

WILLIAM JAMES ON THE HUMANITIES

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ABSTRACT

William James's conception of the humanities and their value opens a way to restoring them to the center of the academic curriculum but without compromising other disciplines. He does this by showing that any discipline, whether the natural and social sciences, or even the various branches of engineering and other technical fields, qualify as one of the humanities or liberal arts if studied historically. The immediate aim of a humanistic or liberal education, in James's historical conception of it, is to acquaint students with the best achievements in all fields of human endeavor so that they might emulate, equal and even surpass them. Its ultimate aim is to sharpen students' discernment of real quality wherever and whenever they encounter it, particularly among rival politicians and their policies. Implicit in James's ideal of a liberal education are some of his most distinctive philosophical ideas, viz. evolutionism, functionalism, pragmatism, individualism, and personalism.

There is properly no history, only biography.

R. W. Emerson

The humanities are in crisis, their value and role being questioned as never before. They have been increasingly shunted aside by the sciences and technical fields. Vocational programs in areas like engineering and business administration now dominate the curriculum, enjoying the lion's share of prestige and funding once enjoyed by classics, philosophy, and history, and attracting students intent on lucrative careers. A grim sign of the times is that the philosophy department at England's Middlesex University, not to mention other philosophy departments at British universities, has been

threatened with closure. Ironically, this crisis has been exacerbated by the humanists themselves who sharply disagree over the nature, role, and worth of humanistic or liberal education:

Now the humanities have become the Ottoman Empire of the academy, a sprawling, incoherent, and steadily declining congeries of disparate communities, each formed around one or another credal principle of ideology and identity, and each with its own complement of local sultans, khedives, and potentates. And the empire steadily erodes, as colleges and universities eliminate such core humanities departments as classics . . . , and enrollment figures for humanities courses continue to fall or stagnate.¹

The humanistic disciplines or liberal arts began to lose ground early in the twentieth century, particularly in the United States, when science, engineering, and technology began to dominate the curriculum in American colleges and universities to meet the needs of a newly emergent and vibrant industrial and commercial society. Describing the state of American higher education then, Jacques Barzun writes:

The American college had been topped, if not crowned, by the graduate and professional schools. The physical sciences had taken over a large slice of the undergraduate curriculum and forced a new standard upon intellect everywhere—specialization. Out of the bits and pieces of the college “electives” a student was supposed to educate himself and acquire or prepare for a specialty.²

In his short and engaging lecture of 1907, “The Social Value of the College-Bred,” William James spiritedly addressed this incipient crisis in humanistic education. He here gives as succinct and cogent an *apologia* for a broad education in the humanities or liberal arts—classics, history, philosophy, and literature—as one could hope for, and speaks to the condition of humanistic education today as he did to that of his own time. James’s lecture, though, is more than a *pièce d’occasion*, giving expression as it does to

some of his most distinctive ideas and bringing them to bear in defense of a liberal education. In what follows, I shall give a brief exposition of the lecture, explicate the philosophy underlying it, and show how it meets our current crisis head on.

James begins disarmingly with the common-place observation that seasoned artisans have naturally developed through their own expertise and experience a sure sense of what counts as good work and bad:

Whether his trade be pleading at the bar or surgery or plastering or plumbing, it develops a critical sense in him for that sort of occupation. He understands the difference between second-rate and first-rate work in his whole branch of industry; he gets to know a good job in his own line as soon as he sees it; and getting to know this in his own line, he gets a faint sense of what good work may mean anyhow, that may, if circumstances favor, spread into his judgments elsewhere.³

He believes that development of this “critical sense” should be the chief end and benefit of a more general education in the humanities. It should aim to give us “a general sense of what, under various disguises, *superiority* has always signified and may still signify. The feeling for a good human job anywhere, the admiration of the really admirable, the disesteem of what is cheap and trashy and impermanent—this is what we call the critical sense, the sense for ideal values.”⁴ And the ultimate object of this critical sense is the quality, not so much of workmanship, but principally of persons. “The best claim that a college education can possibly make on your respect,” says James, is “that it should *help you to know a good man when you see him.*”⁵ The good man, or woman, James undoubtedly intends is the expert in whatever field; but perhaps most importantly, the one he has in mind is the exemplary political leader. A desirable effect and even a goal of a liberal education is endowing its beneficiaries with the spirit of political discernment so that they can distinguish a true statesman from a political hack or demagogue, something crucial to maintaining a free and just society: “Our colleges ought to have lit up in us a lasting relish for the better kind of man, a loss of appetite for mediocrities, and a disgust

for cheapjacks. We ought to smell, as it were, the difference of quality in men and their proposals when we enter the world of affairs about us.”⁶

Now to be able to tell who or what qualifies as genuinely good we need to have in mind certain models of human excellence in all fields of human endeavor to which we can compare them to see whether they measure up. Those models are found in the past. There we find arrayed, as in some vast museum, all sorts of human creations—philosophies and religions; scientific theories and technology; political, legal and economic systems; works of fine and practical arts—each representing the pursuit of perfection in all its variety. From them we can learn which have met the test of time and so proven their superiority thereby setting standards by which we can more accurately assess the merits of our current endeavors and of those who engage in them. From them too we can learn something of the qualities of mind, traits of character, and ideals belonging to those who succeeded in their undertakings, and also of their struggles, the obstacles they had to overcome and the vicissitudes they had to face. Consequently, maintains James, higher education, in its quest for touchstones of human excellence in all fields, must have as its focus the human agent. A liberal education, then, is essentially historical in character; its real subject being biography. Here in outline is James’s conception of it:

The sifting of human creations!—nothing less that this is what we ought to mean by the humanities. Essentially this means biography; what our colleges should teach is, therefore, biographical history, that not of politics merely, but of anything and everything so far as human efforts and conquests are factors that have played their part. Studying in this way, we learn what types of activity have stood the test of time; we acquire standards of the excellent and durable. All our arts and sciences and institutions are but so many quests of perfection on the part of men; and when we see how diverse the types of excellence may be, how various the tests, how flexible the adaptations, we gain a richer sense of what the terms “better” and “worse” may signify in general. Our critical sensibilities grow both more acute and less fanatical. We sympathize with

men's mistakes even in the act of penetrating them; we feel the pathos of lost causes and misguided epochs even while we applaud what overcame them.⁷

James here provides an historical criterion of worth. Time determines what is "better" or "worse." For example, the scientific method, democracy, capitalism, and common law have emerged from the crucible of history as superior to their rivals. Incidentally, we have here an implicit argument against moral and cultural relativism: certain things have proven themselves *objectively* superior to others by dint of actually surviving and beating out the competition in the ongoing cultural struggle for existence. Values are not arbitrarily dictated from above or conceived *a priori*, but emerge spontaneously over time. Contributing to a thing's value is its usefulness, or the benefits it yields for individuals and society. This, by the way, is an aspect of James's pragmatism, briefly discussed below.

A significant implication of James's conception of the humanities as historical inquiry is that any academic discipline whatsoever is grist for the humanistic mill if it is studied historically:

You can give humanistic value to almost anything by teaching it historically. Geology, economics, mechanics, are humanities when taught with reference to the successive achievements of the geniuses to which these sciences owe their being. Not taught thus, literature remains grammar, art a catalogue, history a list of dates, and natural science a sheet of formulas and weights and measures.⁸

Furthermore, all subjects, even the most technical and abstract and apparently least suitable for such treatment, ought to be studied historically since the human factor is inexpugnable from them. "Let in every modern subject," James urges, "sure that any subject will prove humanistic, if its setting be kept only wide enough."⁹

Developing a critical sense of what is genuinely good is, for James, equally indispensable for the well-being of both the individual and society. For the individual, it

results in freedom of thought, independence of judgment, and moral autonomy. But failing to develop it is nothing short of catastrophic—James’s language could not be stronger in its denunciation—because it marks a failure of one to think for one’s self about the good by abdicating that prerogative to others. “But to have spent one’s youth at college, in contact with the choice and rare and precious, and yet still to be a blind prig or vulgarian, unable to scent out human excellence or to divine it amid its accidents, to know it only when ticketed and labeled and forced on us by others, this indeed should be accounted the very calamity and shipwreck of a higher education.”¹⁰

A citizenry possessed of a critical sense of the good is the *sine qua non* of a flourishing democracy. James notes that democracy is reputed by its critics to have a baneful leveling effect on its populace and tends to breed a stultifying mediocrity that smothers merit. In 1907, James believed that the American Republic was at a crossroads, and warned (echoing de Tocqueville):

Democracy is on its trial, What its critics now affirm is that its preferences are inveterately for the inferior. . . .Vulgarity enthroned and institutionalized, elbowing everything superior from the highway, this, they tell us, is our irremediable destiny; and the picture-papers of the European continent are already drawing Uncle Sam with the hog instead of the eagle for his heraldic emblem.¹¹

If democracy is to survive and flourish, insists James, the people must be wise enough to pick and follow the best leaders. James adheres to Carlyle’s “Great Man” theory of history; human progress is made by individual geniuses who establish patterns of action and thought thence to be appropriated and followed by the multitude:

Mankind does nothing save through initiatives on the part of inventors, great or small, and imitation by the rest of us—these are the sole factors active in human progress. Individuals of genius show the way, and set the patterns, which common people then adopt and follow. *The rivalry of the patterns is the history of the world.* Our democratic problem thus is

statable in ultra-simple terms: Who are the kind of men from whom our majorities shall take their cue? Whom shall they treat as rightful leaders?¹²

However, James thinks that this choice of leaders properly devolves on those possessed of a critical sense, the liberally educated, who can judiciously discern who is best and why. They have not only the capacity, but the obligation no less, to help identify the superior leaders. They constitute a natural aristocracy, whose motto should be noblesse oblige, who ought to act disinterestedly for the common good. Identifying himself with them, James remarks, “we stand for ideal interests solely, for we have no corporate selfishness and wield no powers of corruption.”¹³ Ever the optimist, his faith and hope is that these ideal interests in time must prevail thereby enabling democracy to flourish: “The ceaseless whisper of the more permanent ideals, the steady tug of truth and justice, give them but time, *must* warp the world in their direction.”¹⁴

However, if seats of higher learning, as repositories of ideals, fail to inculcate in their students a critical sense of what is truly good so they can set the “tone” for society as a whole, then, James warns, the populace will be left to the predations of the popular press and the mass market. He speaks here as a future historian reflecting ruefully on what had come to pass:

By the middle of the twentieth century the higher institutions of learning had lost all influence over public opinion in the United States. But the mission of raising the tone of democracy, which they had proved themselves so lamentably unfitted to exert, was assumed with rare enthusiasm and prosecuted with extraordinary skill and success by a new educational power; and for the clarification of their human sympathies and elevation of their human preferences, the people at large acquired the habit of resorting exclusively to the guidance of certain private literary adventures, commonly designated in the market by the affectionate name of ten-cent magazines.¹⁵

To see how prescient James unfortunately was, for “certain private literary adventures” substitute “privately owned mass media,” media that now form a spider-web of multinational conglomerates whose only ideal, if it can be called that, is profit. Who sets the tone of popular culture today? Is it the university with its “ideal interests”? The answers, I fear, are too obvious.

For Plato, the principal aim of education, particularly in philosophy, is statesmanship so that the rulers (guardians) might rule justly; for James, its principal aim is citizenship so that citizens might choose wisely their own leaders. Like Dewey, James believes in education for an enlightened democracy. He is calling for a meritocracy open to all comers where admissibility is based, not on social or economic class or blood, but on possession of a “critical sense” motivated by what Matthew Arnold called “a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.”¹⁶ James’s plea for an educated electorate recalls Thomas Jefferson’s admonition: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”¹⁷ For James, then, the liberal arts are not effete and ornamental offerings with a whiff of the finishing school about them, designed at best to enable us to make polite and clever conversations at cocktail parties. They are not “soft” subjects, but rather, eminently muscular and practical ones that should convince even the most intransigent skeptics and cynics of their worth.

James ends his lecture with a profile of the truly cultured (liberally educated). They are not cynics who know the price of everything but the value of nothing, nor so jaded that they are incapable of enjoying anything; their tastes are not at the mercy of the winds of fashion, and neither do they try to lord it over others by flaunting their “superior” culture. They are not among those who are “unable to know any good thing when they see it, incapable of enjoyment unless a printed label gives them leave.”¹⁸ By contrast, says James, “Real culture lives by sympathies and admirations, not by dislikes and disdains—under all misleading wrappings it pounces unerringly upon the human core.”¹⁹ Cultured persons know the good when they see it, and rejoice in it. They can distinguish infallibly the tinsel from the silver, the fool’s gold from the gold.

Now how might James’s program for a liberal arts education based upon an historical search for standards of human excellence, and for the human core at the heart

of any field, practically pan out if actually implemented in an academic curriculum? Consider, for example, how it might transform evolutionary biology into a humanistic discipline. Students would study, together with the traditional biological sciences, the history of biology; more specifically, the history of evolutionary theory, from the earliest speculations of Anaximander down to Darwin's theory of natural selection right on to current theories. They would consider how and why Darwin's theory eventually prevailed over rival evolutionary theories like Lamarck's. Moreover, they would look into Darwin's habits of thought and temperament such as his empirical rigor and legendary caution, and their influence on the formulation and publication of his theory. Students would become aware of the personal conflicts Darwin faced, even at home with his wife Emma, when he contemplated the implications for religion of natural selection. However, their historical investigations would not be confined to the science of evolutionary theory. They would concern themselves with the theory in its broadest cultural context and inquire into its impact on society, politics, and economics and its implications for religion, philosophy, and art. As a result of their historical inquiries into the origins of their science, students would come to understand, among other things, why the theory of natural selection qualifies as the best explanation for the origins and development of life and thus serves as a model scientific theory; what qualities of mind and temperament, such as Darwin's own, best serve the interests of science and so worthy of their emulation; and how science necessarily affects the larger culture of which it is inescapably a part.

As indicated above, James's "The Social Value of the College-Bred" embodies some of his most fundamental and distinctive ideas; among them are evolutionism, functionalism, pragmatism, individualism, and personalism, to which I shall now turn.

The massive influence of Darwin on James's thought is evident in his characterization of history as "the rivalry of the patterns" of thought and action, suggesting the competitive struggle for acceptance among ideas analogous to the struggle for existence among organisms. The Darwinian impact is further evident in the following passage from his "Talks to Teachers" where James describes the evolutionary function of consciousness as simply an adaptation abetting the survival of the human organism:

Man, we now have reason to believe, has been evolved from infra-human ancestors, in whom pure reason hardly existed, if at all, and whose mind, so far as it can have had any function, would appear to have been an organ for adapting their movements to the impressions received from the environment, so as to escape the better from destruction. Consciousness would thus seem in the first instance to be nothing but a sort of superadded biological perfection—useless unless it prompted to useful conduct, and inexplicable apart from that consideration.²⁰

In his account here of the human mind (consciousness) as having evolved in our prehistoric hominid ancestors specifically as “an organ for adapting their movements to the impressions received from the environment, so as to escape the better from destruction,” James gives expression to the psychological theory of functionalism, which James originated and upon which his reputation in psychology partly depends. In his seminal essay, “Does Consciousness Exist?,” James argues parsimoniously that consciousness (mind) is not a substance or thing but rather a “function” or process facilitating the adaptation of the organism to its environment.

This imperative of survival dictated by natural selection justifies James’s preference for the practical man or woman over the purely theoretical one. In the above-mentioned “Talks to Teachers,” he contrasts the two human types. On the classical view of Plato and Aristotle, “Man’s supreme glory, . . . , is to be a *rational* being, to know absolute and eternal and universal truth.”²¹ This viewpoint counsels our withdrawal from the tumultuous scene of life into solitude thereby better to contemplate disinterestedly the nature and causes of things and so achieve what Aristotle calls “theoretical wisdom.” But in the best of all possible worlds, says James, “the man of contemplation would be treated as only half a human being, passion and practical resource would become once more glories of our race, a concrete victory over this earth’s outward powers of darkness would appear an equivalent for any amount of passive spiritual culture, and conduct would remain as the test of every education worthy of the name.”²² James demands that we enter the hurly-burly of life and strenuously engage the world. The very practical ideal of a specifically liberal arts education should be the

cultivation in its beneficiaries of the ability to discern true worth in its various manifestations, particularly in the political realm, and to distinguish it from the false and meretricious. James believed fervently in the possibility of amelioration—his educational ideal is nothing less than the material and moral improvement of the human race. Note that James’s esteeming the practical type over the theoretical is grounded in his functional and evolutionary psychology, in his understanding of the human mind as an adaptive instrument—“man, whatever else he may be, is primarily a practical being, whose mind is given him to aid in adapting him to this world’s life.”²³

James’s conception of the aim of a specifically liberal arts education as making us more discriminatory with respect to values—those qualities which, among other things, improve our multiple adaptations and make for survival—is grounded in his conception of the aim of education in general. He defines “education” as such as “the organizing of *resources* in the human being, of powers of conduct which shall fit him to his social and physical world. . . . *the organization of acquired habits of conduct and tendencies to behavior.*”²⁴ A liberal arts education contributes to this organization as it bears ultimately on our capacity to select the best leaders.

James’s insistence that the ultimate aim and value of education lie in practice, particularly in its facilitating the adaptation of human beings to their social and physical environments, is clearly an expression of another of his fundamental ideas, namely, pragmatism. Pragmatism stipulates that beliefs and theories are ultimately validated by their utility. The hallmark of truth is the practical benefits which flow from its application to the world, of the positive difference it makes in human affairs. The ultimate test of “every education worthy of the name,” then, is the improvements it makes in the lives of individual persons and the life of the community in which they are members—in brief, its contribution to a flourishing democracy whose citizens are responsibly engaged in civic affairs.

Central to James’s conception of humanistic education as the study of historical biography is his belief that superior individuals do in fact play a decisive role in determining the course of human events, though in tandem with forces in the larger social and physical environments such as described in Marx’s economic determinism. This is an expression of James’s philosophical individualism, another fundamental and recurrent

theme of his thought. In the following passage, taken from his essay “Great Men and Their Environment,” he contrasts his own position with the environmental determinism of Herbert Spencer: To the question, “What are the causes that make communities change from generation to generation?” James answers:

The difference is due to the accumulated influences of individuals, of their examples, their initiatives, and their decisions. The Spencerian school replies, the changes are irrespective of persons, and independent of individual control. They are due to the environment, to the circumstances, the physical geography, the ancestral conditions, the increasing experience of outer relations.²⁵

James takes a middle position between the extremes of environmental determinism and individual initiative signaling their reciprocal influence. According to James, great human individuals are in a reciprocal relationship with their environment, both physical and social. Geniuses occasionally emerge, though their origins are obscure, and if they happen to be born into a propitious cultural environment in which their talents can develop and flourish then they stand to significantly influence their society. On the other hand, if they are born into an environment that denies them any opportunity and scope for the cultivation and exercise of their talents then these will atrophy and die and so have no impact on their social environment. Thus, had Beethoven been born on the American frontier he would not have become Beethoven. James, yet again showing the influence of Darwin, compares great individuals and their cultural environment to the spontaneous variations in organisms and their natural environment. Those organisms that have traits well adapted to their habitat will, as it were, be “selected” by it to survive, prosper and reproduce, and, through their progeny, will in turn alter their environment by becoming dominant in it. By contrast, those organisms lacking these adaptive traits will not be selected for survival and reproduction and will eventually face extinction. As James puts it, “the relation of the visible environment to the great man is in the main exactly what it is to the ‘variation’ in the darwinian philosophy. It chiefly adopts or rejects, preserves or destroys, in short *selects* him.”²⁶ Expanding on this reciprocation between individuals and their environment, with natural selection as his key, James affirms:

The mutations of society, then, from generation to generation, are in the main due directly or indirectly to the acts or the example of individuals whose genius was so adapted to the receptivities of the moment, or whose accidental position of authority was so critical that they became ferments, initiators of movement, setters of precedence or of fashion, centres of corruption, or destroyers of other persons, whose gifts, had they had free play, would have led society in another direction.²⁷

He thus neatly explains the distinct but complementary roles of individuals and their environment in terms of production and preservation respectively: “The environment *preserves* the conception which it was unable to *produce* in any brain less idiosyncratic than my own.”²⁸

On James’s view, moreover, the superiority of certain individuals lies not only in their decisive alteration of the course of human events—either for better or worse—but also in their unique and irreplaceable insights into things. They made possible what we all can now know and enjoy, though without them we could not. Thus, “Rembrandt must teach us to enjoy the struggle of light with darkness, Wagner to enjoy peculiar musical effects; Dickens gives a twist to our sentimentality, Artemus Ward to our humor; Emerson kindles a new moral light within us.”²⁹ If, for example, Rembrandt and Wagner had not lived, then the former’s particular chiaroscuro and the latter’s peculiar chromaticism would never have been. However, though James extols the ideas and deeds of great individuals as the proper object of study in a liberal arts education, he, in the spirit of Emerson, encourages neither blind hero worship nor mindless imitation but emulation. “Individuals of genius” only “show the way, and set the patterns, which common people then adopt and follow.” They are mentors and guides who kindle and lead our own ideas and actions. As he says in another essay, “The Importance of Individuals,” in “picking out from history our heroes, and communing with their kindred spirits—in imagining as strongly as possible what differences their individualities brought about in this world, whilst its surface was still plastic in their hands, and what

whilom feasibilities they made impossible—each one of us may best fortify and inspire what creative energy may lie in his own soul.”³⁰

Related to James’s individualism is his affirmation of, in a variety of ways, the reality, integrity, inviolability, and supreme importance of the individual person—what I call his “personalism.” (Though James does not officially belong to the philosophical school of Personalism as such, his affirmation of the personal in his philosophy is sufficient to characterize it as personalistic.) By recommending that the study of history should properly be biographical, James intended restoring persons to their rightful place in the scheme of things. But in so doing James was swimming against the intellectual tide of his day and, for that matter, our own.

During James’s lifetime, science, in the interest of parsimony and quantification, had become hyper-reductionist, a trend evident early on in the physics of Galileo and continuing to gather steam to the present. According to the strictures of modern science, the description of the world, whether the human world described by the social sciences or the physical world described by the natural sciences, should be as impersonal as possible, rigorously expunging any reference to persons and their subjectivities. It was thought that describing the world in terms of personal attributes, desires and purposes was intolerably atavistic, superstitious and subjective and so a distortion of reality. Science should cleanse itself utterly of anthropomorphism and aim instead at a perfectly objective description of things. James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* describes science as “utterly repudiating the personal point of view. She catalogues her elements and records her laws indifferent as to what purpose may be shown forth by them, and constructs her theories quite careless of their bearing on human anxieties and fates.”³¹ Scientists seek to quash the personal element, and believe, in James’s characterization of their attitude, that “the less we mix the private with the cosmic, the more we dwell in universal and impersonal terms, the truer heirs of Science we become.”³²

And not even psychology, the one domain where the person should be paramount as the principal object of study, was exempt from this rampant reductionism. In James’s time, positivist psychologists and philosophers came increasingly to deny the reality of persons, regarding them instead as merely transient and illusory epiphenomena thrown up willy-nilly as accidental byproducts of an impersonal evolutionary process. In James’s

characterization of this psychological reductionism in his *Varieties*, “personality, so far from being an elementary force in nature, is but a passive resultant of the really elementary forces, physical, chemical, physiological, and psycho-physical, which are all impersonal and general in character.”³³ James likens persons thus reduced to “bubbles on the foam which coats a stormy sea” which are “made and unmade by the forces of the wind and water.”³⁴ At a further extreme, behaviorists consigned the very concept of the person to the dustbin of history, believing it an obsolete and redundant vestige of “folk” psychology, an unwholesome mixture of religion, superstition, and metaphysics.

Now James, significantly, though himself a ‘scientific’ psychologist who, following Wilhelm Wundt’s example in Leipzig, established the first experimental psychology laboratory in America, nevertheless plumped for the fundamental and inexpugnable reality of persons against the strident reductionists. For James, the subjective or personal factor in our experience of the world is not negligible and certainly not dismissible. Indeed, our affective and volitional response to reality, the way it “feels” to us at the personal level and the sense we have that it is we ourselves who feel it, provides us the best and most immediate access to what is real; it gives us a tacit knowledge of things which science, with its abstract concepts, is once removed from. A scientific account of reality is once-removed and incomplete since it has to do with only the symbols of reality, not the reality itself, which is accessible only to personal experience. “So long as we deal with the cosmic and the general,” observes James, “we deal only with the symbols of reality, but *as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term.*”³⁵

James analyzes our experience of the external world as an indivisible fusion of both objective and subjective parts: “the objective part is the sum total of whatsoever at any given time we may be thinking of, the subjective part is the inner ‘state’ in which the thinking comes to pass.” Objects of our thought, or ideas, are “but ideal pictures of something whose existence we do not inwardly possess but only point at outwardly,” whereas “the inner state is our very experience itself; its reality and that of our experience are one. A conscious field *plus* its object as felt or thought of *plus* an attitude towards the object *plus* the sense of a self to whom the attitude belongs.” Moreover, the subjective part of our experience is no abstraction like a concept, nor reducible to an idea or mental

picture, and certainly no mere epiphenomenon; it is real—"a *full fact*." "The axis of reality," says James tellingly, "runs solely through the egotistic places—they are strung upon it like so many beads."³⁶ Omitting this subjective part of our experience from our descriptions of the world, as does science, leaves us with a desiccated view, much like substituting a menu for a real meal, or a map for the place it represents. James locates the core of our subjectivity or personality in our "passional" or emotional nature. "Individuality is founded in feeling," James maintains, "and the recesses of feeling, . . . , are the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making, and directly perceive how events happen, and how work is actually done. Compared with this world of living individualized feelings, the world of generalized objects which the intellect contemplates is without solidity or life."³⁷

Little wonder, then, that James should exalt the individual as the chief determiner of history and turn history into biography. A biography to have depth, to be complete and well rounded, must plumb the "subjective part" of a person's experience since it is "a *full fact*" through which the "axis of reality" runs. For James, a philosophy is the result of the reciprocation between a person's temperament and the world. In his *A Pluralistic Universe*, he states, "A philosophy is the expression of a man's intimate character, and all definitions of the universe are but the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it."³⁸ The same is true of science, art, and religion. It is not enough for the student of biographical history to be conversant with the "objective part" of an individual's experience, with her ideas, beliefs and theories, but as well to know her emotional and volitional reactions to life—that is, to enter empathetically into her life and vicariously experience it as she lived it and so experience reality as she did. James suggests as much in saying, "We sympathize with men's mistakes even in the act of penetrating them; we feel the pathos of lost causes and misguided epochs even while we applaud what overcame them."³⁹ Thus, liberally educated students of evolutionary biology would have read not only *The Origin of Species* for the fundamentals of Darwin's theory, but also *The Voyage of the Beagle* for Darwin's graphic account of his raw experience of the wildernesses of South America and the Pacific islands, of his actual encounter with the exotic flora and fauna of these regions, and of the wonderment and fascination they inspired in him. In so doing, students would come to appreciate that the theory of natural

selection is more than an abstract theory, and not the product of a disembodied mind, but instead the creation of a whole man who was emotionally as well as intellectually engaged with the world. They would come to see the theory in the round, so to speak, and how it emerged from the larger context of Darwin's personal life and times.

James's linked theories of evolution, functionalism, pragmatism and personalism, implicit in his *apologia* for liberal education, give it the more cogency. The most fundamental of them, evolutionary theory with its imperative of adapt or die, explains the functionality of consciousness in enabling the human organism to react optimally to its environment; and a philosophical corollary of functionalist psychology is that the products of consciousness like beliefs, theories, and ideas are ultimately validated by their utility. That James's thoughts on humanistic education are firmly grounded in the biological and psychological sciences makes them authoritative; that they are informed by his high esteem and deep appreciation for persons in their wholeness and irreducibility renders them humane.

James's program of liberal education, if implemented, would mitigate the current crisis in the humanities in the following ways: First, it would restore the humanities to pride of place in the academic curriculum, not at the expense of the sciences and the technical and vocational disciplines, but by the simple expedient of teaching them historically. These latter subjects would lose nothing in the bargain but have everything to gain in the way of increased depth and breadth. This would have the further merit of bridging C. P. Snow's "two cultures"—the humanistic and scientific.

Second, James's program would provide an antidote to overspecialization in the academy that James warned against but continues unabated to the present. In his essay, "The Ph.D. Octopus," which, incidentally, should be required reading for all candidates for the doctoral degree, James laments the constriction of the mind resulting from the increasingly narrower specialization occurring in the universities of his day. James wryly remarked somewhere that in overly specializing students learn more and more about less and less until they know a lot about nothing. Narrow specialization now has even fragmented the liberal arts themselves thereby defeating the cultivation of well-roundedness that is their hallmark. James's remedy for the narrowness of mind bedeviling overspecialization in the sciences and liberal arts is to study them historically.

Third, James's program, by restoring the humanities to the center of the curriculum, would serve to check reductionism because their irreducible subject matter is the meaning and value of the human person. As a methodological principle reductionism is indispensable to the work of the natural sciences and, to a lesser degree, the social sciences. However, it has no place in the humanities since it diminishes them and threatens their integrity by reducing the human or the personal, which is their sole and proper object, to something less than itself. In the humanities, an unapologetic nonreductionism should be the rule, otherwise the very idea of the human is lost. Our current crisis in the humanities, James suggests, can only be resolved if persons are accorded primacy and value. James understands very well that a truly liberal and well-rounded education must include the human factor—it must put the *human* back into “humanities,” thereby justifying its etymology.

Fortunately, James's conception of history as the master discipline integrating the sciences with the humanities has not gone unnoticed. Barzun, himself an apostle of James, was long exercised over the conflict between the sciences and humanities and believed that the history of science might serve as the *via media* between them. Reading James's “The Social Value of the College-Bred” confirmed him in this belief. In his *A Stroll with William James*, Barzun writes that the history of science is now firmly entrenched as an indispensable discipline, fully vindicating James's view of history as the queen of the sciences and the lynchpin of the academic curriculum:

Since the crusade which some of us launched five decades ago, the history of science has become part of the curriculum in many colleges, and the monumental *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, recently completed under the editorship of an historian of science, has proved that James's grasp and statement of the point still holds a lesson for culture. It will continue to do so as long as intellectual provincialism rules any discipline or profession.⁴⁰

Barzun notes also that James's conception of a liberal arts education anticipated James B. Conant's program for the historical teaching of science to Harvard undergraduates described in his *On Understanding Science, An Historical Approach*. What needs doing

now is an expansion of the work already begun by the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* and Conant.

James's conception of the goal and value of a liberal education, though, is by no means unobjectionable. I shall here consider some possible objections to his view and reply to them.

First, James's hope that a liberal education would promote the cause of an enlightened democracy by enabling its citizens to make more discerning judgments regarding the relative merits of its leaders has not always been vindicated as is found in the bitter experience of the twentieth century. One need only think of Nazis like Joseph Goebbels who held a doctorate in the humanities, or those fellow travelers like Heidegger and Emanuel Hirsch, the disgraced but distinguished theologian. There can be no doubt that these men enjoyed a humanistic education of the highest order but in their cases it failed to produce political or even moral enlightenment—as the saying goes, one may lead a horse to water but not make it drink. On the other hand, citizens lacking a liberal arts education are no more likely to become civically enlightened. Cultivating a liberally educated citizenry is a better option than not, as Jefferson well understood. And it cannot be supposed that the Roman Republic, the demise of which Cicero so lamented, was built upon ignorance.

Second, James's putting biographies at the center of humanistic education should not be supposed to mean that this all there is to the study of the humanities. Obviously a large part of that study, as the New Critics in literature rightly insisted though perhaps overstated, is considering historical works, whether of literature, art, philosophy or science, strictly on their own terms and explicating their meanings independently of the personal lives of their creators or the wider cultural environment in which they were created. However, their creators' biographies need to be studied in the interest of providing a context which might help explain the genesis of and illuminate their creations. A case in point is Beethoven's Third Symphony (*Eroica*). A study of this work must begin with its theoretical analysis, perhaps a Shenkerian one, to better understand its formal features and harmonic structure. However, a complete *contextual* understanding of the work would require knowledge of some details of Beethoven's personal life: that he was a committed republican who initially sympathized with

Napoleon and dedicated this symphony to him; but when Napoleon became a dictator bent on conquering Europe, an enraged Beethoven erased Napoleon's name from the title-page of the score.

A third objection to James concerns the practicability of humanizing scientific education and thus making it truly liberal by either infusing the traditional courses in the sciences with history or introducing separate courses in the history of science in either the departments of science or of the humanities. The teachers of science might rightly complain that there is scarcely time to cover the scientific curriculum let alone introducing "extracurricular" subjects. And those teachers in the humanities may regard the sciences as an unwelcome intrusion on their time or an imposition on their expertise. This objection, though well taken, may be answered. So as not to impose on the time or patience of scientists and humanists in the classroom, courses in the history of science might be taught by those trained specifically in that discipline. Conant's program for the historical teaching of science at Harvard mentioned above provides a model of such an undertaking. Such courses may be required or elective. Alternatively, the history of science need not be confined to a specific course under that title. It could be taught in the conventional survey of history courses; indeed, it is unavoidable since any discussion of the seventeenth century would have to mention the scientific revolution of that period. Finally, education is not confined to the classroom. Students might be encouraged and provided with relevant bibliographies to study the history of science independently; much of a student's learning in any discipline takes place outside the class setting. In brief, neither the sciences nor the humanities risk losing anything with respect to the integrity of their disciplines by introducing the historical study of science either as part of the curriculum or as an extra-curricular course of independent study.

Finally, James's warning against over-specialization should not be taken to mean that James opposed specialization as such but only its excess, specializing to the neglect of the rest of the intellectual life. Certainly, and James would have assuredly understood this, specialization is inescapable in the sciences and their application to technology, just as the division of labor is necessary to the productivity of industry. James's program of a liberal arts education does not preclude specialization—the broad-based liberal arts education he is advocating is not incompatible with specialization. One may be deeply

specialized in one field and venture fruitfully in others. There are many examples of this. Alexander Borodin was by profession a practicing chemist who contributed importantly to the study of aldehydes, but today he is best remembered as the composer of the opera, *Prince Igor*, among other musical works. Adolf von Harnack, the eminent church historian and theologian, was conversant enough with the sciences to be elected the first president of the Kaiser Wilhelm Gesellschaft, an academy established for the advancement of science. Francis Crick trained in physics yet went beyond the narrow confines of that field to investigate the field of biology for which efforts he was awarded the Nobel Prize, along with James Watson, for discovering the structure of the DNA molecule. Had these men been narrowly specialized posterity would have been the poorer. Moreover, over-specialization in the humanities, of all subjects, is counterproductive since the principal object of their study is the human being in the round. A humanist by definition must be well rounded. For example, an art historian innocent of music history, philosophy, literature and other relevant disciplines would be a poor specimen in his/her field indeed. But it is not just others who are beneficiaries of such polymaths as Borodin, Harnack, and Crick; they themselves benefit by realizing their latent talents. Beyond these mutual benefits, as Kant insists, it is our duty no less to exercise whatever aptitudes we might have.

In summation, James's locating the value of a liberal education in sharpening our discernment as to what has true value—whether cognitive, moral, aesthetic or political—if that is not its *chief* end, or even an end, might be its effect which cannot but be beneficial.

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NOTES

¹Wilfred M. McClay, "The Burden of the Humanities," *The Wilson Quarterly* 32 (2008): 37.

²Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983), 183.

³William James, "The Social Value of the College-Bred," in *Writings from 1902-1910* (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 1243.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1244.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1242.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1244-45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1243-44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1243.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1247.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1244.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1245.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1246. Here are Carlyle's words as to the influence of "great men" which anticipate James's: "Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world." (From Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Teddington, Middlesex: Echo Library, 2007), 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1247.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1248-49.

¹⁶ Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," in *Selections from the Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. W. S. Johnson, The Riverside Literature Series (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 50.

¹⁷ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, Vol. VI: *The Sage of Monticello* (Norwalk, Connecticut: The Easton Press, 1981), 248.

¹⁸ James, "The Social Value of the College-Bred," 1247-48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1248.

²⁰ William James, "Talks to Teachers," in *Writings from 1878-1899* (New York: The Library of America, 1992), 726-27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 726.

- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 727.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 730.
- ²⁵ William James, "Great Men and Their Environment," in *Writings from 1878-1899* (New York: The Library of America, 1992), 619.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 625.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 626.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 643.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 628.
- ³⁰ William James, "The Importance of Individuals," in *Writings from 1878-1899* (New York: The Library of America, 1992), 651.
- ³¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 534.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 542
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 134.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 537-38.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 542.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 542-43.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 545.
- ³⁸ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, ed. H. G. Callaway (New Castle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 12.
- ³⁹ James, "The Social Value of the College-Bred," 1244.
- ⁴⁰ Barzun, *A Stroll with William James*, 5.