively and universally to all rational thinkers. The problem is a problem – an ethical problem – for the one who is already committed to a religious view of life. Most importantly, it is *not* an intellectual exercise that an atheist can successfully present from a point of view lying outside religious life. If the problem is put to such a use, much of its human relevance will be destroyed. As a problem internal to a religious approach to life's stormy questions, it

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47. D.Z. Phillips, "Postscript", in Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion*, pp. 135-139 (here p. 139). For the notion of a philosophical temperament, see James, *Pragmatism*, ch. 1.

48. For a thoroughgoing discussion of how a pragmatist conception of religion may retain "the goods of religion" in human life, see Ulf Zackariasson, *Forces by Which We Live: Religion and Religious Experience from the Perspective of Pragmatic Philosophical Anthropology* (Studia Philosophiae Religionis 21, Uppsala: U of Uppsala, 2002).

49. See Eleonore Stump, "Second-Person Accounts and the Problem of Evil", in Tommi Lehtonen and Timo Koistinen (eds.), *Perspectives in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 2000), pp. 88-113. For the philosophical relevance of the Book of Job, with special emphasis on the idea of an "amoral" universe beyond moral demands of goodness or justice, see John T. Wilcox, *The Bitterness of Job: A Philosophical Reading* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992 [first published 1989]). Wilcox's argument bears some resemblance to the anti-theodicists' (e.g., Wittgensteinians') view according to which it is blasphemous to try to bring God to justice. Indeed, Wilcox points out that Job is (initially) guilty of blasphemy.

50. The extent to which Stump's position is a version of the free will theodicy can be seen from an earlier paper by her: see Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil", *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 2 (1985), reprinted in Stump and Murray (eds.), *The Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 227-240. Both Stump and other recent philosophers of religion have argued that a successful strategy in dealing with the reality of evil requires specifically Christian premises instead of purely metaphysical theistic ones; see also, e.g., Marilyn McCord Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 63 (1989): 297-310, reprinted in Stump and Murray (eds.), *The Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 250-257. A Christian believer's intimate personal union with God may give her/his life a profound significance even when that life is threatened by "horrendous evils". This approach is inescapably troubled by the threat of relativism: why should a successful theodicy be only available to Christians?

51. Stump, "Second-Person Accounts and the Problem of Evil", pp. 112-113.

may lead to an emergence of true (pragmatic) significance – or to a total collapse. An engagement with the problem thus contains a genuine risk in a Jamesian sense. Any pragmatic attitude we adopt to evil is adopted at our personal risk. The fact that believers and non-believers may react differently to the reality of evil should not, however, be construed as implying total relativism.[52] As even Phillips points out, we should not claim that faith cannot be "challenged or overthrown by nonreligious factors".[53] But the logic of such challenging or overthrow is not the simple one of atheological arguments.

We should now briefly return to James's pluralistic idea of individual believer's being able to "make a difference" through her/his faith, in order to re-emphasize the point that his anti-theodicy is "transcendental". In a way, James's celebration of individuality comes rather close to what is known in popular therapeutic literature as "positive thinking". You can really make a difference, if you are not simply paralyzed by the circumstances – just take your own life into your hands and act bravely, live forward, do something! James's famous doctrine of the "will to believe",[54] of the right of an individual to choose a religious (or some other) "live" hypothesis with her/his own risk, given that no fully satisfactory intellectual or evidential consideration can be given either for or against it, can be interpreted as an instance of this idea. Now, the important point invited by the foregoing discussion is this. A positive contribution, a will to believe, a fight against evil and for the good, is possible – in a transcendental sense – only against the background of the pessimistic experience of a "sick soul", of the one for whom the world is a place where disasters strike "without rhyme or reason". The analogy to transcendental thinking ought to be taken seriously: positive individual contributions can be empirically real insofar as one is, on a transcendental level, committed to a picture according to which evil is real and cannot be simply explained away (not even in a "second-personal" sense *à la* Stump). One's optimistic faith in one's own possibilities, which is necessary for a will-to-believe kind of leap to be possible, is itself possible only in a darker, more pessimistic framework in which one really understands that everything is not all right just as it is, i.e., that something must be done, because there is no pre-given harmony in the world. Thus, according to this Jamesian anti-

theodicy, the recognition of genuine evil is required as a background, or as I would say, a transcendental condition, of the possibility of making a difference, a positive contribution, in favor of goodness. Positive thinking is possible and meaningful against a melancholic background, against the negativities that a sick soul perceives in her/his world. Positive individual contributions, then, have their legitimate role to play, empirically speaking, provided that a pessimistic position is accepted transcendentally. Only the "sick soul" sees, profoundly enough, that everything is not all right, that the world is an evil place, and that therefore positive thinking and "difference-making" is required. Otherwise, the "positivist" approach can hardly be serious enough.

Exactly as Phillips notices, the (transcendental) insight (by a sick soul) of the world as a place where no rational order has been pre-arranged and where evil is a factuality may lead us to different reactions, to accepting everything that takes place in our lives as God's gift or to thinking that life is simply absurd and there is no God.[55] Now, perhaps only some of these transcendental pictures are compatible with an empirical picture of the individual as capable of making a difference. It may be doubted, for instance, that the one who existentialistically just sticks to the absurdity of existence cannot really make a difference or will be paralyzed. On the other hand, there have been Christian existentialists, like Kierkegaard, and James's own will to believe idea is in a way very close to existentialists' emphasis on an individual choosing her or his own life.[56] We cannot here settle the controversies between religious and anti-religious forms of existentialism (or pragmatism), but we must let the pragmatic empirical satisfactoriness of the "individual differences" people are able to make influence the acceptability of the interpretations of the pessimism we feel forced to commit ourselves to on a transcendental level. If a religious way of making a difference in a fight against evil produces satisfactory consequences, this counts, on the transcendental level, as a consideration in favor of the religious attitude according to which everything is in God's hands (instead of being ultimately absurd). This may sound paradoxical, but it is not, provided that a conceptual distinction, though not any unbridgeable gulf, between a transcendental and an empirical level of examination is emphasized.[57]

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52. For the problem of relativism in recent philosophy of religion, including reformed epistemology and "Christian philosophy", see, e.g., Timo Koistinen, *Philosophy of Religion or Religious Philosophy? A Study of Contemporary Anglo-American Approaches* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 2000); cf. also my paper, "Pragmatic and Transcendental Arguments for Theism: A Critical Examination", forthcoming in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 50 (2002).

53. Phillips, "Postscript", p. 138. For further elaboration, see D.Z. Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1986); and Wisdo, *The Life of Irony and the Ethics of Belief.*

54. See James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, especially ch. 1.

55. Cf. Phillips, "The Problem of Evil", p. 120.

56. On the existentialist overtones of James's will to believe doctrine, see, e.g., Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), ch. 9.

57. On the other hand, this distinction must remain contextualized, "soft", historically transformable and reinterpretable, if one's approach is based on pragmatism which recognizes no immutable a priori structures, universal essences, or the like. Cf. my *Kant Naturalized, Pragmatism Transcendentalized*, passim.

Conclusion: The Problem of Unhuman Evil

We have seen how James's acknowledgment of evil can be seen as being based on a Kantian-styled transcendental argument. Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion, Phillips among others, also seem to argue transcendentally, appealing to the conditions that make religious belief possible – conditions among which one finds a full recognition of the unequal and unordered distribution of evil among humanity. This is a further link between their views and James's. Both pragmatist and Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion seem to be interested in the conditions that make religious responses to experience possible to us.[58] The acknowledgment of genuine evil is among such conditions, according to both. Although we have seen how this acknowledgment plays a crucial role in James's pragmatism, a problem remains. Can a Jamesian view account for the kind of unbelievable, unsayable, inexpressible evil that *transcends* our human bounds of sense, even the boundaries of linguistic expression? Is such an *unhuman evil* possible for us humans, and if so, how should a pragmatist deal with it? Here, again, we face "Wittgensteinian" issues concerning the limits of language, of the sayable. We will see, as was hinted above, that there is a relation between the linguistically inexpressible and the ethically unthinkable.

What is unhuman evil? One suggestion is that it is, indeed, evil that is humanly "unthinkable". Another Wittgensteinian philosopher, Raimond Gaita, has suggested that philosophical argumentation cannot and should not lead to what is ethically unthinkable, e.g., to the toleration of (or even a consideration of the possibility of tolerating) eating dead people, or (*pace* straightforward consequentialists like Peter Singer) of killing three-week-old babies.[59] Cultures, Gaita argues, are defined by such unthinkabilities. Yet, we may and sometimes do acknowledge extreme evil-doers as our fellow human beings; this acknowledgment, again, is something that transcends the expressive powers of our language – it is "beyond sense and reason".[60]

In a sense, the upshot of James's active, constructivist pragmatic attitude is that evil is inevitably *our* fault. We, after all, are not "*readers* only of the cosmic novel" but "the very personages of the world-drama".[61] The evil there is in the world cannot be independent of us, because reality, as independent of the human mind and its practice-embedded thought, is only something "absolutely dumb and evanescent, the merely ideal limit of our minds".[62] We inevitably make a human "addition" to the world, which is

"in the making" instead of being ready-made independently of us.[63] We are, then, responsible for evil, because we are responsible, metaphysically, for the shape the world takes, as seen from within the ontological commitments we make within our practices. This responsibility can be described as "transcendental" in the sense that it is our human practices that set frames to what is possible by our lights in the empirical world. And God, or gods, remember, are only cosmic fighters for goodness, not absolute powers responsible for all good and evil, according to James. Even God "may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity", being thus metaphysically dependent on "the personal response which any one of us may make to the religious appeal".[64] There is no way we can hide our human responsibility for good and evil.

Hence, in Jamesian pragmatism, the universe as a whole is, in a sense, our (transcendental) pragmatic construction. There is nothing, not even anything good or evil, in total absence from human practice-embedded conceptualizations. It is at this point that the problem of unhuman evil arises. Is inhumanity a human capacity, a conceivable part of a humanly structured world? Are *we* responsible also for the kind of evil that we find it impossible to believe any truly human being to be capable of? We are here led to consider questions that define our common humanity, questions about what we are really capable of, or what makes sense to us and what fails to make sense, ethically speaking. If I have been able to show anything in this paper, it is, I hope, that James struggled with such questions. His pragmatism, including his approach to the problem of evil, can be seen as an extended argument pertaining to the limits of what makes sense, humanly, in a human world of ethical concerns. This is a further reason for classifying him, along with many Wittgensteinians

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58. Philosophers like Phillips might not be happy with this interpretation. They might resist comparison to either pragmatism or transcendental philosophy. But I am not trying to determine the correct reading of Phillips's or any other Wittgensteinian philosopher's position; I am interested in a contextualizing reinterpretation instead of historical truth.

59. Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. xxviii, 181-183.

60. Ibid., p. 55. For Gaita's views on the mysteriousness of facing another human person, see also his earlier book, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1991). I have discussed Gaita's views from the perspective of "culturalist" philosophical anthropology in my article, "On the Concept of Philosophical Anthropology", forthcoming in *Journal of Philosophical Research*, vol. 28 (2003). Cf. here also Phillips's description of his own project in the above-cited paper, "The Problem of Evil": what he attempts to do is to show that what Swinburne asks us to think "distorts what we know or goes beyond the limits of what we are prepared to think" (p. 103). Thus, "to ask of what use are the screams of the innocent, as Swinburne's defense would have us do, is to embark on a speculation we should not even contemplate. We have our reasons, final human reasons, for putting a moral full stop at many places." (Ibid., p. 115.)

61. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 27.

62. James, *Pragmatism*, p. 119.

63. See ibid., pp. 121-123, as well as James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, pp. 9-10.

64. James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 55; see also James, *Varieties*, p. 519. (This phrasing should not be interpreted naively as a statement about humans creating God(s). This is not the right place to examine this issue, though.)

(who would be equally resistant to such classifications), as a transcendental thinker.

Traditional arguments regarding the problem of evil, as we have noticed, turn out to be inconclusive from a pragmatic, ethically oriented perspective. For the Jamesian pragmatist, the undeniable reality of evil may, and should, be a reason to commit oneself ethically and religiously, to try to "help God" in turning the universe into a morally better one. This ethical line of thought is almost entirely missing from standard (analytic) discussions of the problem, which thus require a Jamesian reorientation – even though, admittedly, James's pluralistic solution comes so close to something like polytheism that it can hardly be a "live option" for thinkers educated in a Judaeo-Christian tradition of faith.[65] In a way or another, a pragmatic anti-theodicist approach should be able to accommodate God's infinity, without collapsing that infinity into the notion of an absolute God whose plan will render each individual sacrifice morally legitimate.

But the Wittgensteinian anti-theodicist perspective has its own problems, too. When Phillips tells us that his purpose is "simply to note [the] existence" of the kinds of uses of language that a recognition of the pointlessness of suffering can lead us to, namely, both the temptation to declare that everything is absurd and to "speak of all things as God's gifts",[66] it remains unclear how he is entitled to attack the moral insensitivity of the theodicist's (such as Swinburne's) use of language. Where does one get the normative grounds for criticizing any particular way of using language, if all one can do is to describe, in a Wittgensteinian way, the ways in which language is actually used in various human situations, e.g., in relation to suffering? The same question can, *mutatis mutandis*, be directed to the Jamesian pluralist who does not tolerate the monist's arguments. Why does not monistic theodicism have its own legitimate role to play within the irreducible plurality of people's ways of reacting ethically and intellectually to the empirical reality of evil and suffering? Why couldn't the monist's language-game be one form of "making a difference"?[67]

Of course, one of the main points of pragmatism is that any attempt to make a difference, philosophically or otherwise, can and should be pragmatically evaluated and criticized. From James's perspective, monism is ethically suspect. So is, from Phillips's perspective, any theodicy. James's position, when formulated in a more recent philosophical vocabulary, can be seen as an attempt to draw a middle path between the alternatives incarnated in figures like Swinburne and Phillips, viz., theodicy and anti-theodicy. As so often in philosophy, middle-path-walkers must face vehement attacks from both sides they want to avoid. If a choice must be made, the Jamesian will, obviously, side with anti-theodicy rather than theodicy. Tolerating evil and suffering may, James seems to think, be "explained" or "justified" only by giving up the basic premise of all traditional theodicies, namely, the infinite power of God. By turning God into a finite power, James in a way leaves the problem of evil aside. But he does not leave aside the quest for a moral struggle a true believer must engage in. Thus, he by no means neglects the form that the problem of evil takes in the Wittgensteinian tradition, as conceptualized by philosophers like Phillips, Mulhall, and Tilghman.

Finally, we cannot avoid the conclusion that the problem of unhuman evil remains unsettled in the Jamesian scheme. Insofar as the world, including evil, is a human construction, structured within the human practices in which we make our ethically structured metaphysical commitments, it is a problem how some particular kinds of evil can so much as be real. Some instances of evil must be defined as nothing less than inhuman. It is part of the profoundly paradoxical nature of humanity that we humans are responsible for those evils, too. Ultimately, the problem of (unhuman) evil leads us to wonder, perhaps an existential, incurable wonder directed not only to (if we believe in God) God's eternal ways, which are and remain "utterly unlike our ways",[68] but also to our own humanity, to our being able to do things we can hardly ascribe to any creature to whom we ascribe (our common) humanity. On the other hand, it is by no means clear what we can even mean by "unhuman evil". This notion may have an ethical use in our vocabulary, and we may need it in our attempts to deal with the reality of evil, but surely much further work is required for its more careful explication.

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Editor's Note: The Penguin 1982 edition of the *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and the University of Nebraska 1996 edition of *Some Problems of Philosophy* reproduce the original Longmans, Green, and Co. pagination for those works.

[65.] Insofar as the idea of a finite God is not a live option for the would-be believer, it cannot be adopted on the basis of a Jamesian "will to believe" strategy. Cf. "The Will to Believe", ch. 1 of James, *The Will to Believe.*

[66.] Phillips, "The Problem of Evil", p. 120. (Cf. above.)

[67.] The question of the historical relations between James's pragmatic pluralism and the Wittgensteinian idea of a plurality of language-games grounded in human forms of life cannot be discussed here. For some comparisons and references to relevant literature, see my *Kant Naturalized, Pragmatism Transcendentalized*, ch. 3.

[68.] James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 23.
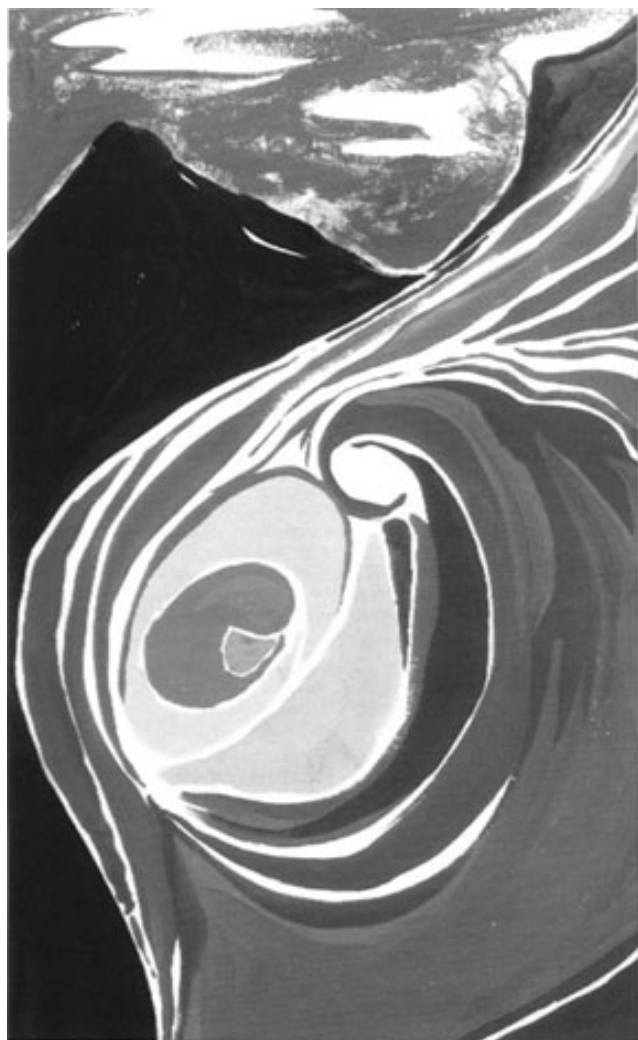
The Reality of the Unseen
by Beth Reiter

Special VRE Issues of SOWJ

Paul Jerome Croce and John Snarey are happy to announce that there will be two special issues of *Streams* devoted to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The Fall 2002 issue will focus on the original historical contexts of the lectures and book. The Spring 2003 issue will focus on uses of the book since the time of its publication.

Conversion
by Beth Reiter

Varieties of Religious Experience Imagery

by Beth Reiter <bbreit2@juno.com>

New Harvard UP Book on VRE

Harvard University Press published *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* by Charles Taylor in March 2002. Taylor is a professor of philosophy at McGill University. Citations are keyed to the Penguin 1982 edition of James's *Varieties*.

The Divided Self, and the Process of Its Unification
by Beth Reiter

WJS at Conferences

The William James Society sponsored a panel at the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy in Portland, ME, on March 8, 2002. The meeting theme was *William James's Varieties: Emotions as/in Religious Experience.* William Gavin was chair. Phil Oliver and Lynn Bridgers presented papers. David Lamberth was respondent.

John Snarey and the William James Society are offering two symposia at the American Psychological Association annual convention in Chicago, on August 22 and 23, 2002. The Division 26, History of Psychology meeting theme is *Historical Perspectives on The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Participants include Hendrika Vande Kemp, Marcia Ian, Lynn Bridgers, Richard L. Gorsuch, and J. Ryan Snyder. The Division 36, Psychology of Religion meeting theme is *Contemporary Readings of The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Participants are Eugene Taylor, William Douglas Woody, Janet C. de Baca, William R. Miller, Mark Krejci, Robert Emmon, and E. Mark Stern.

John Snarey and the William James Society are also organizing a symposium on *Moral Development Perspectives on The Varieties of Religious Experience* at the annual conference of the Association for Moral Education, which will be held in Chicago, (November 7-10, 2002).

For details on attending the above, contact John Snarey <jsnarey@emory.edu>.

The annual meeting of the William James Society will be held in conjunction with the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division's annual conference in Philadelphia this December, 2002. John J. McDermott will be giving his Presidential Address which will be followed by a panel session on the theme: *James's Meliorism: Escape from Tragedy.* Panelists are Dwight Goodyear (New School), Henry Jackman (York), and Wesley Cooper (Alberta). Richard Gale (Pittsburgh) will respond. Finally, the session will end with the annual WJS business meeting. For more details, contact D. Micah Hester, Sec.-Treas. <hester_dm@mercer.edu>.

William James and the Genuine Option: Religion or Nihilism

by Christian Noble

> "Where God is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution are not the absolutely final things."
> —William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

William James was a sick soul. As a young man he had often contemplated suicide; in a letter to his friend Tom Ward, James claimed that he had spent the winter of 1867 "on the continual verge of suicide."[1] In an 1868 letter to Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. he asked "What reason can you give for continuing to live? What ground allege why the thread of your days should not be snapped *now*?"[2] In a later essay, "Is Life Worth Living?", James wrote that the simple fact of suicide imparted an ethical obligation to address the issue. Depression and despair were recurring themes in the life of the James Family. Mental and physical breakdowns afflicted most members of the family with the possible exception of the family matriarch, Mary James.[3] William's own battle with depression was lifelong, and though thoughts of suicide seem to have peaked in his mid to late twenties, the threat of mental illness and insanity remained.

This experience with depression would inform much of James's later work. A number of his essays and lectures contain vivid descriptions of the hopelessness and despair he himself had known throughout his life. This experience is an important part of the larger context that must inform any attempt to analyze or interpret the thought of William James. James himself insisted that a philosophy reflects the character and temperament of the philosopher above all else, and nowhere do we find stronger evidence for this claim than in his own work.

In this essay I will argue that in order to grasp the import of the defense of religion that James put forth in much of his work we must take into account his own intimacy with "shipwreck and dissolution." Many critics have claimed that the conception of religion which James affirms is, in the words of Richard Rorty, "wimpy." Using the model for justified belief that James put forth in the essay "The Will to Believe," I argue that when we look at what the alternative to religion was for James, his affirmation no longer seems insufficient. Indeed, within the confines of a pragmatism that values experience but is committed to intellectual integrity, James could offer no more. I will try to make my case by highlighting the alternative to religion, the option James was ultimately rejecting in favor of religion. In a word, I am calling this option nihilism, and it is characterized by meaninglessness, despair, and death. To the best of my knowledge James never explicitly contrasted these two alternatives, religion and nihilism, in the way that I am suggesting, but his work, not to mention his biography, is so full of rich, if sometimes brief, descriptions of this bleak characterization of existence that we can draw out the implicit dichotomy. I am not going to claim that James was in any way a nihilist; rather by demonstrating that it was a living option for him and one whose reality he felt acutely, I intend to show that his defense of religion is not in fact wimpy at all, but pragmatically hopeful and helpful. I will focus on three texts: "The Will to Believe," "Is Life Worth Living?" and *The Varieties of Religious Experience.*[4]

In "The Will to Believe" James mounts his defense of religious faith. He begins by establishing a model for what he calls a "genuine option." Any statement that might be believed he calls a hypothesis, and a hypothesis can be either living or dead, a real possibility or not, depending on the individual judging the hypothesis. A decision between two hypotheses James calls an option, and delineates kinds of options: 1) living or dead; 2) forced or avoidable; and 3) momentous or trivial. An option is a genuine option when it is living, forced, and momentous. The competing hypotheses must both be real and viable, the need to choose between them must be inescapable, and the choice must carry with it substantial consequences.

Having established the model of a genuine option, James turns to Blaise Pascal's famous wager, which he rejects as a disingenuous means for establishing religious belief. James questions the notion that we might choose to believe entirely of our own accord. There must be some "pre-existing tendency" (*WTB*, p. 460) if a belief is to be embraced. The thought that one might take up religious ideas and practices solely on the off chance of gaining an infinite reward as though we were

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1. This letter is quoted in R.W.B. Lewis, *The Jameses: A Family Narrative* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991) p. 185.

2. Ibid.

3. Certainly depression seemed to run in the family. Feinstein argues that much of the angst circulating in the James family was tied to the question of vocation, a problem Henry Sr. bequeathed to his children. See Howard M. Feinstein *Becoming William James* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984).

4. All my citations of James are drawn from the Library of America editions of his collected works: *William James: Writings 1878-1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992) and *William James: Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987). Since both of the essays I treat are drawn from the volume *The Will to Believe*, page numbers are cited with the abbreviation *WTB*. Page numbers for *The Varieties of Religious Experience* are cited with *VRE*.

simply playing the lottery is reprehensible.

The concept of purely volitional belief is also an insult to "the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences" which is built on objectivity and the dispassionate evaluation of the available evidence. As an example of the scientific attitude toward belief James offers W.K. Clifford's now famous statement that "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." (*WTB*, p. 462) But here James performs one of his patented about faces and claims that much of what we believe, even in the realm of science, is based on volition and belief.[5] He then offers the thesis of his essay:

> *Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.* (*WTB*, p. 464)

As for truth, James makes a distinction between empiricist and absolutist notions of truth. The empiricist tendency, representative of science, posits knowledge without absolute certainty whereas the absolutist tendency, characteristic of philosophy, holds that we can know with certainty that we know. But most of us are, James claims "absolutists by instinct," a tendency we must overcome given that certainty is the rarest of commodities. It is not found in the history of ideas or the world of concrete reality and we should be wary of those claiming certainty: "When, indeed, one remembers that the most striking practical application to life of the doctrine of objective certitude has been the conscientious labors of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, one feels less tempted than ever to lend the doctrine a respectful ear." (*WTB*, p. 468) Lest anyone make the claim that he is simply a relativist, James emphasizes that the empiricist remains committed to truth; indeed his efforts are an attempt to get into better relation with truth. James has yet to begin calling his philosophy by the title of pragmatism, but the pragmatic emphasis is clearly on display. The empiricist is ultimately concerned with results whereas the scholastic absolutists are most concerned with origins and foundational principles.

The response James offers to Clifford's notion that we should never believe without sufficient evidence is laid out in the thesis quoted above. We must be willing to risk error if we are to have any hope of ever arriving at the truth. To follow Clifford in refusing to take this

risk is akin to "a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound." (*WTB*, pp. 469-70) Suspending judgment may be possible in some cases, but there are clearly situations, usually morally imperative situations, where a judgment must be rendered without sufficient evidence.

Having established that there are important contexts in which belief and action are justified without sufficient evidence, James turns to the heart of the debate, religion. He defines religion with two claims: first, "the best things are the more eternal things" and second "we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true." (*WTB*, pp. 474-75) James then makes his case that the religious hypothesis is a genuine option. He begins by noting that those for whom any religion, and James is defining religion in the vaguest possible terms here, is not a living option need participate no longer as his argument presupposes its viability. The religious hypothesis is momentous in that we gain something vital *now*, that we otherwise would lack. James must emphasize this because otherwise he sounds like Pascal promising a deferred reward deliverable only upon death, if at all. James never makes clear just what it is that we gain, but we will return to this question. Finally the issue is forced because not to choose is to risk losing the good we would gain by choosing in favor of religion. To postpone a decision in this case is to act "more or less as if religion were not true." (*WTB*, p. 477) And action is pragmatically speaking the means by which belief is measured. In an important passage confined to a footnote, James reiterates this:

> The whole defense of religious faith hinges upon action. If the action required or inspired by the religious hypothesis is in no way different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis, then religious faith is a pure superfluity, better pruned away, and controversy about its legitimacy is a piece of idle trifling, unworthy of serious minds. I myself believe, of course, that the religious hypothesis gives to the world an expression which specifically determines our reactions, and makes them in a large part unlike what they might be on a purely naturalistic scheme of belief. (*WTB*, pp. 478-79)

James is quite clear here. Were the difference between a religious outlook and its alternatives to produce no practical consequences it would be insignificant. But in fact this is a difference that makes a difference. It is a weakness of this particular essay that he does not give any indication of what this difference looks like in practice. The essay ends with a rather dramatic passage taken from Fitzjames Stephen intended to illustrate the

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5. He explores this issue further in "The Sentiment of Rationality."

existential force of the argument James has been making.

> We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still, we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? "Be strong and of a good courage." Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes…If death ends all, we cannot meet death better. (*WTB*, p. 479)

In later work James followed up and elaborated on many of the ideas he introduces in "The Will to Believe," and in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James would delineate some of the practical fruits of the religious life. But the fact that he ends this earlier essay on an existential note, emphasizing death, is instructive. An affirmative response to the religious hypothesis served a very important function in James's thinking, but before turning to that I want to note some of the specific criticisms that have been raised against James's defense of religion in "The Will to Believe."

Richard Rorty sums up some of those criticisms nicely while offering his own pragmatic suggestions for the role of religion. Rorty of course is in some sense a friendly reader of James. He is himself a pragmatist who claims to have drawn much inspiration from James, though he ultimately aligns himself more closely with John Dewey. However, Rorty does not share James's preoccupation with religion and he makes clear their differences regarding religion in his essay "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance."[6] Rorty feels that James, in "The Will to Believe," is not being sufficiently pragmatic, specifically taking umbrage when James talks about "objective" reality and finding rather than making truth. He also claims James cedes the terms of the debate over religion to Clifford by accepting a useless dichotomy between the cognitive and the non-cognitive, between intellect and passion, science and religion. Rorty feels that a distinction between a belief (cognitive and intellectual, subject to justification) and a desire or hope (non-cognitive, passionate, outside of the realm of justification) is not pragmatically helpful. Tossing this distinction out means one need not maintain an antagonistic distinction between science and religion, for each simply answers to different sets of desires. What's needed is simply "a strategy for keeping the

two accounts from getting in each other's way." (FR&R, p. 89) Rorty wants to maintain the distinction between private and public where religion is concerned. As long as one's religious beliefs, hopes, or desires remain private affairs, there is no need to justify them by anyone else's standards, whatever they may be. Insofar as Rorty believes James is in fact attempting to privatize religion, they are in agreement.[7]

The problem for Rorty, however, is that James has ceded the science/religion, intellect/passion distinction to Clifford and his like. Hollinger is in agreement with Rorty on this point. "In 'The Will to Believe' James was still held in thrall by an older, highly non-pragmatic strategy for defending religious belief: the assertion of the reality of separate spheres for religious and for scientific cognition."[8]

James really comes in for abuse when we turn to just what he himself posited for the sphere of religion. Rorty points out that critics find that the definition James offers for the religious hypothesis falls far short of their own understandings of what constitutes religion. "Many readers of 'The Will to Believe' feel let down when the discover that the only sort of religion James has been discussing is something as wimpy as the belief that 'perfection is eternal.' They have a point." (FR&R, p. 93) The critic's claim is that the real opponents of Clifford and his like are not those such as James who believe simply in some sort of vague hope in eternal goodness, but rather the Inquisitors and their ilk who equate religion, and truth, with very specific dogma and feel compelled to enforce compliance. We can imagine as well that religious believers might find the vagueness of James's religious hypothesis unsatisfying. Just what has he really justified?

Rorty has his own qualms about the religious hypothesis, but his misgivings might actually serve to suggest an answer to the preceding question.[9] Rorty's problem with James's definition of religion is that it "associates religion with the conviction that a power not ourselves will do unimaginably vast good rather

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6. This essay was published in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, Ruth Anna Putnam, Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), and is hereinafter cited as FR&R.

7. James's emphasis is indeed on the individual dimensions of religion rather than the social or institutional dimensions, though he never explicitly announces his project as an attempt to privatize religion in the way that Rorty does.

8. Hollinger, "James, Clifford and the Scientific Conscience," pp. 79-80 in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*. However, Hollinger posits that James has abandoned this notion by the time he writes *Pragmatism*, and is by that time more willing to subject religion to scrutiny. I think this fails to account for the distinction between what James here refers to as religion and what he otherwise calls "over-belief." I suspect James was always willing to subject particular religious claims to scrutiny where possible, but the larger question, the essential question for James, concerning the character of existence and the distinction between religion and nihilism, cannot ultimately be decided on the basis of evidence.

than with the hope that we ourselves will do such good." (FR&R, p. 96) For Rorty, James's conception of religion is not too vague, it is too religious. In its place Rorty suggests what he calls "romance," which he defines as "a faith in the future possibilities of mortal humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community." (FR&R, p. 96) Romance need not be atheistic, but it will have to do without supernatural or mythological elements, not to mention a role in the public sphere. Rorty believes hope can now be located in the human realm, and here he reveals his own faith in the project of liberal democracy. "Now the things of this world are, for some lucky people, so welcome that they do not have to look beyond nature to the supernatural and beyond life to an afterlife, but only beyond the human past to the human future." (FR&R, p. 97)

There are any number of reasons that one might find Rorty's religion as romance unsatisfying or perhaps even troubling.[10] But here I will simply say that I think James would have found it far *too* romantic. James evinces his own particular optimism, but he also displays a sound grasp of the bleaker view of things, of "shipwreck and dissolution," a view that makes Rorty's romance seem naïve and utopian. For his part, Rorty recognizes this side of James, referring to it as his "panic",[11] and points out its relation to his thinking on religious topics. This panic, Rorty says, led James to betray his own pragmatic tendencies. Rorty is content to place his hope for the future in human beings; James requires something external, something above and beyond the merely human.

If we appropriate James's model of a genuine option, of justified belief, and use it to frame the religious hypothesis and its alternative, what I call nihilism and what Rorty alludes to as panic, I believe we will see that the religious conception James has put forth is pragmatically defensible. Both religion and nihilism, characterized as meaninglessness and despair, were living options for James. Indeed as Rorty suggests, the nihilism is in some sense the impetus for the religious

hypothesis. James was perhaps more inclined by circumstances to reject religion. His family history of depression and his own experience of despair might have led him to give up on religion. His training as a scientist and knowledge of Darwinism and his immersion in the social and intellectual currents of his day might have proven conducive to an atheistic worldview. But James never abandoned hope, and hope for James was religious. Thus religion was a bulwark against nihilism, against hopelessness. Ample evidence for this assertion is found throughout his work.

In an address to the Harvard YMCA later published in the volume titled *The Will to Believe*, James set out to tend to the "profounder bass note of life" by addressing the question that became the title of the essay, "Is Life Worth Living?" His approach here is simple and direct: what would we say to convince someone suicidal that life is in fact worth living? James distinguishes between suicide as the product of genuine insanity, in which case we can be of no help, and a more reflective melancholia that results from the studious life, which may be remedied with yet more reflection. This latter James terms a "religious disease," the treatment for which consists of removing the obstacles to religious faith in order to satisfy a religious demand stymied by a skeptical or scientific mindset.

The blockage stems from the contradiction between the notion of a beneficent deity whose goodwill is reflected in the created order and the actual character of the natural order which admits of no such understanding.[12] James is quite clear here: we cannot look to nature for an accurate conception of the divine. "Visible nature is all plasticity and indifference—a moral multiverse, as one might call it, and not a moral universe." (*WTB*, p. 489) Natural theology is the obvious casualty. Moving away from such a conception of the divine is the first step toward spiritual health. Freed from this "monistic superstition" our pessimist can at least take solace in being free to commit suicide. "The certainty that you now *may* step out of life whenever you please, and that to do so is not blasphemous or monstrous is itself an immense relief. The thought of suicide is now no longer a guilty challenge and

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9. Rorty does point out in a footnote that James offered other definitions of religion in other contexts: "He had as many conflicting quasi-definatory things to say about religions as he did about truth." (FR&R, p. 101 n.15)

10. The first and most obvious question is "but what of the unlucky?"

11. Rorty says "James fluctuated between two states of mind, two ways of dealing with the panic which both he and his father had experienced, and the return of which he always dreaded." Rorty was drawing a distinction between the religious hypothesis James put forward and I am defending and "the Whitmanesque dream of plural, democratic vistas stretching far away into the future." (FR&R, p. 98) This latter alternative is Rorty's preferred romantic vision, and while James certainly endorsed such a dream, I am not sure he was quite the true believer Rorty is or claims to be.

12. This passage is worth quoting at length:

The visible surfaces of heaven and earth refuse to be brought by us into any intelligible unity at all. Every phenomenon that we would praise there exists cheek by jowl with some contrary phenomenon that cancels all its religious effect upon the mind. Beauty and hideousness, love and cruelty, life and death keep house together in indissoluble partnership, and there gradually steals over us, instead of the old warm notion of a man-loving Deity, that of an awful power that neither hates nor loves, but rolls all things together meaninglessly to a common doom. (*WTB*, p. 487)

obsession." (*WTB*, p. 491) Further, he or she is momentarily sustained by curiosity about the future, and more substantially nurtured by struggle. The pugnacious attempt to rid the world of evil, to right its wrongs, drawing on our deeply held convictions of honor and duty, will help to maintain an interest in life.

James then turns to what he calls the "soul" of his discourse, religion, which he defines as a belief in an unseen world that is in some sense more significant, truer, than the visible world of everyday reality. He affirms our right to believe in the unseen and answers the claim that such belief is unscientific by reminding us that we must acknowledge how little we do in fact know. To claim otherwise is arrogant and unfounded. And given the momentous nature of the question at hand—the meaningfulness of existence—we cannot claim neutrality, we must believe one way or another. In this case, James assures us, we can believe in accordance with our needs, for in fact this is how science itself often proceeds. We cannot hope for certainty in these matters, but "maybe" is the essential character of our existence. Further, belief may help to determine the future. We have a hand in creating the worlds we inhabit; life is worth living because we have some say in the matter: "believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact."

This essay echoes many of the themes of "The Will to Believe" but with much greater rhetorical effect. We can almost imagine what it might have been like to hear James deliver his address. Knowing what we know about James's own suicidal temptations, it is tempting to read this as a biographical sketch of sorts: the philosopher, torn between optimism and pessimism, religion and nihilism, argues with himself, his life potentially hanging in the balance. At the least it is easy to imagine that a younger James must have roused himself from his own suicidal melancholy with some of these same arguments.

> It is a fact of human nature, that men can live and die by the help of a sort of faith that goes without a single dogma or definition. The bare assurance that this natural order is not ultimate but a mere sign or vision, the external staging of a many-storied universe, in which spiritual forces have the last word and are eternal—this bare assurance is to such men enough to make life seem worth living in spite of every contrary presumption suggested by its circumstances on the natural plane. Destroy this inner assurance, however, vague as it is, and all the light and radiance of existence is extinguished for these persons at a stroke. Often enough the wild-eyed look at life—the suicidal mood—will then set in. (*WTB*, pp. 498-99)

Here James explicitly defends his minimalist religious hypothesis by demonstrating its pragmatic function.

The mere assurance that the chaos and meaninglessness of the natural world is not the final word on things is enough to make life worthwhile. This is the ultimate pragmatic usefulness, the difference that makes all the difference, the securing of existence.

These same threads run through most of James's later work. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is too substantial a text to treat in its entirety, but for my purposes certain passages are essential. Early in *The Varieties*, James acknowledges the complexity of religion as a topic and confines himself to dealing explicitly with religion in its personal or private dimensions, leaving out all social, institutional and ecclesiastical dimensions. Lending credence to Rorty's claim that he was ultimately interested in privatizing religion, James alleges that the personal dimension is the more fundamental religious dimension. "Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they many consider the divine.*" (*VRE*, p. 36) James is clear that he will leave the divine as broad and ambiguous as possible, so as to exclude no particular religious conception. Religion's pragmatic usefulness becomes clear when we take stock of the human existential condition,[13] which James characterizes as one of absolute dependence on the universe, a dependence which requires self-sacrifice and surrender. In the confines of the religious life this sacrifice is not something to be merely endured, or stoically faced up to, but instead is embraced.

> *Religion thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary*, and if it be the only agency that can accomplish this result, its vital importance as a human faculty stands vindicated beyond dispute. It becomes an essential organ of our life, performing a function which no other portion of our nature can so successfully fulfill. (*VRE*, p. 53)

[13.] Consider the description James offers of the human condition from a naturalistic, non-religious perspective:

> 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. (*VRE*, p. 133)

This provides some insight into what James thought the worldview of science in his day had to offer. It is not clear to me that it offers anything more a century later.

Pragmatically speaking, religion makes life endurable. That life is something to be endured is made clear in James's treatment of "the sick soul." The sick soul or morbid mind sees that "the evil aspects of our life are of its very essence, and that the world's meaning most comes home to us when we lay them most to heart." (*VRE*, p. 124) The sick soul asks of the world "Can things whose end is always dust and disappointment be the real goods which our souls require? Back of everything is the great specter of universal death, the all-encompassing blackness." (*VRE*, p. 131) James notes several varieties of the sick soul and illustrates them with copious literary references and excerpts from personal accounts of depression. "The worst kind of melancholy is that which takes the form of panic fear." (*VRE*, p. 149) And here James draws on his own experience, though he does so anonymously, pretending that the account has been translated from French. The account describes an odd episode of "horrible dread" that haunted him for some time and left fearing for his own sanity. "I remember wondering how other people could live, how I myself had ever lived, so unconscious of the pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life." (*VRE*, p. 150)[14] This nihilistic experience cannot be simply written off as abnormal or pathological delusion for "the lunatic's visions of horror are all drawn from the material of daily fact." James is clear here: this bleak, despairing vision of the world is in some sense representative of the world itself. The sick soul is in touch with the character of reality.

The counterpart to the sick soul is the saint, who epitomizes the fruits of the religious life which are "the best things that history has to show." (*VRE*, p. 239) James provides us with a characterization of the features of the saintly life and the practical effects that follow from those features. The saintly character is a cross-cultural composite composed of four "fundamental inner conditions" which lead to four "characteristic practical consequences." The inner conditions, in a nutshell are: 1) the sense that one exists in a "wider life" and a palpable belief in the existence of some ideal power; 2) a conviction that our own existence is positively linked to that power, and a willingness to surrender oneself to it; 3) a gradual fading of the sense of self that leads to "immense elation and freedom"; and 4) an emotional shift toward love and harmony. These conditions engender a) asceticism: self-surrender at its most zealous; b) strength of soul: an uplifting sense of the largeness of life brings patience, fortitude and equanimity; c) purity: the need for consistency and the cleansing of sensual, worldly elements; and d) charity: a stronger sense of affection for other creatures. While

James clearly places a high value on these saintly fruits, he acknowledges that they are best in moderation. When pursued to extremes the fruits tend to rot.

If as I have been claiming James is not just affirming religion, but making a case against nihilism, then the character of the saint takes on added significance. Saintliness, as the best that not only religion, but all of history has to offer, is a bastion against the meaninglessness and death James alludes to so vividly. James says he is "tempted" to claim that these characters are aberrations, but what would it mean to make that claim? If they are simply anomalies are we somehow more justified in dismissing them? If we consider the sort of naturalistic determinism that James argues against, it is easy to imagine such an argument being made: saints are so anomalous as to be simply an evolutionary accident and thus not worthy of any serious consideration when the subject at hand is the character of existence. Given the centrality of his discussion of saintliness, it is clear James would want to avoid such a conclusion. He stops short of labeling saints "monstrous aberrations," and in fact he goes so far as to suggest that we should all be saints if we are able.

In the final lecture of *The Varieties* James provides us with his own assessment of the broader significance of religion for human life. He begins by summarizing the religious life as he has been describing it: 1) the visible world is part of a larger, more spiritual, more significant, universe; 2) our end is "union or harmonious relation" with that universe; 3) prayer or communion with the spirit of that universe achieves real effects; 4) it brings a new zest for life; and 5) a feeling of safety, a peaceful temperament, and affection for others. He affirms the value of pluralism and difference: "we must frankly recognize the fact that we live in partial systems, and that parts are not interchangeable in the spiritual life." (*VRE*, p. 437)

James discusses a possible "science of religions" and suggests, interestingly, that "the best man at this science might be the man who found it hardest to be personally devout." (*VRE*, p. 438). Professor James, perhaps? However, his conception of science and its approach to religion is not necessarily shared by other scientists, so James must address what he calls the "Survival Theory" of religion. In a nutshell, the Survival Theory posits religion as egotism, an anachronistic relic of primeval thought and sympathetic magic. James responds by attacking the supposed impersonal objectivity of science as shallow, arguing that human reality as we experience it is ultimately concrete and subjective. And given that religion is concerned with the individual destinies forged within that reality, it "must necessarily play an eternal part in human history."

Having established the importance of religion, James begins the task of summarizing. Religion gener-

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14. Feinstein treats this experience at length, comparing it carefully with an account of Henry James Sr.'s own such morbid experience. See Feinstein, *Becoming William James*, pp.241-250.

ates an enormous diversity of thought, but thought is secondary to feelings and conduct which tend to be the same across different religious traditions. These feelings are the "zest for life." James refers to the state of having them as the "faith-state." Together with creeds or beliefs, the faith state forms religions which, considered subjectively, must be acknowledged as "amongst the most important biological functions of mankind." The end of religion is not theological, but practical: "Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life…" (*VRE*, p. 453) This is ultimately vindication enough for James, but he still must consider religion in terms of its intellectual content. He offers a simple but bold summation of religion in two parts: an uneasiness and its solution. Our natural state seems somehow wrong, but it can be made right by properly aligning ourselves with the "higher powers." Religious experience essentially consists of the realization that some higher part of our being is continuous with that "higher power" outside of us and that salvation or liberation consists of being connected with it.

Finally, almost reluctantly, James asks whether we can say that all this is, in some sense, true. Does the higher power (at this point he is referring to it simply as "more") exist and in what way is union with it possible? Our experience of this "more" comes through the subconscious, an idea James alludes to elsewhere in *The Varieties*. As for what the "more" actually is, James is less clear. It is "an altogether other dimension of existence" which he finally concedes to call God.[15] James has already made it clear he wants nothing to do with the "metaphysical monster" of systematic theology; his God "is real since he produces real effects." Here God is explicitly a refuge from nihilism: "where God is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution are not the absolutely final things." (*VRE*, p. 462) Believing enables James to "keep more sane and true." A most pragmatic benefit indeed. The bleak reality of science is a real option for him, but ultimately it is his understanding of human experience that leads him to reject it in favor of a more meaningful, more religious conception of existence.

The genuine option for James was ultimately between religion and nihilism. Both were living options for him, and he believed the choice was both forced and momentous. Indeed, he felt that his life and his sanity were at stake, and this was true in some general sense, not simply because of any predisposition to depression and despair. The sick soul is in touch with reality. The issue at hand for James was the character of human existence, its purpose and meaning, and the possibility of its future. These were the final philosoph-

ical questions, the true philosophic concerns. To opt for religion, however vaguely expressed, was for James to opt for hope and a life worth living.[16]

It is not clear, however, that James has necessarily done much to dispel a contrasting understanding of religion of the sort associated more with those purveyors of the hermeneutics of suspicion: Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. They would claim that religion successfully provides life-supporting illusions but its optimism is in the end disingenuous; it is an elaborate and complex system for dealing with that which might otherwise be unbearable: the prospect of a meaningless and random universe in which suffering and death have the final word regarding human life. And if this were the truth, would we be pragmatically obligated to acknowledge it? Of course, a good pragmatist cannot make any final statements about the ultimate character of the universe, but can only acknowledge that as it stands there is no absolutely conclusive evidence one way or another. But we can ask what difference it makes to believe, or simply hope perhaps, one way or another. In which case we can take solace in the final words James offers in the postscript to *The Varieties*. If the choice is between resignation and hope, "the chance of salvation is enough."

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Note: This essay won the 2002 William James Society essay contest for *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

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15. James does offer a more explicit conception of God in the conclusion of *A Pluralistic Universe*.

16. And we must remember that belief was not certain for James, there were no guarantees. Certain critics cannot accept that this might be an authentic expression of religion. Consider Santayana's skepticism:

> All faiths were what they were experienced as being, in their capacity of faith; these faiths, not their objects, were the hard facts we must respect. We cannot pass, except under the illusion of the moment, to anything firmer or on a deeper level. There was accordingly no sense of security, no joy, in James's apology for personal religion. He did not really believe; he merely believed in the right of the believing you might be right if you believed.

I think joy occasionally made an appearance in James's work, and perhaps more importantly, hope is always present. James seems to garner disdain for his honesty in the simple admission that he did not, could not, know for certain. Santayana is quoted in Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986) p. 454.

WJ and the Craft of Tropes

by David Dannenbaum

That William James is a master literary craftsman comes as no surprise to readers of this newsletter. It is likely that many have, as I have done, collected a variety of his tropes to re-read for rejuvenation and inspiration. In my own collection are several that demonstrate his gift for a turn of phrase. For example, in a letter to Tom Ward (1868), James discusses the possibility of his suicide: "… sometimes when I despair of ever doing anything, [I] say, 'Why not step out into the green darkness?'"[1] The "green darkness" challenges readers to solve the mystery of James's modifying death with a metaphor for youth and life.

James also employs tropes to explain technical matters in his essays and books. In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), he coined the masterful metaphor, "The Stream of Thought," to demonstrate that consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up into bits; rather it flows continuously. Then, to explain why interruptions or changes in our environment do not stop the stream of our thought, he employed another trope: "The transition between the thought of one object and the thought of another is no more a break in the *thought* than a joint in a bamboo is a break in the wood. It is part of the *consciousness* as much as the joint is part of the bamboo."[2]

James used a brilliant simile when he delivered the Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College, and published them as *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909). Monists and absolutists had objected to phrases they found in James's writings on philosophy; they found them inconsistent and contradictory. In answer, he wrote:

> Place yourself at the centre of a man's philosophic vision and you understand at once all the different things it makes him write or say. But keep outside, …try to build the philosophy out of single phrases, taking first one and then another in seeking to make them fit and of course you fail. *You crawl over the thing like a myopic ant over a building, tumbling into every microscopic crack or fissure, finding nothing but inconsistencies, and never suspecting that a centre exists.* [italics added][3]

During the same lecture, he praised the literary style of Henri Bergson with words that I find appropriate for a description of James's own style:

> If anything can make hard things easy to follow, it is a style like Bergson's…[He has] a flexibility of verbal resource that follows the thought without a crease or wrinkle, as elastic silk underclothing follows the movements of one's body. The lucidity of Bergson's

way of putting things is what all readers are first struck by. It seduces you and bribes you in advance to become his disciple. It is a miracle and he a real magician.[4]

Like all great craftsmen, James worked very hard to acquire in his writing the appearance of ease. His apparent spontaneity intrigues us, his readers; his clarity stimulates us to imagine streams, bamboo joints, myopic ants, and freshly ironed thoughts. His wit invites us to join him on his side of the argument. And if we read the above quotes aloud, we discover a charm that James must have had—a charm that must have matched Mark Twain's on the platform. In fact, we would not be surprised if an actor, say Kevin Kline or David Straitharn, devised a one-man show based on James's writing.

These tropes did not spring from James's mind like Athena from the head of Zeus. He worked with his raw materials for long periods of time (it took him twelve years to write *Principles*[5]), and he described his process of composition in a letter to Mrs. Henry Whitman (July 4, 1890). James wrote, "Everything comes out wrong with me at first; but when once objectified in a crude shape, I can torture and poke and scrape and pat it till it offends me no more."[6]

James's description reminds me of a short, but memorable, passage in Richard Poirier's *Poetry and Pragmatism*: "…poetry is necessarily hard work. It is a wringing, a screwing, a turning of word, and its full rewards are to be realized only in the future."[7]

We describe what is going on in the universe through tropes. We get the word "trope" from Latin *tropus*, and from Greek *Tropos*, meaning "turn," "figure of speech." Thus, Poirier's phrase, "a wringing, a screwing, a turning of word," as if a line of poetry were a dowel turning in a lathe and being shaped by a chisel held by a master artisan. Craftsmanship, whether in furniture making or in writing, is, in Poirier's words, "work carried out with a certain regard for form, rigor and discipline."[8]

Tropes are tools, and must be put to work, as James tells us in this passage from *Pragmatism* (1907):

> But if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any…word as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash value, set it at work within the streams of your experience. It appears less a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*.[9]

Tropes never settle an issue; nor do they finalize a process. Creating a trope requires Poirier's "certain regard for form, rigor and discipline" and must be used to indicate James's "ways in which existing realities

may be changed."

Poirier lists seven writers whose work exemplifies the craftsmanship of literature: "…William James (and to some extent John Dewey) in tandem with American poets of a discernibly similar temperament, like [Henry David] Thoreau, [Walt] Whitman, [Robert] Frost, [Gertrude] Stein, and [Wallace] Stevens."[10] These writers believe that writing and manual labor are equally purposeful, that there should be no social distinctions separating the work of the writer and the work of a carpenter or a farmer. To Poirier, these writers implicitly acknowledged that, "if writing were to be otherwise perceived, it might alienate the writers themselves from the larger human community they hope to please and persuade."[11]

The trope is not only a product of language, but also a means to learn about ourselves, to find the shape of our lives, to find our place in our stream of experience. Poirier tells us that, when Emerson asks "Where do we find ourselves?" at the opening of *Experience*, "…the question of the essay becomes this: how do we ever find ourselves except *in* metaphor, in the *making* of metaphor …?"[12]

Metaphors and other tropes are not the sole property of philosophers and poets. Recently, I found that the manual labor of furniture-making uses tropes and accomplishes its goals with a certain regard for form, rigor, and discipline. As I researched and wrote articles about the history and design of furniture, I encountered carvers, turners, joiners, and sawyers, who left behind distinctive family names, because they had transformed blocks of wood into the objects of desire that we now call antiques.

While I read and took notes, I deconstructed high-boys into bonnet-tops, flame finials, and batwing brasses. I discovered that many late 17th-century and early 18th-century cabinetmakers concretely alluded to Greek architecture. The acanthus leaves of Corinthian columns enliven cabriole legs of card tables, and laurel wreathes, the skirts of desks. On the feet of pie-crust tea-tables are symbols of power and wealth: masterfully carved talons grasping a sphere, an idea that traveled to North America through London from China, where the concept began as a dragon's foot holding a pearl.[13]

In his book, *Old Ways of Working Wood*, Alex Bealer mourned the loss of the old crafts that, without electric power, produced these ambassadors from the history of our material culture. He counseled us:

Consider the lost emotional reactions to using hand tools: the resultant sounds and sights of thin wood shavings curling from a sharpened plane, the gentle hissing of the cutting blade, the solid note of a well-placed ax and the beauty of the clean chip flying to the ground, and the elemental natural rhythm of the saw,

and mallet on chisel, and rotation of wood brace; all these are about to be lost, too….When using hand tools, a man can learn about himself.[14]

Bealer, who passed away before the book was published in its revised edition, would have been happy to learn that, using the tropes of cabinetmaking, joiners continue to put tongues in grooves, turners still shape dowels into bamboo spindles, and carvers scoop out narrow grooves called quirks. These craftsmen's present work improves their skills for the next creation. One of them is Bob Dillon, who, in his workshop in Hackensack, Minnesota, makes Windsor chairs.[15]

Illustrations courtesy of Bob Dillon

They are masterpieces of design, and their makers must be master craftsmen. It took Bob Dillon several years to acquire the skills of turning, carving, and joining. To produce the bow-backs and arms, he also had to acquire the skills of steaming and bending the wood. The parts to be bent are suspended in a chamber filled with hot steam until the wood is in a plastic state. Then the wood is carefully bent to the necessary curve on a bending form. It takes a long time to acquire this skill, and beginners have broken a lot of wood and often scalded their hands while learning to do this.

About the Windsor chair, it's the design that you notice first: the upward thrust of lithely curved dowels that are kept from flying away by a solid saddle seat supported by legs splayed outwards to grip the floor. This chair is all wood, but hardly wooden. It aspires to defy gravity, yet provides stability while holding you comfortably erect. The back reclines slightly, and when you sit in a Windsor, you feel the spindles bend with your weight and offer support to a spine that has probably been slouching all day. That slight recline and that support for the spine make your breathing easier and help you relax. And you are ready to read or converse with your friends.

A good handmade Windsor chair looks delicate, but is by no means fragile. In fact, the life span of such

a chair is often several times that of a machine-made item bought from a trendy boutique or furniture warehouse outlet. Windsors last because the design takes into account that while sitting, no one, regardless of the chair style, is ever still. We all frequently shift our bulk from one buttock to another when we cross our legs and assume the pose of cool authority. Or, to score a conversational point, we suddenly lean forward in a burst of energy. Or to show boredom or exhaustion, we press against the back as we stretch our legs in front of us and cross our ankles. Because the Windsor's backs, legs, and arms are not attached to one another, they can adjust to the stresses produced by our near-constant movements without breaking. Craftsmanship triumphs over human foibles.

So, not entirely lost are the growing piles of wood shavings and the hiss of planes smoothing planks. But the sights, sounds and tropes of old newsrooms are— the form, rigor and discipline of writing with pencils and manual typewriters.

I grew up watching news reporters apply their craft in the old city room of The Houston Post. From all those durable Remingtons and Royals, what a delicious, energizing racket! The snap of keys striking ribbon to paper, the clunk of the space bar, the ding of the carriage bell, and the clack and burr of the carriage return. Then the *zurrrzz* when the reporter grabbed the paper from the platen and slammed it down on his desk, pulled a #2 pencil from behind his ear and, in sure and graceful strokes, carved away needless words, turned the dull phrase into a vital image, and joined the surviving phrases together with S-curves and arcs.

Not a single movement was wasted. The writers, focused on their words, silently nodded in agreement with a city councilman's comment or shook their heads in dismay at the very tender age of a murder victim. And the sounds and the feel of the contact of finger pads to round keys restored to the writers the very energy they had expended to transform raw information into stories that readers could use to determine their votes or plan their condolences. For these writers, craftsmanship was truly *hands-on*. What they literally *turned out* was, in James's words, "an indication in which existing realities may be changed."

While I appreciate the convenience that personal computers have brought to the craft of writing, I still have to use a hard copy when I revise my first draft. And with my number 2 pencil, I add the "t" to "here" so that it becomes "there, "and I strike through the expression so detested by Strunk and White, "the fact that."

Touching the words on paper helps me find what I really want to say, and without having to waste paper retyping the entire essay, I can use the curser on my computer's monitor to insert new phrases and delete

needless passages before filing it on my hard-drive. By thus writing with both pencil and computer—and using the tropes appropriate to each of them—I learn about myself and the existing realities that may be changed by the reader and myself.

Tropes, such as *quirks* and *coursers*, help us find ourselves when we set them to work within the streams of our experience. Craftsmanship, an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed, remains hands-on, even when tools rely less on muscle and more on electricity.
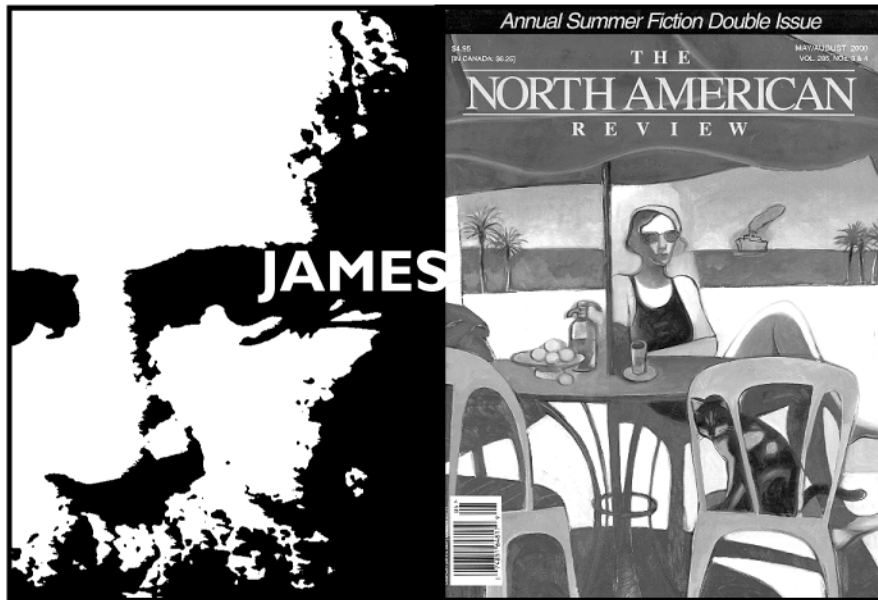
Variable speed drills have replaced augers, and personal computers have replaced typewriters. The products, whether Windsor chairs or essays, are turned out through the tropes and tools of craftsmen. Tools and tropes change—even the craftsmen change—because each accomplishment is not an end, but a Jamesian program for more work.

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Notes
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2. William James, *The Principles of Psychology.* New York, Henry Holt, 1890, p. 240. [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981/83, pp. 233-34]
3. William James, from "Bergson and His Critique of Intellectualism," *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy* (1909). In *William James Writings, 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick, New York, Library of America, 1987, pp. 750-1.
4. Ibid, p. 732.
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10. Ibid, p. 80.
11. Ibid, p. 81.
12. Ibid, p. 49.
13. John T. Kirk, *American Furniture: Understanding Styles, Construction, and Quality.* New York, Harry Abrams, Inc., 2000, p. 137.
14. Alex Bealer, *Old Ways of Working Wood: The Techniques and Tools of a Time-Honored Craft* (Revised Edition). Edison, NJ, Castle Books, 1996, p. 15.
15. Bob Dillon makes Windsor chairs and maintains a website (www.bobdillonwindsorchairs.com) where you can access an interesting e-zine on a variety of topics, from the crafts of furniture making to poetry and philosophy.

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MAY/AUGUST 2000
VOL. 285, NOS. 3 & 4

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