

# JAMES, DEWEY, AND DEMOCRACY

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## *ABSTRACT*

*In this paper I examine John Dewey's correspondence and selected writings to illuminate Dewey's understanding of and possible shaping of William James's work as it pertains to politics and democracy. I suggest a way of seeing a richer connection between the thinkers than has been portrayed and a picture of influence flowing from Dewey to James.*

## *INTRODUCTION*

In this essay, I agree with those scholars who see William James as a democratic thinker.<sup>1</sup> This claim may seem controversial insofar as James and John Dewey are often paired together and Dewey is thought of as the more socially and politically oriented of the two. Specifically, Cornel West and Robert Westbrook have argued that James was surprisingly uninterested in political matters.<sup>2</sup> No doubt, Dewey's work is more directly concerned with political issues of education, ethics, and collaborative social efforts than James's. It is a common approach to conceive of James as a solitary thinker who laid the ground for Dewey's work. In fact, the common ordering of the names, Peirce, James, and Dewey, often misleads newcomers to pragmatism to think that developments in their thought occurred chronologically from one to the next.

Throughout this paper, a broader theme will be developed, whose surface Ralph Sleeper has scratched in *The Necessity of Pragmatism*. That theme is the encouragement that Dewey's work represented for James.

Dewey explicitly urged James to work more specifically on the problems of philosophy, beyond his earlier focus on psychology. Although psychology was burgeoning in America, both James and Dewey moved away from it as a field of study when it came to focus on laboratory work. I imagine that a number of factors were relevant to James's move toward philosophy, not

the least of which was the completion of his thirteen-hundred page opus, *The Principles of Psychology*, which took approximately a decade to finish beyond the due date his publisher had in mind.

Among other scholars, Joshua Miller has offered some initial ways to present the case for thinking of James as having a *Democratic Temperament*. Whereas Miller's analysis is focused on James's work, my approach here is to make my case more from Dewey's letters to James, urging an increasingly explicit pronouncement of democratic ideals. The democratic impulse is one of the many features of James's thought that has not received a great deal of attention, perhaps because of the motivations for calling him an individualist.<sup>3</sup> James's democratic tendencies begin with the scientific ethos that avoids tyrannical thinking in favor of evidence. Dewey's encouragement in correspondence with James is an underexplored factor in the development of James's move further into philosophy and in the expansion of the democratic ideal which drives it.

## ***JAMES AND DEWEY***

### ***JAMES'S INFLUENCE ON DEWEY***

Since my main focus will be on the reverse relation, James's influence on Dewey is worth making clear, at least briefly. As is well known, Dewey's earliest works are driven by Hegelian influences. In a review of Sleeper's *The Necessity of Pragmatism*, Larry Hickman explains that Sleeper "sees Dewey's lifework as an attempt to find a mean between the extremes of [Hegelian] idealism and scholastic realism."<sup>4</sup> Over a certain interval, Dewey shakes loose some of his Hegelian baggage and ventures into his own work. His early volume on psychology, still heavily Hegelian, is not well received by James. In a letter to George Croom Robertson, in December of 1886, James writes, "Dewey is out with a psychology which I have just rec'd and but ½ read. I felt quite 'enthused' at the first glance, hoping for something really fresh; but am sorely disappointed when I come to read [it]."<sup>5</sup>

It is worth noting with regard to James's criticism here, that when writing this letter James is four years away from completing a twelve-year opus of his own on psychology. To impress James in the field of psychology, therefore, would likely be difficult at this point in his career. Four years later, James's *The Principles of Psychology* is published, receiving high

acclaim. Not the least of this is Dewey's praise. In a letter to James in May of 1891, Dewey writes,

I don't know that I told you that I have had a class of four graduates going through your psychology this year, and how much we have all enjoyed it. I'm sure you would be greatly gratified if you could see what a stimulus to mental freedom, as well as what a purveyor of methods and materials your book has been to us.<sup>6</sup>

As a fellow psychologist, Dewey was markedly and immediately impressed by James's work.

Beyond James's new approach to psychology, Dewey is equally impressed with James's writing style. Textbooks are often dry and dead. The vibrant style of James's writings, however, animates the work in an entirely novel way. In a letter to James from February of 1892, Dewey writes,

One of my friends summed up Sully's review [of the *Principles*] in [the journal] *Mind* for me as follows: 'A good book, but too lively to make a good corpse and every scientific book ought to be a corpse.' If we weren't indebted to you for any specific things, we should be indebted to you for what you did to break down this superstition.<sup>7</sup>

Two further letters from Dewey to James concerning the latter's influence help to bring out Dewey's understanding and contribution with regard to James's work. First, in January, 1904, Dewey writes, "I need hardly say what I have said before, such approval as you feel drawn to give means more to us than that of anybody else. None the less as far as I am concerned I have simply been rendering back in logical vocabulary what was already your own."<sup>8</sup> Dewey is no doubt responding to the praise James has given him for Dewey's work on psychology and education. He clearly sees his work as an extension of James's psychology. In 1907, Dewey writes of his "appreciation of and indebtedness to, all you do."<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I will present the result of Dewey's shift from Hegelian thinking to a new and exciting ethics, which James praises and builds on.

*JAMES IN PRAISE OF DEWEY*

Before discussing Dewey's encouragement of James, a few of James's letters about and to Dewey are worth citing, showing James's great praise of Dewey's work. The anomaly cited above, of James criticizing Dewey, reveals an early, first impression of Dewey as a Hegel scholar. Dewey's early work on ethics, psychology, logic, and education, progressing away from idealism, all receive great praise from James, and resemble James's later work in that regard.

As early as July of 1896, James writes of Dewey to Alice Howe Gibbens James. He recounts, "I heard a lecture by John Dewey at 2.30, & another by Bryan ... both very good. Unfortunately Dewey has already left – I should have stayed on indefinitely to hear more of his lectures."<sup>10</sup> As of the writing of this paper, we still do not know which works James is referring to here, but around that time, Dewey writes on psychology, education, schools, ethics, culture-epoch theory, metaphysics and much more.<sup>11</sup>

Later in a letter to Sarah Wyman Whitman of October 1903, James writes,

Chicago University has during the past 6 months given birth to the fruit of its 10 years of gestation under John Dewey. The result is wonderful – a *real School*, and *real Thought*. Important thought too! Did you ever hear of such a City or such a University? Here we have thought, but no school. At Yale a school but no thought. Chicago has both.<sup>12</sup>

Here we see the seeds of what James refers to by Dewey's inspiration in *Pragmatism*.<sup>13</sup> Dewey, or so James believes, has really developed a school of thought, and of course, James sees the way in which his work is congruous with it.

In a letter to F. C. S. Schiller from April of 1906, James describes his agreement with Dewey's rejection of treating the world as propositional. Some see philosophy as the logical working out of the world's problems, only because the world is a set of propositions or facts that can be analyzed logically. Dewey, with his emphasis on the complexity of the world of experience, recognizes early that we must not view experience in such a limited fashion. An excellent example is his reply to James's discussion of reflexes, in "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology."<sup>14</sup> In that article, Dewey notes the mechanistic rendition of reflexes and the story that psychology has been telling about them with regard to memory and habit formation. Dewey

criticizes the Meynert scheme, which James introduces, for not at all taking into account the complexity of the environment in which a child encounters stimuli. Dewey shows the continually popular notions of stimulus and response to be dangerously oversimplified. It is more accurate to say that stimulus and response are two sides of one thing – experience. And, in a sense, response comes first. The child who reaches for a candle and learns from the burn was not *struck* by a stimulus. He or she *found* it interesting and selected it for attention over any number of possible subject matters. James appreciates and accepts Dewey’s version of the world as complex and not merely “sentenced.” Though we describe experience linguistically, experience itself is not immediately sentenced. To Schiller, James writes, “Dewey’s powerful stuff seems also to ring the death knell of a sentenced world. Yet none of *them* will see it – Taylor will still write his refutations etc, etc, when the living world will be all drifting after *us*.”<sup>15</sup> Here we have an explicit reference from James, taking Dewey and himself to be working almost as a team on pulling scholarship out into the world of the living, bringing intelligence to life outside the oppressive confines of academic tradition.

In another letter to Schiller, from August of 1906, James writes, “I find Dewey’s article ... [‘The Experimental Theory of Knowledge,’<sup>16</sup>] *most illuminating & masterly*.”<sup>17</sup> Among the works James has yet to write at this point are *Pragmatism, The Meaning of Truth, A Pluralistic Universe, Some Problems of Philosophy*, as well as numerous articles.

As Robert T. Westbrook points out, when Dewey criticized an element of James’s work, James then reconsidered. Westbrook writes,

Dewey was selective in what he incorporated into his thought from the *Principles*, for it was a profoundly conflicted, even contradictory, text, torn between epistemological dualism and an antidualistic “radical empiricism” grounded in evolutionary biology. Dewey was sharply critical of remnants of dualism and “subjectivism” in James’s thinking, while at the same time he responded enthusiastically to the “objective” biological strain—the rooting of human psychology in organic experience and history—that he found in the *Principles*.<sup>18</sup>

If Westbrook is right, then it seems Dewey’s strong criticism of James’s dualisms could have been an important reason why James distanced himself from dualistic thinking, to be the proud expositor of “radical empiricism” as a focused and important approach to inquiry.

One last letter by James bears mentioning here before we proceed to the specifics of Dewey's encouragement and advice for James. In a kind letter to Dewey from August of 1908, James writes to Dewey about his contribution to a volume in James's honor.<sup>19</sup> Dewey's article, "Does Reality Possess Practical Character?" inspires James's words as follows:

Your own contribution is to my mind the most *weighty* – unless perhaps Strong's should prove to be so. I rejoice exceedingly that you should have got it out. No one yet has succeeded, it seems to me, in jumping into the centre of your vision. Once there, all the perspectives are clear and open; and when you or some one else of us shall have spoken the exact word that opens the centre to everyone, mediating between it and the old categories and prejudices, people will wonder that there ever could have been any other philosophy. That is the philosophy of the future, I'll bet my life.<sup>20</sup>

It is easy to envision James as one who is simply aware of Dewey's work when he gives his Lowell Lectures on *Pragmatism*, for instance. The centrality of Dewey's thought for James, however, is dramatically underestimated given that presumption.

### ***DEWEY'S ENCOURAGEMENT OF JAMES***

In *The Necessity of Pragmatism*, Ralph Sleeper shows the importance of Dewey's logical theory for the development of pragmatism and its influence on James, though this latter relation is not his focus. He makes clear the fact that Dewey follows James with respect to experience, but differs with him with regard to necessity. Dewey's work against James's psychologism of necessity – making necessity a matter of mental structure – represents a great divergence between them. For Dewey, the "superstition of necessity" is a logical consequence of James's account of experience in the *Principles*. Yet, James would not come to see necessity in the way Dewey does until later in life.

Not long after the publication of James's *Principles*, Dewey writes him an excited letter<sup>21</sup> about an inspiring reporter whom Dewey has met. Franklin Ford, previously affiliated with *Bradstreet's* publications in New York, inspires Dewey to write James the following in June of 1891:

... [T]here is something back (& something ahead) of whatever freedom of sight & treatment there is in my ethics. I got it from Franklin Ford to whom I refer in the preface ... Ford who was a newspaperman (formerly Editor of Bradstreets in N.Y.) with no previous [philosophical] training had been led by his newspaper experience to study, as a practical question the social bearings of intelligence & its distribution ... Well, he identified the question of inquiry with, in philosophical terms, the question of the relation of intelligence to the objective world – is the former free to move in relation to the latter or not? So he studied out the following questions (1) The conditions & effects of the distribution of intelligence especially with reference to inquiry, or the selling of truth as a business; (2) the present (or past) hindrances to its free play, in the way of class interests or (3) the present conditions, in the railway, the telegraph &c for effectively securing the freedom of intelligence – that is, its movement in the world of social fact, and (4) the resulting organization ...

Now I am simply reducing what was a wonderful personal experience to a crude bit of cataloging, but I hope it may arouse your interest in the man and his work...

... [P]hilosophy has been the assertion of [the] unity of intelligence & the external world in idea or subjectively, while if true in idea it must finally secure the conditions of its objective expression. And secondly I believe that a tremendous movement is impending when the intellectual forces which have been gathering since the Renaissance & Reformation shall demand complete free movement, and, by getting their physical leverage in the telegraph & printing press shall through free inquiry in a centralized way, demand the authority of all other so-called authorities.<sup>22</sup>

What we find here is a muddled message from Dewey to James, in excitement over a new way of thinking that inspires Dewey in its democratic promise. At this point, Dewey is still quite young, and is getting his own philosophical feet wet. Nevertheless, there is no doubt to the numerous connections one can easily make between Ford's inspiration of Dewey and Dewey's encouragements of James into philosophical issues of pragmatism and democratic pluralism.

While the notion of “intelligence” is brought up in James, and, while it plays an important role in his philosophy, it is not developed until Dewey takes the notion further.

In this letter we see Dewey’s invitation for James to join in the project of democratic intelligence and philosophy. The salient notion here is the sense in which philosophy, ideas, facts, and truth, all have practical value for life, and can work in the effort of social and political improvement. I want to suggest the following three types of connection between this letter and developments in James’s later philosophy.

1. *Concerning pragmatism.* In this letter, we see explicit mention of the idea that truth has a cash value – literally for the journalist. Truth can be “sold,” but not in the sense that it can be changed on whim for a buck. Rather, objective aspects of the world and its truth are of great value, *cash value*. This is a clear and recurrent theme in James’s later philosophical work on pragmatism. One other element seems clearly relatable to even more technical understandings of pragmatism, though the passage is admittedly jumbled. Dewey writes about the need for ideas to secure consequences in the objective world. It is not enough for ideas to be true only subjectively for the idealist. Ideas must have value and meaning in real life.

2. *Concerning pluralism.* On the question of the freedom of intelligence, we can see elements of epistemology and metaphysics. I say both here because if there are objective and subjective features to the world, a common theme for James and Dewey, then the idea that a movement is in the works, according to Dewey, which is similar to the Reformation, implies that the movement in question is one which shatters the centralization of authority in religious, or in this case epistemological leaders. That is, each individual’s religious liberties were expanded in validating individuals’ direct experience of religion in the Reformation, and similarly, social intelligence is valued in democracy, validating each individual’s right and freedom to voice concerns of his or her own, contributing to public inquiry into social problems. Various world views must be acknowledged, according to James’s later writings, in the working out of belief, and here we see Dewey bubbling over with his excitement in encouraging James to make the connection as well.<sup>23</sup>

3. *Concerning religion.* What I have just mentioned about James’s pluralism is noticeable too in his work on religion. Before the Reformation, there were strong divisions of class and authority in religious deliberations. Dewey notes this parallel in the Ford letter when describing Ford’s desire to overcome class interests’ influence on the distribution of intelligence.



Fundamentally, Dewey urges James to consider the validity of the experiences of a plurality of people, and Dewey does this with explicit reference to a tremendous movement like the Reformation. This set of ideas fuses four crucial elements of James's later thought: a, religion; b, pluralism; c, the validation of individuals' experiences; and d, the challenging of conventional authorities.

A few months later, in November of 1891, Dewey asks James the following influential question: "If the organic theory of intelligence is true as theory isn't it time something was done to make it true as fact, that is as practice? This inquiry has been bottled up in my mind so long that it now discharges at you as the most convenient target."<sup>24</sup> Dewey's position with regard to the organic nature of intelligence is not James's, though it is an extension of his psychology. James's notion of intelligence demands much working out – a task which Dewey takes up. What we find here, however, is the thread of asking about the *use* of the organic theory of intelligence. That is to say, why not develop a practical method based upon the theory of intelligence got from Darwin and James's psychology? This question, posed only a year after the publication of the *Principles* is an incisive prompting to get James thinking about the grander issues of philosophy and how they can be addressed by a method based on his psychological theory.

Aside from these foundational questions and urgings, Dewey also advises James elsewhere on the specifics of his work and on the burgeoning pragmatic method. In December of 1903, Dewey writes James about the habit of making a "personal tool out of discussion & inquiry out of a 'point of view' – And that is a good criterion – for a pragmatist anyway." He continues,

"Truth for its own sake" has upon complete pragmatic principles it seems to me not only a justification, but an absolutely indispensable function – without which the last word would be with an "environment" which finally determines what is & what isn't useful – and it make[s] little difference whether this environment is called "matter" or a complete system of thought-relations, or Experience per Bradley, or per Royce.<sup>25</sup>

The idea we see here is that the search for truth for its own sake minimizes bias in inquiry, which for that reason is valuable and pragmatic as such. It would be a mistake to think that Dewey was

James's sole inspiration for pragmatism, of course. What I suggest is that Dewey was more of a sympathetic motivator, passionate about the same project. To give the development of pragmatism some perspective, James presents his early pragmatic essay, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," in 1898 in Berkeley, California. Nevertheless, Dewey represents an important colleague for James, not merely a follower.

In many senses, James's psychology, particularly in relation to habits, is tied to his ethical views. Indeed, Dewey takes this connection and runs with it. Education becomes the foundational ethical endeavor of living well in a community – reinforcing good habits through the use of intelligent, social inquiry. This connection, sown in James's *Principles*, is pushed further by Dewey in November of 1904. Regarding James's empiricism and its relation to the metaphysics that underlies Pragmatism, Dewey writes,

Of course, we come back afterward everywhere, to the difficulty of stating the nature & reasons of the fact that the objective, – the fire which burns, –is pliable, & submits to the exactions which we, in our subjective or psychical capacity, make of upon it – But if it be true, as it seems to me to be true, that the subjective is identical with reference to it functioning in an autobiography, this is just the fundamental question of morals – the interaction of persons and things –, or ... the relation of personal freedom & the stable order. And one of the many advantages of the pragmatic approach is that it identifies this ethical problem with the general problem of the relations of the objective & subjective in experience, instead of ... leaving the ethical in a small corner by ... itself.<sup>26</sup>

The ethical, according to both James and Dewey, is a matter that pervades all of our experience. These thinkers find the notion of a distinction between matters of fact and matters of value misguided. Surely, this is not to deny the value of science. Rather, science, inquiry, and knowledge all point toward the same notion of intelligence, the formation of good, habituated behavior. As such, science itself is an ethical endeavor, as is art, and both just as much as politics.

In 1909, the year before James's death, Dewey pushed James to clarify his notions of pragmatism and radical empiricism. Dewey felt "impertinent enough to ask" about particular essays and phrasings. In February of 1909, he writes,

You will pardon this suggestion I hope but it seems to me that you concede, for the sake of better understanding, to the critic that ‘a happening is the ... same as a truth’ is to admit the very point in which his own confusion resides, and by encouraging him in that confusion ... prevent exactly the better understanding which you have aimed at?<sup>27</sup>

Dewey here corrects James’s often overreaching efforts to explain to others the pragmatic point of view and its theory of truth. It is likely that James’s effort was due to his great desire to be inclusive and understanding of those who did not yet grasp his ideas. What distinguishes James and Dewey from so many others is their attention to the questions not only of philosophy, but *about* philosophy. What is it good for? How can it help us live well? Dewey also warned James to work more on the project of his germinal notion of pluralism, which Dewey saw as foundational to James’s democratic spirit.

I hope that what I have said so far has done enough to show the rich relationship these two shared in philosophy. A towering intellect in his own right, James nevertheless was certainly encouraged in Dewey’s engagements with him. The next section explores this relationship with focus on the theme of democracy and pluralism.

### ***DEMOCRACY AND PLURALISM***

In this section, I will show some of the ways that Dewey urged James to focus on the matter of pluralism and democratic political ideals, such as the matter of social intelligence that arose in Dewey’s letter about Ford.

A brief passage in Dewey’s letter to James from 1903 focuses on pluralism. Keep in mind, James’s *A Pluralistic Universe* was published six years later, in 1909. In 1903, Dewey advises James, “I think you must state your Plurality as a matter of historic significance (& hence of relativity) as well as the Universal, Unity &c.”<sup>28</sup> Dewey was an important and most careful reader of James’s work. What is more, Dewey gained James’s respect early in his career. So, when Dewey writes James with a recommendation concerning his work and what would be worth developing further, James is likely to have listened.

So far an important element of my categorization of James depends upon the idea that pluralism is important for democracy. Although James is justly criticized as one who is insufficiently political,<sup>29</sup> he nevertheless is concerned with issues foundational to democracy. Dewey believes that the elements essential to what "...democracy really means..." include "...its essential pluralism, experimentalism and consequent toleration." And, he continues, "it may be that the best thing which can happen to the ideal of democracy is to be put on the defensive. For then it will no longer remain a vague optimism, a weak benevolent aspiration, at the mercy of favorable circumstances ... It will recognize the infinite variety of human nature, and the infinite plurality of purposes for which men associate themselves together."<sup>30</sup> The notion that it is good for democracy to be on the defensive evokes James's chapter on habit in the *Principles* – one must keep one's habits flexible and adaptable, or else they will harden like any other undemocratic monism.

Recall the passage in Dewey's letter to James about Ford. Already at that point Dewey was emphasizing to James the importance of social intelligence and the tremendous movement that parallels the religious Reformation. We each have a part to play in the search for truth, because truth for James and Dewey is perspectival. Thus, democracy, if it is to be grounded on intelligent social inquiry, as Dewey would insist it must be, demands that the many different and changing voices contribute to the pursuit and exploitation of the fullest inquiry possible. With the break from accepted religious authorities that came with the Reformation, so too did Dewey and James see the potential for freer and greater adaptability of social practices. As scholar James T. Kloppenberg has written regarding James's political philosophy, "Norms cannot be imposed on a polity any more than they can be imposed on an individual; they must be chosen voluntarily and validated in action by the community. As I have noted, James described history as the ongoing effort to 'find the more and more inclusive ideal.'"<sup>31</sup> Here we see the sense in which consent is a concept that is better suited to democratic theory if a more inclusive and adaptable form of government is maintained, allowing future generations their own opportunity to accept or reject the practices and decisions of previous generations.

One of the ways that James showed his desire to address a variety of audiences was evident even in his presentational style. In a letter to Arthur F. Bentley of August 1942, Dewey writes,

What you say about the tendency of James to adapt himself to the audience he was addressing is sound and shrewd. Of course we all do it to some extent, but James to an unusual degree. I think there were two causes. James had a democratic respect for the beliefs of others if they were sincere – (he was inclined probably to be a little overgenerous in assuming sincerity) and he was an artist with the artist[']s desire to communicate.<sup>32</sup>

The trait Dewey describes here, of adapting to one's audience, is a democratic virtue. Indeed, in Plato's dialogues, Socrates strays from his dialectical method in the *Gorgias*, as his interlocutors demand speeches and pontification. James, no doubt, believes in adaptation, as does Dewey. The skill of varying one's approach to different situations is vital for natural, biological endeavors just as much as it is for social, ethical, and educational ones. When the student does not learn the notion or process this way, you say it or present it in another way until he or she does. Adaptation and attention to differences and pluralities are the mark of the democratic and of its foundation – education.

What sort of pluralism are we talking about in James's work? In Dewey's article, "Pragmatic Acquiescence," he describes the influence on James of the pioneer life. Dewey replies to Lewis Mumford's criticism that James mistakes the experiences of a generation – the pioneers – for the experience of all. Dewey explains that James's pluralistic, pioneer analogy describes the universe as "...not all closed and settled, which is still in some respects indeterminate and in the making, which is adventurous and which implicates all who share in it, whether by acting or believing, in its own perils." Dewey continues, "one who has not studied James patiently enough to learn how this idea is wrought into his treatment of all special topics, from the will to believe to his pluralism, from his empiricism to his moral and religious ideas, has not got far in knowledge of James."<sup>33</sup> All in peril have a claim and a stake in knowledge of public problems. Dewey here is pointing out the importance of understanding James's grand, vital view of the universe that bubbles up in all his theories. Dewey believes, furthermore, that James is the primary proponent of this view. Elsewhere he writes, "The term pluralism is very recent in English ... James has probably done more than anyone else to give it currency, in his *Will to Believe* (see preface in particular)."<sup>34</sup>

It is important to see the relation between pluralism and democracy for both Dewey and James. Among the views that each fought was the immutable: for instance, the idea of the great chain of being,<sup>35</sup> the notion that human beings are part of a set of unchanging things in the world, ranked higher or lower on a spectrum of proximity to the divine. When Dewey ventured to criticize the notion that the so-called “savages” were indeed under-developed white persons, James was very much in agreement with Dewey’s sentiment. In fact, in a letter to Dewey from September of 1902, James writes,

Having just read your “Savage Mind” article in the Psych. Rev. for May, I cannot refrain from thanking you for a thing so “concrete” and full of veracious psychological imagination. Also humane, and calculated to dampen the conceit of our all destroying “Civilization.” Pray keep up that line of study.<sup>36</sup>

James is referring, of course, to Dewey’s “Interpretation of Savage Mind.”<sup>37</sup> In that article, Dewey rejects the notion that the so-called savages have inferior or undeveloped minds. He writes,

The psychical attitudes and traits of the savage are more than stages through which mind has passed, leaving them behind. They are outgrowths which have entered decisively into further evolution, and as such form an integral part of the framework of present mental organization. Such positive significance is commonly attributed, in theory at least, to animal mind; but the mental structure of the savage, which presumably has an even greater relevancy for genetic psychology, is strangely neglected.<sup>38</sup>

The democratic spirit in which James and Dewey continually grow finds an important source in this notion of transition and variability.

I have mentioned that the idea of consent is a way to link the notion of pluralism with democracy. It bears fleshing out in relation to the ideas of transition and variability. These two ideas arose to prominence in James’s and Dewey’s thinking first as biological ideas. Organisms survive as species when they are able to adapt to their environments. When you consider James and Dewey’s historical context, with the Civil War only a generation earlier than theirs, the idea

of adaptability would have appeared crucial for government as much as for species. The country was rebuilding after a conflict concerning the consent or dissent that some Americans exhibited with regard to the government. Americans, as Dewey noted in the Ford letter, were growing a movement similar to the Reformation. Each citizen has a direct contribution and value in considering the true or best government. Both James and Dewey fought the social contract tradition's idea of consent, handed down through theory and ahistorical ideas. Consider, by contrast, James's statement in his essay, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," that "there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance."<sup>39</sup> Ethics must be developed, not in idea prior to engagement with others, but in the transactions among different individuals who each brings a unique perspective to the table.

Even in Dewey's early essays, though he is still entrenched in his Hegelianism, we find the spirit of democracy emerging and in a way that James takes up later in the name of pluralism. It offers a starting point for what we find later in the article on savage mind. Dewey writes,

In primitive societies morality is identified with the customs of the community; and these customs, receiving religious sanction, are thus binding religiously as well as morally. This fact tends to retard the growth of any theory of conduct. Custom when consecrated by religion is the essence of conservatism.<sup>40</sup>

Here, Dewey lays out the danger of conservatism – the doctrine of holding a monistic, unchanging view of the world. It is solidified in religion, and halts moral progress. If the world is indeed always changing in the way James later describes, the most dangerous position one can hold is an unchanging one. Democracy demands adaptation, malleability, openness and experimentation. It demands an ethical approach that is suited for the type of changing universe we inhabit.

Whenever the notions of change, adaptation, and pluralism are mentioned, there are those who cringe at the danger these words represent to the conservative way of life: if we hold a pluralistic view of the world and values, then everything will become meaningless. Discussing just this problem raised by critics of James, Dewey writes,

James shows us that people were laboring under a misapprehension when they feared that the concept of pluralism would lead to chaos, and when they therefore

insisted upon forcing all experience into one mold of system and unity. But as a matter of fact, if we change our viewpoint and see human experience as a stream of consciousness which runs ceaselessly, there is need for both monism and pluralism in interpreting the phenomenon. In any case, human experience has ceased to be a “thing,” a dead concept; it is a living entity, and may be examined in a monistic frame of reference, or in a pluralistic one, as the nature of the occasion demands.<sup>41</sup>

Here, Dewey makes sure the point is clear – that pluralism is not an invariable notion to employ in all cases. Indeed, monism is sometimes called for depending on the situation at hand.

### **CONCLUSION**

Much of this discussion has been phrased by Dewey’s pen. I take this approach to show where in Dewey’s work we might see the areas that James was encouraged in examining the democratic matter of a practical philosophy attentive to the societal changes surrounding them in their pluralistic contemporary context.<sup>42</sup> The ultimate evidence of James’s spirit of democracy, however, is in his own words. In a letter to Ralph Barton Perry of July 1909, James sums up his democratic sentiment in his discussion of what he likes of Perry’s *The Moral Economy*.<sup>43</sup> He writes, “What I care for most is the reasoned faith in radical democracy, and the smiting and sweeping sentences in which every now and then it comes to the fore, scouting the pedantic, conventional, and scholastic alternatives, whatever they may be.”<sup>44</sup> James is a passionate advocate of the value of all people in the effort to live well together. He sees himself as a thinker who focuses on the nature behind such projects, such as what Dewey calls the infinite variety of human nature. We see these tendencies elsewhere, however. It is not only in Perry’s book that this tendency of James’s comes out. We find it in his beginnings in medicine, his social endeavor in the science of psychology, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, in his *Will to Believe*, and most certainly, in his later work, *A Pluralistic Universe*. What makes one hesitate to call James democratic thinker is primarily the sense in which he seems introspective. Although his *Pragmatism* is more extroverted, his work on religion, psychology, and belief are generally more focused on the individual’s experience than Dewey seems to be. But, for James, the issue is not solitary. His are always issues that we all must face, and his spirit of openness



and interest in the pluralistic humility of respecting how others experience the world is exemplary of the democratic ideal.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Authors who have argued this point of view in a variety of ways have included James T. Kloppenberg, Andrew F. Smith, Joshua Miller, and David Schlosberg. In a unique way, Colin Koopman has argued that James was a political thinker, but one focused on “personal freedom.” Koopman develops this unique approach in his article, “William James’s Politics of Personal Freedom,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, 2 (2005): 175–86.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew F. Smith offers a succinct statement of the scholarship that sees James as an individualistic thinker. See Andrew F. Smith, “Communication and Conviction: A Jamesian Contribution to Deliberative Democracy,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 21, 4 (2007): 259–274. See especially 262, where Smith cites Westbrook and West. Consider also that George Cotkin characterized James’s pluralism as “anarchistic,” which “impelled him to be wary of all governments, be they capitalist, socialist, and of the institutionalization of philosophy and science,” in *William James, Public Philosopher* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Westbrook describes James as a stubborn individualist in *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 67. Once again, I am indebted to Andrew F. Smith for pointing me to this passage, “Communication and Conviction,” 262.

<sup>4</sup> Larry A. Hickman, Review of Sleeper’s *The Necessity of Pragmatism* in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* XXIII, 3 (Summer, 1987): 446–453. Excerpt found on page 452. Brackets added.

<sup>5</sup> Ignas K. Skruplekiš and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds. *The Correspondence of William James, Volume 6, 1885–1889* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 187. Referred to hereafter as *James Correspondence*, followed by the volume number and dates. Brackets added.

<sup>6</sup> *James Correspondence*, volume 7, 1890–1894, 162–163.

<sup>7</sup> *The correspondence of John Dewey, 1859-1952, 2nd edition*. General editor, Larry A. Hickman; editors, Barbara Levine, Anne Sharpe, Harriet Furst Simon (Charlottesville, VA : IntelLex Corp., 2001), 1892.02.08 (00463). Source will be referred to hereafter as *Dewey Correspondence*.

<sup>8</sup> *Dewey Correspondence*, 1904.01.20 (00926).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1907.11.28 (04579).

<sup>10</sup> *The Dewey Correspondence*, 1896.07.23, (09530).

<sup>11</sup> Dewey's important "Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" article was first published in 1896, but it was probably not this paper that James heard, since Dewey later asks James in a letter whether he has read it. It was first published in *Psychological Review*, 3 (1896): 357–70. This evidence is inconclusive, however.

<sup>12</sup> *James Correspondence*, volume 10, 1902–1905, 324.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, William James, "What Pragmatism Means," in *'Pragmatism' and 'The Meaning of Truth'* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 34–37.

<sup>14</sup> First published in *Psychological Review*, III (July 1896), 357–70.

<sup>15</sup> *James Correspondence*, volume 11, 1905–1908, 197.

<sup>16</sup> First published in *Mind*, n.s., 15, July 1906, 293–307.

<sup>17</sup> *James Correspondence*, volume 11, 1905–1908, 253.

<sup>18</sup> From Robert T. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 66.

<sup>19</sup> *Essays, Philosophical and Psychological, in Honor of William James*, Professor in Harvard University, by his Colleagues at Columbia University (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), 53–80.

<sup>20</sup> *James Correspondence*, volume 12, 1908–1910, 73.

<sup>21</sup> Robert T. Westbrook discusses this letter in *John Dewey and American Philosophy*, 54–55.

<sup>22</sup> *Dewey Correspondence*, 1891.06.03, (00460).

<sup>23</sup> I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for *William James Studies* for pointing out this element in James's social thought.

<sup>24</sup> *Dewey Correspondence*, 1891.11.22, (00461).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 1903.12.19, (00802). Brackets added.

<sup>26</sup> *Dewey Correspondence*, 1904.11.21, (00902).

<sup>27</sup> *Dewey Correspondence*, 1909.02.24, (04580).

<sup>28</sup> *James Correspondence*, volume 10, 1902–1905, 215. The cited passage is found in a parenthetical note.

<sup>29</sup> According to Sleeper, "Whereas James remained, as even a sympathetic critic has remarked, 'self-centered and abysmally ignorant of massive social inequities,' Dewey's melioristic conception of philosophy drove him to unrelenting criticism of those inequities." This passage is quoted from *The*

*Necessity of Pragmatism*, 202. The “sympathetic critic” he mentions is none other than John J. McDermott. Sleeper refers to McDermott’s review of Barzun’s *A Stroll with William James*, published in *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 1 (1984): 127.

<sup>30</sup>John Dewey, “Social Absolutism,” *John Dewey, The Middle Works, 1899–1924, Volume 13: 1921–1922*, Edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 315.

<sup>31</sup>James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 173.

<sup>32</sup>*Dewey Correspondence*, 1942.08.08, (15238).

<sup>33</sup>John Dewey, “The Pragmatic Acquiescence” *John Dewey, The Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 3: 1927–1928*, Edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 149.

<sup>34</sup>John Dewey, “Contributions to Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology” *John Dewey, The Middle Works, 1899–1924, Volume 2: 1902–1903*, Edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 204.

<sup>35</sup>See, for example, Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of and Idea*. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1960).

<sup>36</sup>*James Correspondence*, volume 10, 1902–1905, 138.

<sup>37</sup>First published in *Psychological Review* 9 (1902): 217–30.

<sup>38</sup>John Dewey, “Interpretation of Savage Mind,” as found in *John Dewey, The Middle Works, 1899–1924, Volume 2: 1902–1903*, Edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 39.

<sup>39</sup>William James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1897/1956), 184.

<sup>40</sup>John Dewey, “Moral Philosophy,” *John Dewey, The Early Works, 1882–1898, Volume 4: 1893–1894, Early Essays and The Study of Ethics, A Syllabus* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 132.

<sup>41</sup>John Dewey, “Three Contemporary Philosophers,” *John Dewey, The Middle Works, 1899–1924, Volume 12: 1920*, Edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 211.

<sup>42</sup>Consider for instance the pioneer movement and the Haymarket affair.

<sup>43</sup>Ralph Barton Perry, *The Moral Economy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909).

<sup>44</sup>*James Correspondence*, volume 12, 1908–1910.