

# “A NEW SPHERE OF POWER”: RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND THE LANGUAGE OF DYNAMIC GIFTS IN WILLIAM JAMES

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This article examines what I will call the language of dynamic gifts in the writings of William James as another way to open up an interdisciplinary conversation among scholars of pragmatism, religion, and rhetoric. My argument is that dynamic gifts are closely associated with what James calls the “dynamogenic qualities” of religious experiences, and they open up sources of agency, inspiration, and empowerment that exceed our rational control. Though not generated by us, our ability to have such experiences is nevertheless mediated by modes of language that condition the appearance and direction of dynamic gifts. In addition to highlighting a deep connection between the religious and the rhetorical, this pragmatist notion of dynamic gifts also shifts the theoretical framework of gift-exchange from an economic cycle of debt and obligation to an intersubjective transaction of inspiration and empowerment.



*After all, what accounts do the nethermost bounds of the universe owe to me? By what insatiate conceit and lust of intellectual despotism do I arrogate the right to know their secrets, and from my philosophic throne to play the only airs they shall march to, as if I were the Lord's anointed? Is not my knowing them at all a gift and not a right? And shall it be given before they are given? Data! gifts! something to be to be thankful for! It is a gift that we can approach things at all, and, by means of the time and space of which our minds and they partake, alter our actions so as to meet them.<sup>1</sup>*

~ On Some Hegelisms ~

While working on a larger project on the language of gifts in nineteenth-century American literature, philosophy, and religion, I became fascinated with passages like the one above from William James. First published in 1882 and reprinted in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, “On Some Hegelisms” was meant to be a polemical jab at the kind of monistic idealism that was taking philosophical root in the US. In the preface to the later volume, James expresses some regret “for the superficiality with which [the essay] treats a serious subject,” but he decided to include it anyways, he says, “partly because I believed the dialectical method to be wholly abominable when worked by concepts alone, and partly because the essay casts some positive light on the pluralist-empiricist point of view.”<sup>2</sup> Gifts, as he uses the term here, point to both the contingent limitations of our knowledge of the universe and the secrets that still exceed our grasp. As I began to pay attention to the interesting ways that James employed this particular trope in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *Pragmatism*, I was able to see the possibility of scholars of pragmatism, religion, and rhetoric converging around a rich interdisciplinary discourse about gifts.

Alan Schrift has described the gift as “one of the primary focal points at which contemporary disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourses intersect.”<sup>3</sup> This is the case according to Hildegard Hoeller because “Gift theory from its inception has recognized that it must grapple with this double nature of the gift—its real

manifestations as a cultural and economic practice that governs human relations and communities and its powerful existence as a site of hope, faith, even fantasy.”<sup>4</sup> Given the wide range of recent discourses about gifts, it should not surprise us that studying James’s language of gifts can also be a useful bridge across the many disciplinary boundaries he himself crossed. But to say there is a language of gifts operative in James’s writings ought to mean something more than claiming he used the word often or even in interesting figurative ways.

So I’d like to propose the following thesis which will require some interdisciplinary juggling and a close reading of the text: *examining James’s language of gifts can help reveal the rhetorical and hermeneutical dimensions of pragmatism as a method to track the religious experience of dynamic gifts*. In order to make such an argument, this article will aim at three broad yet interrelated conclusions: (1) the religious experience of what I will call *dynamic gifts* opens up sources of agency, inspiration, and empowerment that exceed our rational control; (2) though not generated by us, their appearance is nevertheless mediated rhetorically and hermeneutically — that is to say, the reception of dynamic gifts is always bound up with modes of language, without which gifts cannot be distinguished from other objects; and (3) a pragmatist conception of dynamic gifts imagines a way to avoid the economic cycles of debt and obligation often associated with gift-exchange in order to open up an intersubjective space for inspiration, creativity, and empowerment. Before I turn to a close reading of the texts, let me briefly explain some of the broader contexts motivating these conclusions.

One of my objectives in emphasizing the language of gifts and what James calls their “dynamogenic” qualities is to build on the work of pragmatist scholars who often work independently from each other. On the one hand, literary and rhetorical pragmatists such as Richard Poirier and Steven Mailloux have emphasized the linguistic implications of Jamesian pragmatism but have largely bracketed out the central role of religion. On the other hand, religious pragmatists such as Wayne Proudfoot and David Lamberth

have done much to bring religion back to the forefront of James studies, but the rhetorical and hermeneutic implications of James's religious writings remain underdeveloped.<sup>5</sup>

This article suggests that focusing on a pragmatist concept of dynamic gifts can help us think again about the deep connection between the religious and the rhetorical. Doing so can also provide important correctives to readings by prominent figures such as Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor who reduce what James calls experience to merely a private and subjective matter.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to such readings, Paul Stob has argued that James believed we ought to throw our interpretations of the world, including religious ones, into a "marketplace of ideas, wherein something like the art of rhetoric — though James never labeled it as such — is required to work through our differences."<sup>7</sup> The religious experience of dynamic gifts may begin in the private and subjective, but when such experiences enter a marketplace of ideas, which is the only way to test their validity, we can see more clearly not only the rhetorical significance of James's pragmatism, but also a crucial distinction between different modes of rhetoric that either open or close more creative energy and dynamic exchange.

Marilee Mifsud's article "Rhetoric as Gift/Giving" may be helpful here in making this distinction between what she calls *rhetoric as a technological process* and *rhetoric as creative communication*. Technological rhetoric operates "in an ethic of abstraction, approaching its situation with a fundamental distance between self and other. In this distance, the other's assent becomes regarded as a commodity to secure, and rhetorical techne the tools for the task."<sup>8</sup> With creative rhetoric, however, "we can imagine it not so much a tool but a gift. We can suppose rhetoric as a gift to be creative, intimate, memorable, luxurious, and liberal. Creativity is the antinomy of technical procedure."<sup>9</sup> This notion of rhetoric as gift becomes a fundamental openness to and cooperation with the other. It is less agonistic and more hospitable.

But Mifsud acknowledges that gifts too can become burdensome in economic cycles of obligation and indebtedness, so she suggests shifting the theoretical framework of the gift away from economic

exchange to release more of the gift's creative possibilities. To do so, we must have an answer to the following questions: "Can the gift be aneconomic? Can we imagine giving, not figured through cycles of obligatory return, i.e., not savings, but squander; not return, but release?"<sup>10</sup> While Mifsud looks to "the demand in writing for excess" that can be found in the works of Jacques Derrida and Helene Cixous, I will look to James to offer an alternative way to think about a rhetoric of gifts in terms not of indebtedness but of empowerment. For James, the gift opens up a dynamic intersubjective transaction or horizon that makes it difficult to locate and calculate who is giving to whom. Yet though not generated by reason, the dynamic power of gifts is nevertheless mediated by modes of rhetoric that condition the gift's reception and effects. And nowhere does James see this rhetoric of dynamic gifts more clearly than in an openness to and cooperation with a religious power that comes to us like a gift from sources beyond ourselves and impossible to determine fully in advance.

Before returning to this question of rhetoric as an aneconomic gift in the conclusion, I need to begin by showing how the pragmatist preoccupation with dynamic power is related to the reception of religious gifts. To account for such experiences, James develops a theory of consciousness that reveals just how fundamental language is in closing or disclosing the dynamic gifts of experience. And by analyzing how language functions in this way, I will argue not only that pragmatism, at least for James, is in an important sense always a *religious* pragmatism, but also that this religious pragmatism has deep rhetorical and hermeneutic implications. Indeed, it gives us another way to think about certain modes of rhetoric as a gift that opens us to dynamic sources of power beyond our rational control.

### **RELIGION, POWER, AND DYNAMIC GIFTS**

*Religious feeling is thus an absolute addition to the Subject's range of life. It gives him a new sphere of power.*<sup>11</sup>

~ The Varieties of Religious Experience ~

That power is one of James's key terms is unsurprising. It is a term not only relevant to pragmatism's emphasis on effects, but also inextricably tied to what he calls a science of religion. In *Pragmatism*, James defines his philosophy as a method and theory of truth that among other things help to overcome inaction resulting from metaphysical disputes — most notably between religion and science. As a theory of truth, pragmatism rejects a correspondence view for an instrumental one. Truths are formed rather than found. When older truths are modified to incorporate newer ones, the process should be described as not revolutionary, but evolutionary in that the new is grafted onto the old. As a method, pragmatism turns away from “a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers,” namely, the search after an “unlawful magic” of words that rely on “fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins.” Instead, it “turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action,” all of which ultimately reflect pragmatism's turn “towards power.”<sup>12</sup>

While such a theory and method can have wide implications, James more narrowly suggests both in his first lecture and near the end of the second one, that the central aim of pragmatism is to widen “the field of search for God.”<sup>13</sup> What is important to emphasize here is that James does not separate the pragmatic turn towards power from the widening search for religious sources. Rather, pragmatism mediates the reception of power from a wider religious field. It opens up, what he calls in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the “*that by which we live*” that both dogmatic rationalism and materialistic empiricism cut off.<sup>14</sup> This aspect of James's pragmatism, then, becomes more than a method and theory of truth; it offers its own religious beliefs about human agency and history. Thus, what I am suggesting is not simply the application of pragmatism to the topic of religion, but more strongly James's attempt to synthesize religion and pragmatism. In other words, pragmatism for James is in an important sense a religious pragmatism. Before looking at the final chapter of *Pragmatism* where this synthesis takes place, it is necessary first to focus on

*Varieties* to examine more carefully this relationship between pragmatic power and religious experience.

For James there is no contradiction in his concern for both pragmatic power and religious sources. Rather he builds into his definition of religion the very notion of power. In the chapter “Circumscription of the Topic,” James begins his definition as, “Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*”<sup>15</sup> However, after some considerations on what might be considered divine, James modifies this first definition several times in what I would describe as a demonstration of pragmatism’s evolutionary theory of truth. Religion is next defined as a “total reaction upon life,” a reaction he then specifies as solemn and grave, instead of the “vain chatter” of Voltaire and Renan or the “sick shrieking” of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.<sup>16</sup> Then after a further distinction between religion and what he calls the “athletic attitude” of moralism, James finally settles on the key definition of religious feeling as “an absolute addition to the subject’s range of life. *It gives him a new sphere of power.* When the outward battle is lost, and the outer world disowns him, it redeems and vivifies an interior world which otherwise would be an empty waste.”<sup>17</sup> Power here means personal empowerment. As Wayne Proudfoot notes about this definition of religious power, “The strenuous life, the willingness to take risks and to persevere in the face of opposition, is to be found, James says, in religion if it is to be found anywhere.”<sup>18</sup> And in my reading of *Varieties*, all the subsequent lectures on the divided-self, conversion, saintliness, and mysticism are studies on various manifestations of religion as a source of power.<sup>19</sup>

What makes this understanding of power particularly religious is the way James ties it with a theological notion of the gift. In the sentences immediately preceding his key definition of religion, James writes,

Like love, like wrath, like hope, ambition, jealousy, like every other instinctive eagerness and impulse, it [religion] adds to life an enchantment which is not rationally or logically deducible from anything else. This enchantment, coming as a gift when it does come — a gift of our organism, the physiologists will tell us, a gift of God's grace, the theologians say — is either there or not there for us, and there are persons who can no more become possessed by it than they can fall in love with a given woman by mere word of command.<sup>20</sup>

There are two important points from this passage I will examine in more detail later and only highlight briefly now. The first is rhetorical and the second, psychological, or more accurately, phenomenological. James first claims that enchantment or religious power is not something that can be “rationally or logically deducible,” nor will it appear “by mere word of command.” One can only receive this kind of empowering enchantment like the reception of what I have been calling a dynamic gift (e.g., a gift that empowers). Although this might suggest that gifts are independent of rhetoric, we will see more precisely how for James language always mediates, even if it never generates, the reception of dynamic gifts.

The second point about the phenomenal appearance of these gifts is interesting because James equivocates about whether the source of dynamic gifts is in human physiology or in the divine. This ambiguity is, I argue, intentional. Whether the source is supernatural or not, James nevertheless considers dynamic gifts to be religious. In other words, religion to the pragmatist is not deciding conclusively about its source. Rather, it is an openness to the reception and effects of dynamic gifts, whose sources may be physiological or divine, but nevertheless remain for James religious because they are not generated by rational control. The larger implication of this is that every experience, if it results in a dynamic

surge of power, can be called religious whether or not it is determined by a supernatural being.

In order to explain this, James develops a psychological theory that has deep rhetorical and hermeneutic implications to account for the appearance and effects of such phenomena. His argument is that in the end we can know them only by effects that persuade us of their existence. It is, after all, a pragmatist definition of religion as the feelings, acts, and experiences of a new gift of power. If power means personal empowerment, then James, by using the gift as a metaphor for its coming, suggests that the will to power is not self-generated, even if, as we will see, its reception is conditioned by language. Gifts may not appear by mere word of command, but they also cannot appear without a rhetorical structure (e.g. ideas, beliefs, metaphors) that anticipates their appearance. Because pragmatism emphasizes the effects of power so much, it is often easy to miss the fundamental giftedness of power.

In works both before and after *Varieties*, James uses this term gift to describe phenomena that we do not master and control. An early example is James's use of this trope in an 1884 address to Harvard Divinity students called "The Dilemma of Determinism." In this essay, gift means the opposite of philosophical determinism. However much conditioned, the universe is nevertheless contingent and open. Hence, gift is another word for freedom or chance:

Let us not fear to shout it from the house-tops if need be; for we now know that the idea of chance is, at bottom, exactly the same thing as the idea of gift — the one simply being a disparaging, and the other a eulogistic, name for anything on which we have no effective *claim*. And whether the world be the better or the worse for having either chances or gifts in it will depend altogether on *what* these uncertain and unclaimable things turn out to be.<sup>21</sup>

Notice again that in order to determine whether gifts make the world better or worse, we do not seek to know whether their origins

are divine or diabolical. Rather, we can only know what *kind* of gifts they are by how they turn out to be. All that we know about their origins is that we have no effective claim on them. That is, none of our theories or theologies correspond completely to the world: “no part of the world, however big, can claim to control absolutely the destinies of the whole.” This emphasis on parts is a central theme from his earliest work on psychology to his last publication of “A Pluralistic Mystic.” And nowhere does James critique the metonymical reduction more strongly than his theory of truth in *Pragmatism*: “It would be an obvious absurdity if such ways of taking the universe [e.g. Platonic, Lockean, Hegelian, etc.] were actually true.”<sup>22</sup> The world, despite our theories, “stands there indefeasibly: a gift which can’t be taken back.”<sup>23</sup> The gift here points to the unclaimable givenness of our existential being in the world. Truth may be instrumentally formed, says James, but it is always formed in negotiation with the world or the unclaimable gifts already given. Thus, pragmatic truths are never arbitrary even if they are revisable.

This philosophical notion of the world as a gift is for James an extension of one of his principles of psychology, namely, that the conscious, rational self plays only a part, along with the subconscious, in conditioning one’s total being. To some people are given unclaimable gifts from the subconscious that can shift their consciousness and open up possibilities otherwise not there. In *Varieties*, conversion is what James calls the shift from a divided to a unified consciousness:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct

divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to equivocating again about its sources, this pragmatic definition of conversion moves the emphasis from intellectual or institutional assent to the experience of religion, which is synonymous with the reception of the gift of grace. Thus, the lectures on conversion lay out in a sense a theory of the reception of dynamic gifts.

If consciousness can shift with conversion, it proves consciousness is nothing more than the forming and reforming of associations or habits. When certain mental associations are sustained, these habits constitute what we call character. Aspects of character that feel fixed are only long held habits of association. Within our broader habits of association or character, there are certain “centres of our dynamic energy” that render other associations out to the margins.<sup>25</sup> When certain ideas move to the center, others do not simply disappear. Instead, peripheral ideas are organized along, we might say, a horizon that is nevertheless tinged by the center.

However, the direction of influence moves both ways. Even when, for example, religious ideas remain peripheral, they are not necessarily ineffective. Our general field or horizon of consciousness includes not only the habitual centers of our energy, but also margins, which like a “magnetic field” help “both to guide our behavior and to determine the next movement of our attention.”<sup>26</sup> While the margin itself is not fully determinable, James points to studies suggesting that aside from the usual center and margin, there might be “an addition thereto in the shape of a set of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are *extra-marginal and outside the primary consciousness altogether*, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs.”<sup>27</sup> This extra-marginal field is also called the subliminal or the subconscious. The subliminal memories, thoughts, and feelings here do not refer to preexisting ideas in some Platonic world of forms, but for the most part to things accumulated through

sensory experience. Most of what we experience slips from “primary consciousness” (both center and margin) into the subconscious (extra-marginal field). And if experiences can slip into the subconscious, they of course can return. If they do, they do so in often abrupt and spontaneous ways in the form of “uprushes,” “bursts of energy,” and “power,” which he says are akin to theological experiences of redemption, salvation, or peace. Underlying all these terms is, as he calls them, a “dynamogenic quality (to use the slang of the psychologists), that enables them to burst their shell, and make irruption efficaciously into life.”<sup>28</sup> When these dynamogenic irruptions take place, they often shift or convert one’s horizon of consciousness.

According to this model, James hypothesizes that the source of religious power might be in the subconscious. Some have an active and “large subliminal region,” from which incursions more frequently take place.<sup>29</sup> But even if others have a less active subliminal region—that is, “if his conscious fields have a hard rind of a margin that resists incursions from beyond it”—this only means that “his conversion must be gradual if it occur, and must resemble any simple growth into new habits.”<sup>30</sup> This psychological difference between sudden and gradual conversions might be what separates in James’s view a religious experience from an athletic moralism. If so, it highlights again a definition of religion as the incursion, experience, or reception of power.

With this theory of the subconscious, James makes room for the possibility of religious experience without determining the origins of these religious incursions. Tracing the scientific experiments James relied on to develop his understanding of the subliminal, Ann Taves has argued, “James left open the question of where the subconscious ended, whether in the personal self or beyond it, and thus placed *ultimate* questions about origins outside the purview of the science of religions.”<sup>31</sup> But for James this isn’t to say that scientists could not examine the *possibility* of subliminal incursions from non-sensory supernatural sources. Instead, James always positions himself carefully as a psychologist to reflect the pragmatist method that in his view ought to maintain the subjunctive ambiguity

between possibility and doubt. Earlier in his first lecture on “Religion and Neurology,” James already set this up by revising one psychological conclusion that religious experiences are nothing but symptoms of neurosis. Instead, he writes, “If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish *the chief condition* of the requisite receptivity.”<sup>32</sup> James is not saying there exists a higher realm or supernatural agent. Rather, he is applying the pragmatic method of revising absolute conclusions into tentative conditions. Thus, James’s concern is not to determine religious or supernatural sources at all even if he himself admits to believing in them. And when he does make this leap of faith, his only justification is the pragmatist method of judging any phenomena by its “fruits” even when its “roots” are inaccessible.

However, a significant part of James’s argument, one that gets us closer to the rhetorical implications of dynamic gifts, is that for there even to be the possibility of judging religion properly by its fruits, it is necessary to examine critically *a priori* conclusions against supernatural religious sources. The psychological hoops he jumps through to open up even the conditional possibility of religious sources in an extra-marginal field are meant to undermine dogmatic conclusions, scientific or theological, that preemptively close off incursions that can shift or expand our horizons of consciousness. In other words, to be already persuaded there are no religious sources is to harden “the rind of the margin that resists incursions from beyond.”<sup>33</sup>

This is basically what James argues in “The Will to Believe,” the arguments of which influence all his subsequent work on religion and philosophy. This foundational essay can be summed up as a justification of faith or the belief that some things are justified only by faith when there is insufficient evidence to act otherwise. There are times when we should act based on a non-logical faith even in the absence of convincing intellectual grounds because some facts can come about only as a result of an act of faith. One such fact, like love or justice, is the reception of dynamic gifts.

In the conclusion to *Varieties*, James refers back to this earlier essay to make this point about dynamic gifts:

Although the religious question is primarily a question of life, of living or not living in the higher union which opens itself to us as a gift, yet the spiritual excitement in which the gift appears a real one will often fail to be aroused in an individual until certain particular intellectual beliefs or ideas which, as we say, come home to him, are touched. These ideas will thus be essential to that individual's religion; — which is as much as to say that over-beliefs in various directions are absolutely indispensable, and that we should treat them with tenderness and tolerance so long as they are not intolerant themselves. As I have elsewhere written, the most interesting and valuable things about a man are usually his over-beliefs.<sup>34</sup>

This notion that ideas or beliefs condition the appearance of all phenomena including the gift is what I meant earlier by anticipation. Beliefs do not generate the gift; but they provide a kind of subliminal suggestion that conditions its receptivity. A better way perhaps to describe this is to say beliefs provide a hermeneutic center or horizon from which the religious experience of gifts can at least become a possibility. In the passage above, we see how James's philosophy and psychology of gifts are both grounded on a hermeneutic theory. Beliefs can serve as hermeneutic frameworks to interpret, for example, some events as mere chance or acts of providence. Furthermore, beliefs condition not only the appearance, but also more importantly "the various directions" of gifts. Gifts, which are always mediated by language, can have different kinds of rhetorical effects depending on our interpretive frameworks. Beliefs say in greed or generosity, or in Buddhism or Marxism, condition dynamic gifts to empower us in different ways. Thus, while religious experience is *phenomenologically* prior to belief and theory, beliefs

play an important *rhetorical* and *hermeneutical* function by conditioning the possibility and direction of dynamic gifts. Between the phenomenological appearance of gifts and their rhetorical effects are hermeneutic frameworks open to sources beyond the self.

Central to James's argument at this point are two modes of language that relate to experience differently, much like the distinction Mifsud makes between gift rhetoric and technological rhetoric. The former remains open to experience, in that "these intellectual operations presuppose immediate experiences as their subject-matter. They are interpretative and inductive operations, operations after the fact, consequent upon religious feeling, not coordinate with it, not independent of what it ascertains."<sup>35</sup> This mode of language, though contingent, is grounded upon religious feeling. It differs from logical abstractions by acknowledging its "formulas are but approximations," and though interpretation of feeling into words is necessary, it understands that "truth and fact well up into our lives in ways that exceed verbal formulation."<sup>36</sup> Abstract concepts, mathematical proofs, and logical necessities, if they are detached from the truth and fact of experience, are powerless modes of language, rhetorically so, unable to make much pragmatic difference. The example he gives is metaphysical arguments about the existence of God, which fail to persuade anyone: "If you have a God already whom you believe in, these arguments confirm you. If you are atheistic, they fail to set you right."<sup>37</sup>

In contrast to theological formulations detached from experience, James suggests that a more contingent and hermeneutic mode of religious language is prayer, which he broadly defines as "every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine."<sup>38</sup> As "the very soul and essence of religion,"

Prayer is religion in act; that is, prayer is real religion.  
It is prayer that distinguishes the religious  
phenomenon from such similar or neighboring  
phenomena as purely moral or aesthetic sentiment.  
Religion is nothing if it be not the vital act by which

the entire mind seeks to save itself by clinging to the principle from which it draws its life [...] One sees from this why 'natural religion,' so-called, is not properly a religion. It cuts man off from prayer. It leaves him and God in mutual remoteness, with no intimate commerce, no interior dialogue, no interchange, no action of God in man, no return of man to God. At bottom this pretended religion is only a philosophy.<sup>39</sup>

What natural religion essentially lacks is an intersubjective dialogue and commerce, or what he calls on the same page, "a sense that *something is transacting*." In the concluding lecture, where James outlines the fundamental characteristics of religion, this something is clarified as "spiritual energy [that] flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world" by giving "a new zest which adds itself *like a gift to life*."<sup>40</sup> In other words, in prayer there is an intersubjective transaction of dynamic gifts that results in pragmatic effects and can be phenomenologically traceable to experience. And this transaction is conditioned both hermeneutically in terms of an interpretive openness to dynamic gifts and rhetorically in terms of the way these gifts are directed.

Again, it must be emphasized that despite the God-talk in the passage above, James is not deciding on whether the divine exists or not, though it is clear where he stands if he had to offer his own over-beliefs or what he admits seems more like a "sorry under-belief."<sup>41</sup> What this emphasis on prayer signifies for him is the attempt to open up more broadly a dynamic transaction between experience and language, between sensory feelings, intellectual beliefs, and ultimately social action. Like the phenomenon of reading fiction or poetry, what the phenomenon of prayer demonstrates for us is an experience that emerges out of an intersubjective transaction mediated by language.

Thus, a pragmatist who prays, so to speak, is one whose mode of language is open to an experience of the other and to the dynamic

sources of power beyond the self. What matters for James is that certain modes of language either close or disclose an experience of the kind of power that makes action possible. What kind of action we will see in just a moment. But interpretations of religious experience or transactions in prayer should result in real, historical and material changes. Without such evidence, James thinks it is a waste of time to discuss religion or anything else, since from a pragmatist's perspective the only way to judge the existence of any source is to trace the effects of its dynamic gifts. Therefore, when James says that pragmatism widens the field of search for God, we can now better understand that whether divine sources really exist or not, a question whose answer can never be dogmatically certain for the pragmatist, their gifts can make a difference. In this way, pragmatic action results from a dynamic transaction of gifts mediated by language.

If we read *Pragmatism* and *Varieties* closely together as the last paragraph suggests we do, it is possible then to understand James's pragmatism as doing something more than simply mediating metaphysical disputes as he claims in the chapter "What Pragmatism Means." *Pragmatism* begins by being open to opposing philosophical temperaments or habits of thinking, but by the end of his last lecture on "Pragmatism and Religion," his philosophy in fact develops into its own "religious synthesis":

But if you are neither tough nor tender in an extreme and radical sense, but mixed as most of us are, it may seem to you that *the type of pluralistic and moralistic religion that I have offered is as good a religious synthesis as you are likely to find*. Between the two extremes of crude naturalism on the one hand and transcendental absolutism on the other, you may find that what I take the liberty of calling *the pragmatistic or melioristic type of theism* is exactly what you require.<sup>42</sup>

Here James's pragmatism is more than a method and theory. It is a religious synthesis that puts forward a kind of pragmatic theism with substantive claims about the sources of human agency and history. James does not stop simply at the classic Peircean definition of pragmatism that beliefs are rules for action. What James fills in at this point is a particular belief that there are forces or powers, seemingly divine (or, it should always be added, potentially diabolic), that enable individuals to act in heroic ways to bring about historical changes. The kind of action James is ultimately interested in is the attempt to realize our highest ideals about the world and history. He calls these ideals our beliefs about the world's salvation, which also implies the means of grace or dynamic gifts necessary to achieve them. The pragmatist is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, both of which he understands as deterministic views of the future. Instead, James holds to a melioristic view, which "treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become."<sup>43</sup> If what James calls salvation becomes more probable, it will be the result of a mixture of complementary conditions and forces, which include for him an individual's ideals, the cooperation of others, and the reception of dynamic gifts: "What now actually *are* the other forces which he trusts to co-operate with him, in a universe of such a [pluralistic] type? They are at least his fellow men, in the stage of being which our actual universe has reached. But are there not superhuman forces also, such as religious men of the pluralistic type we have been considering have always believed in?"<sup>44</sup> His answer is yes, only if we understand these forces or powers, whose sources might be untraceable yet known by their pragmatic effects, as "one helper, *primus inter pares*, in the midst of all the shapers of the great world's fate." No part, not even the gifts of God, absolutely conditions the whole.

But dynamic gifts, whose appearance and direction are nevertheless contingent upon at least a hermeneutical contribution on our part, can have rhetorical effects on individuals and history for better or for worse. The varieties of religious experiences open up

intersubjective chances and gaps, themselves indeterminate gifts that empower partial acts to save (or potentially to destroy) a world anything but guaranteed. This is ultimately James's faith and his religious pragmatism. And whether melioristic possibilities are realized or not depends, we might say, on pragmatists who pray.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

*As certain objects naturally awaken love, anger, or cupidity, so certain ideas naturally awaken the energies of loyalty, courage, endurance, or devotion. When these ideas are effective in an individual's life, their effect is often very great indeed. They may transfigure it, unlocking innumerable powers which, but for the idea, would never have come into play. 'Fatherland,' 'The Union,' 'Holy Church,' the 'Monroe Doctrine,' 'Truth,' 'Science,' 'Liberty,' Garibaldi's phrase 'Rome or Death,' etc., are so many examples of energy-releasing abstract ideas. The social nature of all such phrases is an essential factor of their dynamic power.<sup>45</sup>*

~ The Energies of Men ~

Part of my objective has been to consider what rhetorical implications can be teased out when we examine the centrality of religion to James's work on pragmatism. What we find is that both reflect his preoccupation with power, effects, and action. James defines religion as the experience of new spheres of power. And pragmatism is defined as a philosophy that turns away from abstract *a priori* reasoning and instead turns toward action and power. One of the central questions that frame James's work is what releases or inhibits various manifestations of power. And the answer to this question is particular modes of rhetoric that can close or disclose the experience of dynamic gifts. Abstract verbal formulations such as metaphysical arguments about the existence of God cut us off from the experience of religious power. But modes of rhetoric such as prayer that is more contingent upon experience can open us up to

intersubjective sources of power beyond our rational control. What this shows is the central role language plays in mediating between experience and action. Ideas and beliefs, each rhetorically structured as a means of persuasion, can be used in what Mifsud calls “a spirit of domination.”<sup>46</sup> Or they can be used more creatively in a dialogical openness to and cooperation with others. Rhetoric then becomes less a tool to win the argument and more a gift that releases creative energy. Rhetoric as a medium of gift-giving becomes an intersubjective transaction between the experience of power and its dynamic effects.

A couple weeks after completing his *Pragmatism* lectures, James gave a talk to the American Philosophical Association titled, “The Energies of Men.” Robert Richardson tells us it was a talk reworked from an earlier address given to the psychology club at Harvard delivered before the lectures. “Thus the work in pragmatism,” according to Richardson, “was bracketed — or contained, so to speak — by James’s inquiry into ‘the *amount of energy available* for running one’s mental and moral operations by.’”<sup>47</sup> In this essay James argues that one “great dynamogenic agent” is “energy-releasing” ideas such as those included in the passage above that begins this section: “Ideas contradict other ideas and keep us from believing them. An idea that thus negates a first idea may itself in turn be negated by a third idea, and the first idea may thus regain its natural influence over our belief and determine our behavior. Our philosophic and religious development proceeds thus by credulities, negations, and the negating of negations.”<sup>48</sup> As in his earlier writings on religion, James calls this process of negating negations a conversion: “*Conversions*, whether they be political, scientific, philosophic, or religious, form another way in which bound energies are let loose. They unify, and put a stop to ancient mental interferences. The result is freedom, and often a great enlargement of power.”<sup>49</sup> What this confirms is the notion that ideas can become means of persuasion that release dynamic sources of power. Most individuals, James claims, operate on levels far below their maximum capacity of energy. If we are able to tap into greater reservoirs of power, both in ourselves and in our audiences, rhetoric

will play a crucial role in negating those ideas that alienate us from an openness to and experience of dynamic gifts.

But if gifts are to release more dynamic power, then negating one idea will be necessary, and that is, as Mifsud asked at the beginning of this article, whether we can imagine rhetoric as a gift figured not in terms of obligation and return, but in terms of squander and release. I think James provides one answer in writing about dynamic gifts that empower us rather than place us under debt. If dynamic gifts come from intersubjective transactions whose sources cannot be precisely determined for the pragmatist, then to whom are we indebted? Thus rhetoric as gift can avoid the burden of obligation if it shifts its interpretive framework to an intersubjective horizon that opens up an infinite multiplicity of experience or what James liked to call the pluriverse. James is not the first to think of such gifts. He is part of an American tradition that goes back at least to Emerson who also writes about a more democratized notion of gifts that give us more fully to ourselves rather than back to the giver.<sup>50</sup> This subject of dynamogenics, according to Richardson, “is the long-standing American interest in awakening to new life and new power, the great theme of Thoreau and Emerson and Whitman, the great theme too of Jonathan Edwards, now carried to the new American century by William James.”<sup>51</sup> What is true of all these figures is that modes of rhetoric (e.g. sermons, lectures, essays, poetry, etc.) play a significant role in whether or not we have access to dynamic sources of power that come to us like gifts. And while figures like Emerson and James draw this language of dynamic gifts in part from theological debates of grace in the nineteenth century, they also attempt to purge the gift from its cycles of obligation, indebtedness, and resentment. Whether it is possible to do so depends on large part on how dynamic gifts are described and how those interpretations affect our behavior. If this is true, then rhetoric does play a central pragmatic role in what kinds of gifts we experience and whether our social transactions can be determined in terms other than debt and obligation.

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#### NOTES

1. James, "On Some Hegelisms," 202.
2. James, preface to *The Will to Believe*, 9.
3. Schrift, *The Logic of the Gift*, 3. For other overviews of recent gift-theories from various disciplinary fields, see Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift*; Hyland, *Gifts: A Study in Comparative Law*; Sykes, *Arguing with Anthropology*.
4. Hoeller, *From Gift to Commodity*, 5.
5. In *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*, Lamberth acknowledges the importance of literary-critical readings of James's work, but he thinks they downplay James's emphasis on radical empiricism. Proudfoot's *Religious Experience* does include strong emphases on the importance of religious language and hermeneutics, but James is largely absent from these sections. My argument about the rhetoric of religion draws more on Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition* and Beth Eddy's *Rites of Identity*, although neither has James as its central subject. For work done by literary and rhetorical pragmatists, see Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* and Mailloux, *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism*. While Poirier and Mailloux do not address the significance of religion in

James's pragmatism, their arguments about language and rhetorical hermeneutics have been instrumental to my reading of James. An important exception to the absence of religion among literary scholars of pragmatism is Giles Gunn's *Thinking Across the American Grain*. Nevertheless, religion continues to be left out in recent works by important rhetorical pragmatists like Robert Danisch's *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric*.

6. James's work plays an important role for Rorty and Taylor, both of whom read James as trying to hold onto metaphysics while privatizing religion. Despite their similar readings, they fall on opposite sides of their criticism. Rorty accuses James of betraying his own pragmatism by holding onto a "metaphysics of feeling," while Taylor thinks James fails to think through the public dimensions of religious belief. Although not a full response which will need to be addressed elsewhere, this article is an initial response to such criticisms. See Rorty, "Some Inconsistencies in James's *Varieties*"; Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*.

7. Stob, "Terministic Screens," 237. See also James's preface to *The Will to Believe* where he writes, "But it is just on this matter of the market-place that I think the utility of such essays as mine may turn. If religious hypotheses about the universe be in order at all, then the active faiths of individuals in them, freely expressing themselves in life, are the experimental tests by which they are verified, and the only means by which their truth or falsehood can be wrought out" (8).

8. Mifsud, "Rhetoric as Gift/Giving," 101.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 102.

11. James, *Varieties*, 46.

12. James, *Pragmatism*, 31.

13. *Ibid.*, 44.

14. James, *Varieties*, 156.

15. *Ibid.*, 34.

16. *Ibid.*, 36-39.

17. *Ibid.*, 46 (emphasis added).

18. Proudfoot, *William James and a Science of Religions*, 35.

19. The context makes clear that power as James uses the term does not mean political power-relations. However, even though he avoids in *Varieties* a historical study of religious institutions, traditions, and dogma, what James calls religious power is not entirely irrelevant to what Mailloux has called rhetorical power, which examines “how various discourses—literary, critical, and theoretical—function in producing the specific historical effects they do” (*Rhetorical Power*, xii). Although James is primarily concerned with the ways an individual’s “interior world” is empowered to face contingency and meaninglessness, he is also concerned about their profound historical implications. This point will be developed later, but the misleading opposition between the private and the public has resulted in criticism of James’s politics. For Cornel West, another religious pragmatist, James’s libertarian and cosmopolitan perspective “is one of political impotence, yet it buttresses moral integrity and promotes the exercise of individual conscience” (*American Evasion*, 60). For a similar criticism, see also Ross Posnock, “The Influence of William James on American Culture.” More recently, however, Jeremy Carrette has attempted to connect the dots between James’s emphasis on personal empowerment and power relations without trying “to make James into Foucault.” See Carrette, “Religion, Power, and the Relational Attitude.”

20. James, *Varieties*, 46. Consider also another passage about passions as gifts: “So with fear, with indignation, jealousy, ambition, worship. If they are there, life changes. And whether they shall be there or not depends almost always upon non-logical, often on organic conditions. And as the excited interest which these passions put into the world is our gift to the world, just so are the passions themselves gifts,—gifts to us, from sources sometimes low and sometimes high; but almost always non-logical and beyond our control” (126-127).

21. James, *The Will to Believe*, 123-124. Here James emphasizes that we have no claim on gifts, but in *Varieties* James will qualify the gift’s claim on us by emphasizing our partial *interpretive* claim on the gift’s manifestation. Helpful here is Gadamer’s hermeneutic

reflection on the Kierkegaardian notion of claim: “A claim is something lasting [...] but the concept of a claim also implies that it is not itself a fixed demand, the fulfillment of which is agreed on by both sides, but is rather the ground for such” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 123).

22. James, *Pragmatism*, 25.

23. *Ibid.*, 51.

24. James, *Varieties*, 157.

25. *Ibid.*, 162.

26. *Ibid.*, 189.

27. *Ibid.*, 190 (emphasis added).

28. *Ibid.*, 144. In *Principles of Psychology*, James cites the work of Charles Frere in his discussion of dynamogeny, which referred to experiments that measured physiological responses to stimulation. Using what was called a dynamometer, which measured hand pressure on the device, James writes that Frere was able to demonstrate how the “dynamogenic value of simple *musical notes* seems to be proportional to their loudness and height. Where notes are compounded into sad strains, the muscular strength diminishes. If the strains are gay, it is increased” (1001). James also includes color, taste, and odors as other sensational stimuli that can affect the force of movement. Jonathan Crary’s work offers a detailed discussion of the history of dynamogeny and in it he argues that James’s *Principles* helped popularize the term, which demonstrated “how kinesthetic sensation affected the total creative behavior and emotional state of the individual, rather than being simply a localized physical event” (*Suspensions of Perception*, 170-171). What is significant about this according to Crary is that these dynamogenic effects can bypass conscious thought altogether. “By the late 1880s,” according to Crary, “it [dynamogeny] had already acquired a wider cultural set of meanings associating it with any stimulus or event that produced a generalized surge of life-enhancing feelings” (171). What I am suggesting in this article is that James expands dynamogeny to include what I have been calling the dynamic gifts of religious power.

29. James, *Varieties*, 204.

30. Ibid., 197.
31. See Taves, "The Fragmentation of Consciousness."
32. James, *Varieties*, 29.
33. Ibid., 197.
34. Ibid., 405.
35. Ibid., 342.
36. Ibid., 360.
37. Ibid., 345.
38. Ibid., 365.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 382 (emphasis added).
41. Ibid., 405.
42. James, *Pragmatism*, 144 (emphasis added).
43. Ibid., 137.
44. Ibid., 143.
45. From "The Energies of Men." James, *Essays in Religion and Morality*, 142.
46. Mifsud, "Rhetoric as Gift/Giving," 100.
47. Richardson, *William James*, 489.
48. James, *Essays in Religion and Morality*, 141.
49. Ibid., 143.
50. See Sung, *Pragmatism and the Gift*.
51. Richardson, *William James*, 489.