

# MARCUS AURELIUS, WILLIAM JAMES AND THE “SCIENCE OF RELIGIONS”

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay explores the significant role that the writings and Stoic philosophy of Marcus Aurelius came to play in the life and work of William James. James’s correspondence reveals that he first read Aurelius’s Meditations during the troubled ‘crisis years’ of his twenties. Moreover, these writings were a source of solace for James and informed his personal life philosophy during this period. There is evidence that it was from a Stoic standpoint that he contested his father’s faith. And, in later years, it is his interrogation of the experiential divide between a life lived under Stoicism and one lived as a ‘religious’ believer that lies at the heart of his Varieties of Religious Experience.*

Marcus Aurelius, Emperor of Rome during the second century AD,<sup>1</sup> was the author of a Greek text, known today as *Meditations*.<sup>2</sup> Written originally for himself, and not for publication, the *Meditations* belong to a type of writing called *hypomnēmata* in antiquity which can be defined as ‘personal notes taken on a day-to-day basis’.<sup>3</sup> They comprise one of the few remaining texts setting down the principles of the Stoic way of life which consists, essentially, in mastering one’s inner discourse – thoughts, emotions, intentions.<sup>4</sup> How these personal ‘notes’ came to be preserved is unknown since the earliest testimonies of the book being read and copied date to the Byzantine tenth century. In the West the first printed edition was brought out in Zurich, in 1559, accompanied by a Latin translation.<sup>5</sup>

For their author the *Meditations* were a source of solace and guidance during life’s troubles; written and re-read by him during his many military campaigns, waged against various tribes of invaders, at the borders of his realm. They consist, in effect, of repeated appeals to himself to remember and apply the tenets of Stoic philosophy to his day-to-day life. And they rest on a central doctrine: the idea that it is crucial to recognise the difference between what we can control and what we cannot. There is an assumption that whatever happens to us it is within our power to control how we respond to those events and, crucially,

that everything happens for a reason, even though that reason may not be apparent to us. The *Meditations* have been interpreted as a philosophy of consolation and there is evidence to suggest that it was this aspect that appealed to their nineteenth century reader, William James.<sup>6</sup> This paper will explore the significant role that the writings and philosophy of Marcus Aurelius came to play in James's life and work.

### ***WILLIAM JAMES AND THE MEDITATIONS***

James is best known for his text book, *Principles of Psychology*, and many other pioneering works in the realm of philosophy, addressing questions surrounding religion, truth and warfare in his writings.<sup>7</sup> But he was also a prolific letter writer throughout his life and much of this correspondence, to friends and family, was preserved after his death. It is these private writings that document his introduction to the words of Marcus Aurelius.

In 1866 James was living in Boston having just returned from an expedition to Brazil, to study the fauna of the Amazon, in the employ of the Harvard scientist and collector Professor Louis Agassiz. James had suffered since his late adolescence from a troubled state of mind and body and his condition consisted in part of physical symptoms, such as a persistent backache, headaches and stomach problems, and also a deep and recurring melancholy.<sup>8</sup> The years immediately following his return from Brazil were a particularly bad time for him. He was tortured by the difficulty of deciding on a suitable vocation and plagued by his distressing symptoms.<sup>9</sup>

James had entered Harvard Medical School several years earlier, and his plan was to resume his medical training there. On his return from Brazil however, it was too late for him to enrol in the current term's courses so he undertook an undergraduate summer internship at Massachusetts General Hospital instead. It was an experience that left him with little enthusiasm for a career as a physician. He found the hospital routine boring and intellectually unsatisfying and his work there left him impatient and physically drained. In particular, standing all day put a strain on his already troublesome back.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, medicine had never been James's first choice as a career. When he originally took the decision to begin his medical training, two years earlier in 1864, he was torn by indecision. His preference was to study 'natural science' but he despaired at the prospect of supporting himself, and a potential future Mrs James, on the proceeds of such an occupation. At that time he saw medicine, which involved the opportunity for a limited amount of scientific study, as being a compromise between science and a more lucrative career in "business". In short, James had

never been at all sure what he should be doing with his life and, at this point, the path ahead was extremely uncertain.<sup>11</sup> It was in this state of mind that he read the *Meditations* for the first time.

In June 1866 James wrote to a close friend, Thomas Wren Ward,<sup>12</sup> who it seems was suffering from his own greater state of restlessness and whose last letter, James notes with concern, was marked with a "melancholy tone". In the course of advising his friend on how to deal with life he writes:

I began the other day to read the thoughts of Marcus Aurelius, tr. by Long, pub<sup>d</sup>. by Ticknor, which, if you have not read I advise you to read, slowly. [...] He certainly had an invincible soul; and it seems to me that any man who can, like him, grasp the love of a "life according to nature", ie a life in which your individual will becomes so harmonized to nature's will as cheerfully to acquiesce in whatever she assigns to you, knowing that you serve some purpose in her vast machinery wh. will never be revealed to you, any man who can do this, will, I say, be a pleasing spectacle, no matter what his lot in life. I think old Mark's perpetual yearnings for patience and equanimity & kindness wd. do your heart good. – I have come to feel lately more & more (I can't tell whether it will be permanent) like paying my footing in the world in a very humble way, (driving my physicking trade like any other tenth-rate man), and then living my free life in my leisure hours entirely within my own breast as a thing the world has nothing to do with; and living it easily and patiently, without feeling responsible for its future.<sup>13</sup>

He goes on to reflect that "these notions and others have of late led me to a pretty practical contentment" and expresses his hope to his friend that they "may suggest some practical point of view to you."<sup>14</sup>

Like James, Thomas Ward was also unsure about his choice of career. He had begun working in the New York branch of his father's banking firm, Baring Brothers, earlier in the year but was unconvinced that banking was for him. It seems James had found comfort and guidance, with regards his vocational plight, in the words of Marcus Aurelius and hoped that his friend might do likewise. Specifically, the *Meditations* suggested to James the consolatory idea that by following the career path that fate ("nature") has assigned you, however uninspiring, you are justifying your existence in some way; "paying your footing in life" and

“serv[ing] some purpose.” And, moreover, that any loftier aspirations you have, that occupy your free time, should be pursued in a spirit of patience rather than anxious fretting over the outcome or “feeling responsible for [their] future.”

In light of this letter it seems that the words of Marcus Aurelius made a significant impression on the twenty-four-year-old James. At a time when he was unsure of his direction through life the Stoic philosophy offered useful instruction and reassurance. In a subsequent letter to the same confidant, eighteen months later, he re-iterates the sentiments he extolled previously and confesses that:

...in the lonesome gloom wh. beset me for a couple of months last summer, the only feeling that kept me from giving up was that by waiting and living by hook or crook long enough I might make my nick, however small a one in the raw stuff the race has got to shape, and so assert my reality. The stoic feeling of being a sentinel obeying orders without knowing the General's plans is a noble one.<sup>15</sup>

His account of this very difficult period gives the impression that he had felt supported by the faith of Marcus Aurelius, by his trust that the universe will guide our path towards a rewarding future regardless of whether, from our personal vantage point, our lives are unfolding in a way that currently makes sense. And, the other idea that appears to have given James strength in his darkest hours is that a purpose in life can be found through our efforts to help the rest of mankind, “the race,” in some way. In his words:

So that it seems to me that a sympathy with men as such, and a desire to contribute to the weal of a species, wh., whatever may be said of it contains All that we acknowledge as good, may very well form an external interest sufficient to keep one's moral pot boiling in a very lively manner to a good old age.<sup>16</sup>

It seems that this life goal, of “contribut[ing] to the weal of [our] species” was, James's hoped, enough to maintain his spirits, (his “moral pot”), and prevent his lapses into melancholic inertia. The notion that we live in order to serve our fellow man through our actions is a central tenet of Stoicism as set down in the *Meditations*.

**"THE GOOD OF HUMANKIND"**

According to Pierre Hadot, in his analysis of the *Meditations*, Stoicism was born of the fusion of three traditions: the Socratic ethical tradition, the Heraclitean physical and 'materialistic' tradition, and the dialectical tradition of the Megareans and of Aristotle. Together these elements formed a Stoic "philosophy of self-coherence."<sup>17</sup> Underlying this system is the concept of the Universe as ruled by a single *logos* or 'Reason.' The aim of philosophy is to guide its practitioner with regards the "act of placing oneself in harmony with the *logos*."<sup>18</sup> It is only through choosing to act in harmony with the fundamental 'Reason' of the universe, (of which rational human nature is one manifestation), that a life of moral goodness, the only life of any value and happiness, can be lived. Such notions of harmony involve the philosopher abandoning their partial, egotistic perspective on life and choosing instead to prioritise the common good of the universe and of society. It was these themes, passed down from his Stoic predecessor Epictetus, that Marcus Aurelius develops in his *Meditations*.

In the words of Marcus Aurelius: "let your impulse to act and your action have as their goal the service of the human community, because that, for you, is in conformity with your nature."<sup>19</sup> For Marcus Aurelius the goal of our actions must be "the good of humankind" since "[t]he rational faculty is simultaneously the faculty of social life."<sup>20</sup> In other words the law of human and social reason, which is fundamentally identical to the universal 'Reason' of 'Nature' as a whole, demands that we place ourselves entirely in the service of the human community. Furthermore, it is clear that good intentions or impulses are not enough. His Stoicism requires focus and action since "the human soul dishonours itself when it does not direct its actions and impulses, as much as possible, toward some goal."<sup>21</sup>

It is interesting to note that these instructions bear a striking resemblance to James's attitude towards sentimentality. In his *Psychology: Briefer Course*, he declares: "There is no more contemptible type of human character than that of the nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer, who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotion, but who never does a manly concrete deed."<sup>22</sup> He continues by giving the example of "the weeping of the Russian lady over the fictitious personages in the play while her coachman is freezing to death on his seat outside" which, he declares, is "the sort of thing that everywhere happens on a less glaring scale."<sup>23</sup> For James it would seem, as for the Stoics, it is the goal and the deed that count and without a pragmatic focus even 'good' emotions are worse than useless.

James's avowedly ethical writings also contain implicitly Stoic themes. At the heart of that series of essays lies his own ethical manifesto; his campaign for the "strenuous life."<sup>24</sup> In 1891 James delivered an address to the Yale Philosophical Club, entitled *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*, during which he described his intentions for such a life:

The deepest difference, practically, in the moral life of man is the difference between the easy-going and strenuous mood. When in the easy-going mood the shrinking from our present ill is our ruling consideration. The strenuous mood, on the contrary, makes us quite indifferent to our present ill, if only the greater ideal be attained.<sup>25</sup>

Lewis Rambo refers to other essays by James, such as *Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment*, and *The Importance of Individuals*, to make the case that this "greater ideal", that James invokes, is the melioration and evolution of the human community.<sup>26</sup> In his insistence, that individual action and desire should be subjugated to the long-term greater social good, Stoic principles are clearly at work. Moreover, in his later publications on religion James refers explicitly to the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius and cites him at length. But before exploring these particular works further it is necessary to consider the intellectual context in which he originally developed and maintained his interest in Stoicism.

### ***THE INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT OF JAMES'S STOICISM***

James was an avid student of philosophy from a young age so it is not at all surprising that he should have read and studied the texts of Stoics.<sup>27</sup> Although slightly ahead of his time, in reading the *Meditations* in 1866, the Stoic philosophers of the Hellenistic era were a popular subject amongst historians of philosophy in the last quarter of the nineteenth century before being eclipsed as scholarly attention turned to the Presocratics and the Neoplatonists. (Subsequently, from the early twentieth century until recent years, Stoicism received so little interest that one author writing on the subject in 1992 claimed to have drawn most of his secondary literature from this period of enthusiasm during the end of the previous century.<sup>28</sup> This might explain the extremely limited amount of historiographic interest to date in the topic of Stoicism in the context of James.)<sup>29</sup>

Along with his interest in philosophy James displayed, from his youth, a fascination with the natural sciences. In a letter to a friend the sixteen-year-old James exclaimed: "If I

followed my taste and did what was most agreeable to me, I'll tell you what I would do. I would get a microscope and go out into the country, into the dear old woods and fields and ponds – there I would try to make as many discoveries as possible."<sup>30</sup> And, as discussed above, when it came time to settle on a vocation, years later, science was still his first choice of the options on offer.

In the realm of his family however, a very different influence was active. Eugene Taylor has brought to light the role that the religious leanings of James's father played in his life.<sup>31</sup> Henry James Sr. experienced a mystical awakening, when James was a young child, and later went on to publish several works on his own unique theological philosophy which was informed by the Swedenborgian faith.<sup>32</sup> James however, despite his best efforts, found his father's religious ideas difficult to comprehend. Correspondence, between Henry James Sr. and his son, suggests that it was from a Stoic perspective that James contested his father's beliefs.

During the Autumn of 1867, over the course of several letters, James attempted to elicit from his father a better understanding of his faith. Their discussion touched on the topic of what comprises man's "conscious life". In concluding his own rendition of his father's ideas James writes "[i]f our *real* life is unconscious, I don't see how you can occupy in the final result a different place from the Stoics, for instance."<sup>33</sup> He appears to be alluding to the Stoic assumption that events in the universe are governed by *logos*, or 'Reason,' but that this underlying meaning or purpose may not be apparent to us or, in other words, part of our consciousness. His main point of contention, however, was with Henry James Sr.'s account of the creation of the universe and the role of a "Creator." And here again it appears to be from a philosophical position consistent with the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius that James tries to contrast and comprehend his father's account.

Henry James Sr.'s concept of creation consisted of a two part process. It involved firstly, the birth of the natural world, a process akin to the Christian creation story, and then secondly and crucially, the return of the individual to the Creator ending in "the ultimate marriage between the two which we call creation."<sup>34</sup> This ultimate 'return' to the Creator is brought about via an inevitable, spontaneous spiritual reaction within man. According to Henry James Sr. we are at first seduced by what is in effect an illusion; our own selfhood. Ultimately however we become disheartened by our perceived separateness from God that is implied by the concept of our being a distinct 'self'. And, we eventually begin to turn away from selfish preoccupations, "to separate myself from myself as it were," by, for example, "paying some regard to my neighbour, or learning to identify myself to some extent with

others.”<sup>35</sup> In this embrace of the plight of our fellow man, which is driven by the unconscious presence of “infinite goodness, truth, & beauty”<sup>36</sup> within us, we rise up to fulfil our spiritual destiny; our union with our creator.

What was particularly unclear to James was how his father’s description of the universe could escape the label of pantheism which Henry James Sr. had always denounced. Since every individual’s eventual “marriage” with God was pre-ordained, and the seeds of this union were ever present since birth within their spirit, it was difficult for James to see how his father’s ‘God’, as defined by his version of ‘creation’, could be anything other than all-encompassing ‘everythingness.’ It seemed to James that “the whole process [of creation] is a mere circle of the creator described within his own being and returning to the starting point.”<sup>37</sup>

He admitted to his father that “I think that spontaneously I am rather inclined to lapse into a pantheistic mode of contemplating the world” and explained his conception of pantheism as consisting in “there being a necessary relation between Creator and creature, so that both are the same fact viewed from opposite sides and their duality as creator & creature becomes merged in a higher unity as Being.”<sup>38</sup>

An understanding of a creator such as this is representative of the Stoic system. Within this system God is nothing other than universal ‘Reason,’ producing in self-coherence all the events of the universe.<sup>39</sup> In other words, for the Stoics God simply *is* Nature as opposed to the Christian understanding of God as an external force that exists outside of and creates and shapes Nature.<sup>40</sup> It is this very distinction which William claims he is unable to find evidence for in his father’s version of Creation despite, he insists, the “scorn with which [his father] always mention[s] Pantheism” and the “broad gulf” he places between it and “Creation.”<sup>41</sup>

His father, responding to these points, tells James that his inability to grasp his vision of the world arises “*mainly* from the purely *scientific* cast of your thought just at present and the temporary blight exerted thence upon your metaphysic wit.”<sup>42</sup> He writes that the types of problem they were discussing must “seem very idle to the ordinary scientific imagination, because it is stupefied by the giant superstition we call Nature.”<sup>43</sup> Intellectually speaking Henry James Sr. declared his son to be at a “scientific or puerile stage of progress” with his conviction that Nature is the “objective source or explication ...of all phenomena” leaving God, “- though we may continuously admit his existence out of regard to tradition,” “a rigid superfluity, so far as the conduct of life is concerned.”<sup>44</sup> His criticism, that James’s concept of a God is one who is labelled as such out of tradition but is essentially ‘irrelevant’, is precisely



the argument levelled by some of the ancient critics at the Stoic system of belief.<sup>45</sup> It would appear however, that it was exactly this aspect that appealed to James.

Paul Jerome Croce describes how James's early professional writings reveal the divided allegiances of their author. He depicts him as being pulled in two directions, both by his enthusiasm and awe for the potential revelations of scientific enquiry and by his personal affinity for the ideas of metaphysics. In Croce's analysis of the various book reviews that James wrote during this period he reconstructs James's nascent professional agenda for the field of psychology. This was to "establish a middle path between a positivism that naively espoused faith in scientific naturalism and a spiritual view of mind that let religious belief close off inquiries into the body's operations."<sup>46</sup> In this context, it would seem that Stoicism offered James a 'minimalist' vision of a metaphysical reality that could keep house with science, unlike the 'spiritualist excesses' of other religions such as his father's. In this way his Stoic faith satisfied his need for a moral structure to life but did not contradict the findings of the new scientific psychology. In his 1874 review of Henry Maudsley's work, *Responsibility in Mental Disease*, James refers explicitly to this re-assuring coherence in his discussion of the section on "The Prevention of Insanity" and "the hygiene of the mind." Maudsley lays "immense stress in his conclusions," James reveals, "upon inward consistency of thought and action, [...] and indifference to outward fortune as a ruling mood" which are also, he points out, the moral ideals of a "great Roman emperor". He finishes by stating that "[m]oralists need not be anxious when the most advanced positivism comes to practical conclusions that differ so little from those of the 'metaphysically' minded Marcus Aurelius."<sup>47</sup> There is also evidence that James continued to respect and identify with the Stoicism of Aurelius for many years to come.

In 1878 for example, eleven years after the exchange of views with his father, James sent a copy of the *Meditations* to his brother Henry who was living in Paris at the time.<sup>48</sup> And, twenty-seven years later still, James sent another copy this time to a young woman, Pauline Goldmark, with whom he enjoyed a close friendship and correspondence. Ignas Skrupskelis, one of the editors of *The Correspondence of William James*, remarks pointedly of their relationship: "Perhaps she made him feel young again and no more. But one exchange very much invites reading between the lines!"<sup>49</sup> In any case it is clear from the accompanying note that even in his sixty third year the book was one which still brought him comfort and afforded respect in his eyes.<sup>50</sup> Despite his continued affinity for the Stoic doctrine however, it is apparent that even in his youth he wished he could sustain religious beliefs more akin to his father's.

### ***THE LIMITS OF STOICISM***

Although their debate by correspondence, discussed above, appears to end with James no more convinced by his father's creed he does end on a conciliatory note.

I have now laid bare to you the general complexion of my mind. I cannot help thinking that to you it will appear most pitiful & bald. But I cannot help it and cannot feel responsible for it. Heaven knows I do not love it, and if in a future letter or letters you are able to sow some seed in it which may grow up and help to furnish it I shall be thankful enough.<sup>51</sup>

A few months later, in one of his letters to his friend Thomas Wren Ward, he begins by urging him to consider in his mood of “inward deadness and listlessness” that he can achieve some purpose in life through contributing in some small way to the “welfare of the race.” But on this occasion, whilst preaching notions of the Stoic goal of helping humankind, he also notes what is missing from such a way of living: namely the emotional sustenance of intimate contact with a spiritual world beyond his own interior life: “I know that in a certain point of view, and the most popular one this [stoic life] seems a cold activity for our affections, a stone instead of bread. We long for sympathy, for a purely personal communication, first with the soul of the World, then with the soul of our fellows – And happy are they who think or know that they have got them!”<sup>52</sup>

And, in a letter eight years later to his soon to be wife, Alice Howe Gibbens (another Swedenborgian), he alludes again to the limitations of his beliefs:

The hardness of my Stoicism oppresses me sometimes; My attitude towards Religion is one of deference rather than of adoption. I see its place; I feel that there are times when everything else must fail & that, or nothing, remain; and yet I behave as if I must leave it untouched until such times come, and I am driven to it by sheer stress of weather. I'm sure I'm partly right, and that religion is not an everyday comfort and convenience. And yet I know I'm partly wrong...<sup>53</sup>

From these letters it appears that although unable, or unwilling, to share the faith of Alice and his father he continually worried at the substance and limitations of his own beliefs. Nineteen years later in 1895, (thirteen years after the death of his father), he returns to this theme in an address to the Harvard Young Men's Christian Association. It is clear that by this point his sense of unease had turned into a conviction that 'religion', as something beyond Stoicism, must have a place in his life. In his speech, later published as the essay *Is Life Worth Living?*, James cites the words of Marcus Aurelius; "O Universe! What thou wishest I wish." This is a noble sentiment, he declares, but one that becomes untenable in a world where 'Nature' displays contradictory phenomena of both good and evil. In such a world the Stoic system fails and "the visible surfaces of heaven and earth refuse to be brought by us into any intelligible unity at all."

He goes on to describe the extreme pessimism and suicidal view of life that arises in those who acknowledge "the contradiction between the phenomena of nature and the craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit whose expression nature is."<sup>54</sup> He counts himself amongst those who have become convinced of the limitations of "the naturalistic superstition, the worship of the God of Nature."<sup>55</sup> "For such persons," he continues, "the physical order of nature, taken simply as science knows it, cannot be held to reveal any one harmonious spiritual intent. It is mere *weather*."<sup>56</sup> In essence he has abandoned Stoicism in the face of its resigned acceptance of all that is evil. Instead, he has come to believe that there must be a separate 'spiritual reality' beyond and distinct from the natural world that is currently observed by scientists.<sup>57</sup>

He concedes that there is no way to know or prove the existence of an "unseen world" of God but raises the concept of a "German doctor's" description of "*Binnenleben*", or 'inner life', in what appears to be a reference to the writings of Moriz Benedikt, the Viennese neurologist.<sup>58</sup> When James invokes the term in his own lecture he insists that our "*Binnenleben*" is the "deepest thing in our nature" and here faith is safe from the arguments of science and the need to prove the reality of God.<sup>59</sup> For Benedikt, an individual's "Seelen-Binnenleben" consisted of a parallel mental life: "[U]nder the calmest surface of the emotional life surges and seethes an inner life of the soul." This inner second life is born of the imagination in conjunction with the unending multitude of "lasting impressions and memories, thoughts and feelings, inclinations, needs and skills of the individual." It appears to others only in fragments, "in attitudes and facial expressions, in words and behaviour."<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, it is through developing this line of thought, with regards the role of an alternative, secondary realm of psychological activity, that James finds the answer to his

lifelong internal struggle between science and religion. The conclusion of his later work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, can be read as his solution.

### ***THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE***

Published in 1902 *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was originally delivered by James as a series of lectures through his appointment as a Gifford Lecturer on Natural Religion at the University of Edinburgh.<sup>61</sup> In the second lecture, entitled ‘Circumscription of the Topic’ James, by defining religion to his own ends, explains to his audience what it is that he plans to examine. His subject, it transpires, is precisely that which, as revealed above, has occupied his thoughts for many years: What is it that separates those who ‘have religion’, such as his father and his wife, from the Stoics? And how do they come by their faith in their religious beliefs?

James begins by stating that both ‘morality’, (including Stoicism), and ‘religion’, (Christianity for example), share a fundamental teaching: that we should accept the Universe in all its workings. What makes them different however, is how they go about this acceptance. He contrasts the words of Marcus Aurelius “If gods care not for me or my children, here is a reason for it” with Job’s cry “Though he slay me, yet I will trust in him!” The words of the former carry a “frosty chill,” he declares, “devoid of passion and exhalation.” The Roman Emperor *respects* the divine order he adheres to “but the Christian God is there to be *loved*” insists James.<sup>62</sup> He goes on to compare more of Marcus Aurelius’s words with those of the old Christian author of the *Theologia Germanica*. Although their central creed, that the conditions of life should be accepted uncomplainingly, appears in abstract terms to be the same he stresses “how much more active and positive the impulse of the Christian writer to accept his place in the universe is! Marcus Aurelius agrees *to* the scheme – the German theologian agrees *with* it. He literally *abounds* in agreement, he runs out to embrace the divine decrees.”<sup>63</sup> James also explains why this is significant in that “[i]t makes a tremendous emotional and practical difference to one whether one accept the universe in the drab discoloured way of stoic resignation to necessity, or with the passionate happiness of Christian saints.”<sup>64</sup>

Later he develops this theme in his discussion of the circumstances in which this difference really matters. What the Stoic achieves he achieves through an effort of volition, James declares, whereas the practice of the Christian faith requires no exertion of volition because it thrives on the “excitement of a higher kind of emotion.” Where ‘morality’ breaks

down, James insists, is when reserves of personal will and effort run dry; when "morbid fears invade the mind" and "death finally runs the robustest of us down."<sup>65</sup> In short James is returning to his old theme of the inadequacy of Stoicism as he finds it. It appears that, from James's perspective, the words of Marcus Aurelius may give life a purpose but they do not make living such a life any easier.

During the rest of the lectures he explores the nature of what it is that Stoicism lacks. He characterises the mystical states through which religious conversions take place and attempts to understand why such events are accessible to some but not to others. He concludes by offering up a theory which he believes can explain the origins of such experiences. The answer lies, he is convinced, in the new research into the structure of human consciousness. Specifically, the "discovery" of additional regions of consciousness, "in the shape of a set of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside of the primary consciousness altogether."<sup>66</sup> He proposes that religious experiences are the result of the "subconscious incubation and maturing of motives deposited by the experiences of life" which "hatch out" or "burst into flower" during a religious conversion event.<sup>67</sup> In other words, a 'message from God' can be interpreted, in psychological terms, as a message from a separate subliminal consciousness.

At the time he wrote *The Varieties* there were many competing descriptions of the nature of subconscious or secondary states of mind. Although previously it was Benedikt's concept of a 'second life' of the soul that he referenced, in these lectures it is the insights of the French psychologist, Pierre Janet, and the English psychical researcher, F. W. H. Myers, that were explicitly invoked. And, although he clearly stated his debt to Janet, in the preface to *The Varieties*, it is clear that, in one crucial respect it is Myers's description of the subliminal conscious that informed these particular lectures.<sup>68</sup> Unlike Janet, Myers believed that the subconscious realm is also the home of the "super-conscious;" the gateway to consciousnesses beyond our own.<sup>69</sup> Accordingly, James was able to leave open the door to the possibility that mystical states are genuine communications with a supernatural world at the same time as allowing that sometimes they are merely "uprushes" from our own, alternative, buried mental lives. In both cases the immediate origin of the experience was the same; a subliminal consciousness.

## CONCLUSION

It is evident that the Stoic philosophy of Marcus Aurelius resonated with James when he first read the *Meditations*, aged twenty-four, and that he prized the message that it held for him, especially in his youth. He seems to have valued Stoicism for its moral guidance and reassurance and because it occupied a middle ground, alienating neither science nor metaphysics. Later on he appears to have abandoned Stoicism, at least for himself, in favour of a life philosophy that allowed for the existence and agency of an “unseen spiritual world” distinct from “Nature”. Despite adopting this as a personal preference however, the Stoic creed was clearly not one he could leave behind entirely. Whilst acknowledging the inadequacy of the metaphysical basis of Stoicism, as he later finds it, he appears to remain wedded to Aurelius’s ethical values and programme for the ideal life. Moreover, references to, and re-examinations of, the Stoic faith continue to haunt his later works.

In essence the starting point and part of the motivation behind *The Varieties of Religious Experience* appears to be James’s reprise of the old debate with his father: the question of what distinguishes Stoicism from ‘religion.’ Only this time, as Taylor has pointed out, he does seem to have achieved some sort of a reconciliation of their two points of view.<sup>70</sup> Through his theory, invoking the role of the subconscious regions of the mind in religious experiences, he was able to account for the mystical experiences and beliefs of his father, and others like him, in a way that made sense to his self confessed ‘naturalistic’ turn of mind. Moreover, he succeeded in convincing himself of a worth for such experiences, beyond the merely practical one of helping someone get through life: in addition, he declares, the mystical state is likely a “superior point of view;” “a window through which the mind looks upon a more extensive and inclusive world.”<sup>71</sup>

It seems though, that all this reconciling had occurred on an entirely intellectual plane since James described himself as no closer to experiencing the “supreme happiness” which is “religion’s secret” than he was in his youth. Such experiences are the province of religious men of the “extremes type” whereas, speaking of mystical states, he confided that “my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely and I can speak of them only at second-hand.”<sup>72</sup> It would appear that, experientially, James had not been able to move significantly beyond the “cold activity” of his Stoicism.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, it is ironic that the very concept of his project, to establish a “science of religions,”<sup>74</sup> would have been, for his father, somewhat of a contradiction in terms. In Henry James Sr.’s eyes it was precisely his son’s

adherence to the doctrines of science that made him impervious to the longed for joys of true religious experience.

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### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Mark Morford, *The Roman Philosophers: From the time of Cato the Censor to the death of Marcus Aurelius*, (Routledge, 2002), p. 229.

<sup>2</sup>The writings were originally untitled by the author and have been given a variety of names since including: ‘On his life’, ‘About Himself and to Himself’, ‘On the Duty of Life’. See Pierre Hadot, (translated by Michael Chase), *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, (Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-32.

<sup>4</sup> Marcus Aurelius is regarded as the last of the Stoic philosophers and in his *Meditations* he frequently acknowledges the wisdom of his predecessor Epictetus. Epictetus was, in turn, influenced by the founders of the Stoic school: Zeno and Chrysippus. See Ibid., pp. 50,59,73.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 22; Mark Morford, *The Roman Philosophers*, p. 230.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the *Meditations* as a philosophy of consolation see David J. Rosner, ‘Marcus Aurelius: Philosophy as Consolation’ in Phil Washburn, (ed.), *The Many Faces of Wisdom: Great Philosophers’ Visions of Philosophy*, (Prentice Hall, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> See for example his essays and books entitled: ‘The Moral Equivalent of War’; *The Will to Believe*; *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; ‘Is Life Worth Living?’

<sup>8</sup> Gay Wilson Allen, *William James*, (Viking Press, 1967). pp. 70, 92.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James*, (Harper & Row, 1983), p. 15. Many of these symptoms continued intermittently throughout his life and he would later come to describe his condition as ‘neurasthenic’. Neurasthenia, a popular diagnosis of James’s day, was described and so

named by the American neurologist, George Beard. See *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8. See also Tom Lutz's chapter on James and Neurasthenia in Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness: 1903, An Anecdotal History*, (Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Gay Wilson Allen, *William James*, pp. 118,121.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Ward was the son of Samuel Gray Ward, Henry James Sr.'s banker in Boston. Tom was also a student at Harvard and he and William had embarked on the trip to Brazil together. See *Ibid.*, pp. 79,101.

<sup>13</sup> William James to Thomas Wren Ward, Jun. 8<sup>th</sup> 1866, Skrupskelis and Berkeley, (eds.), *The Correspondence of William James, Vol. 4: 1856 - 1877*, (University Press of Virginia, 1995), p. 139.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> William James to Thomas Wren Ward, Sep. 10<sup>th</sup> 1867, *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>22</sup> William James, *The Works of William James: Psychology: Briefer Course*, (Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 136.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 136– 37.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis Rambo makes the case that James's vision of a "strenuous life" formed the core of his normative ethics which he explicated in a series of essays, between 1879 and 1896, and later brought together and published as *The Will to Believe*. See Lewis R. Rambo, 'Ethics, Evolution, and the Psychology of William James', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 16, (1980), p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> William James, 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life' in *The Will to Believe and other essays in popular philosophy*, (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), p. 211.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis Rambo, 'Ethics, Evolution', pp. 51-53.

<sup>27</sup> In his biography of James Gay Wilson Allen refers to him reading Schopenhauer and Renan as a teenager. Gay Wilson Allen, *William James*, p. 53. Several years later in a letter to his brother from Brazil James announced that "When I get home I'm going to study philosophy all my days". Cited in Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James*, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> Ralph Dorty, *The Criterion of Truth*, (Peter Lang, 1992), p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Ralph Barton Perry makes a brief mention of how, in his youth, William James "was wont to preach the gospel of Stoicism". See Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William*



*James: As revealed in unpublished correspondence and notes, together with his published writings, Volume II Philosophy and Psychology*, (Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 352. Many other authors describe the 'crisis years' of his late twenties or the characteristics of his personal faith or philosophy without any reference to Stoic influences. See for example: Howard Feinstein, *Becoming William James*, (Cornell University Press, 1984); Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James*; Bernard P. Brennan, *William James*, (Twayne, 1968); Richard M. Gale, *The Philosophy of William James: An Introduction*, (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> William James to Edgar Beach Van Winkle, Mar. 1<sup>st</sup> 1858, Skrupskelis and Berkeley, *The Correspondence, Vol. 4*, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Eugene Taylor, 'The Spiritual Roots of James's Varieties of Religious Experience' published as part of the introduction to William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: Centenary Edition*, (Longmans, Green, and Co., 2002).

<sup>32</sup> For an account of Henry James Sr.'s mystical experiences and his theology see William James, (ed.), 'The Literary Remains of the Late Henry James', in Burkhardt, Bowers and Skrupskelis, (eds.), *The Works of William James: Essays in Religion and Morality*, (Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>33</sup> William James to Henry James, Sep. 5<sup>th</sup> 1867, Skrupskelis and Berkeley, *The Correspondence, Vol. 4*, p. 196.

<sup>34</sup> Henry James Sr. to William James, Sep. 27<sup>th</sup> 1867, *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> William James to Henry James Sr., Sep. 5<sup>th</sup> 1867, *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>38</sup> William James to Henry James Sr., Oct. 28<sup>th</sup> 1867, *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>39</sup> Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, p. 76.

<sup>40</sup> John Sellars, *Stoicism*, (Acumen, 2006), pp. 92-93.

<sup>41</sup> William James to Henry James Sr., Oct. 28<sup>th</sup> 1867, Skrupskelis and Berkeley, *The Correspondence, Vol. 4*, p. 218.

<sup>42</sup> Henry James Sr. to William James, Sep. 27<sup>th</sup> 1867, *Ibid.*, p. 204. (The italics are his.)

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>45</sup> John Sellars, *Stoicism*, p. 93.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Jerome Croce, 'Physiology as the Antechamber to Metaphysics: The Young William James's Hope for a Philosophical Psychology', *History of Psychology*, Vol. 2, No. 4, (1999). p. 303.

<sup>47</sup> William James, 'Responsibility in Mental Disease by Henry Maudsley (1874)' in Burkhardt, Bowers and Skrupskelis, (eds.), *The Works of William James: Essays, Comments and Reviews*, (Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 283-284.

<sup>48</sup> Henry James Jr. to William James, Oct. 23<sup>rd</sup> 1878, Skrupskelis and Berkeley, (eds.), *The Correspondence of William James, Vol. 1: William and Henry, 1861 – 1884*, (University Press of Virginia, 1992), p. 273.

<sup>49</sup> Ignas Skrupskelis, 'Introduction,' to Skrupskelis and Berkeley, (eds.), *The Correspondence of William James, Vol. 11: April 1905 – March 1908* (University Press of Virginia 2003), p. xli.

<sup>50</sup> William James to Pauline Goldmark, Dec. 28<sup>th</sup> 1905, *Ibid.*, pp. 130–131.

<sup>51</sup> William James to Henry James Sr., Oct. 28<sup>th</sup> 1867, Skrupskelis and Berkeley, *The Correspondence, Vol. 4*, p. 221.

<sup>52</sup> William James to Thomas Wren Ward, Jan. 7<sup>th</sup> 1868, *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>53</sup> William James to Alice Howe Gibbens, Oct. 9<sup>th</sup> 1876, *Ibid.*, pp. 547–548.

<sup>54</sup> William James, 'Is Life Worth Living?' in *The Moral Equivalent of War and Other Essays & Selections from Some Problems in Philosophy*, John K. Roth, (ed.), (Harper & Row, 1971), p. 73.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>57</sup> James wrote about another facet of monistic systems of belief, such as Stoicism, in his chapter on 'The Absolute and the Strenuous Life', in a later book entitled *The Meaning of Truth*. There he maintains that monistic systems "sanction anything," i.e. any personal action or tendency, since after their occurrence all events in an individual's life, are said to form part of "the universe's perfection." In this light, he argues, philosophic systems that adhere to the precept that there is an underlying unity and perfection to the whole of life may permit, but do not encourage, someone to lead a "strenuous life." In this instance he implicitly defines such a 'strenuous life' as one that is characterised by active participation in "the world's salvation." In one sense however, he sees this as a positive aspect of monistic, or absolute, philosophies. They accept and console those who are permanently incapable of participating actively in life in this way: "Absolutism" has a "saving message for incurably sick souls." See William James, 'Chapter 11: The Absolute and the Strenuous Life' in *The Meaning of Truth*, (Longman Green and Co., 1911).

<sup>58</sup> Previously, James's citation of the term 'Binnenleben' has been misattributed to Freud rather than Benedikt. See Grace Foster, 'The Psychotherapy of William James' in *Psychoanalytic Review*, XXXII (1945), pp.300-318. However, in the previous year, 1894, Benedikt had given a lecture at the International Congress of Medicine in Rome entitled: "Second Life: The Seelen-Binnenleben (Inner Life of the Soul) of the Healthy and the Sick." He also published the substance of this lecture in an article in the journal *Wiener Klinik*. See Oliver Somburg und Holger Steinberg, 'Der Begriff des Seelen-Binnenlebens von Moriz Benedikt', W. J. Bock und B. Holdorff, (Hrsg.), *Schriftenreihe der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Nervenheilkunde*, Bande 12, (2006). pp. 231-240. Somburg and Steinberg also discuss James's use of Benedikt's expression but only in

reference to his 1899 lecture 'The Gospel of Relaxation'. They fail to note his earlier use of it in the lecture under discussion above; 'Is Life Worth Living?'

<sup>59</sup> William James, 'Is Life Worth Living?', pp. 88-89.

<sup>60</sup> This is my translation of Benedikt's words which are cited in the original German in Oliver Somburg und Holger Steinberg, 'Der Begriff des Seelen-Binnenlebens', p. 235.

<sup>61</sup> Eugene Taylor, 'The Spiritual Roots', p. xxxii.

<sup>62</sup> William James, *The Varieties*, p. 38. (The emphasis added is my own).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 183-184, 395. See also William James, 'Frederic Myers's Service to Psychology' in Burkhardt and Bowers, (eds.), *The Works of William James: Essays in Psychological Research*, (Harvard University Press, 1986).

<sup>69</sup> F. W. H. Myers, 'Note on a suggested mode of psychical interaction' in Edmund Gurney, Frederic Myers and Frank Podmore, *Phantasms of the Living, Vol. II*, (Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1970).

<sup>70</sup> Eugene Taylor, 'The Spiritual Roots', p. xxxiii.

<sup>71</sup> William James, *The Varieties*, p. 31.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>73</sup> G. William Barnard argues that James's "Walpurgis Nacht", his experience whilst camping in the Adirondacks in 1898, should be classed as a mystical experience. See G. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism*, (State University of New York Press, 1997). pp 19-20. But, taking James's own words above, from the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, at face value implies that he considered himself only capable of experiencing mystical states "second-hand". This suggests that even his feeling of intense "spiritual alertness" that night on the mountains did not, as far as he was concerned, satisfy the requirements of a 'bona fide' mystical experience.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396. James held that such a "science of religions" might "sift out from the midst of their discrepancies a common body of doctrine which she might also formulate in terms to which a physical science need not object. This, I said, she might adopt as her own reconciling hypothesis, and recommend it for general belief." See *Ibid.*, p. 394. Eugene Taylor describes James's own 'reconciling hypothesis' as "the development of a cross-cultural comparative psychology of subconscious states, especially of the mystical variety, and how people took such experiences from culture to culture." Eugene Taylor, 'Review of Proudfoot's William James and a Science of

Religions' in *Religious Studies: an international journal for the philosophy of religion*, Vol. 41, No. 4, (Dec. 2005), p. 487.