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WILLIAM JAMES AND WELL-BEING:  
THE PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY, AND CULTURE  
OF HUMAN FLOURISHING

*JAMES O. PAWELSKI*



Presidential Address  
William James Society

American Philosophical Association  
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What is the value of philosophy? This question is quite familiar to philosophers. We have no doubt heard it from the time we started studying philosophy. Our friends asked us why we had decided to major in such a peculiar discipline. Our concerned parents asked us about our intended life path. And even strangers weighed in with their questions. When I was in graduate school, a typical response from new acquaintances upon learning that I was getting my Ph.D. in philosophy was, “What are you going to do with *that*?” The puzzled look in the stranger’s eye, accompanied by at least gentle disapproval, implied that philosophy was lacking in the sort of value that would justify its study. Although we have heard questions about the value of our discipline throughout our lives, they are being asked more insistently these days and with less gentle disapproval.<sup>1</sup>

What is the value of philosophy? This question is familiar to us for other reasons as well: It is, itself, an important philosophical question. Our teachers raised this question in our first classes in the discipline, and we now discuss it with our own students. We also give it a fair amount of thought outside of classrooms as we reflect on our own lives—and the time and dedication we give to philosophy.

What is the value of philosophy? How do you answer this question for your students and for yourself? Perhaps you quote Socrates’s observation that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” and you note that philosophy is important because it can help us examine our lives and become more aware of our own and others’ feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Perhaps you point out how philosophy can help us learn to think more clearly, to create sound arguments, and to protect ourselves against the unsound reasoning of others. Or perhaps you observe that ethics, one of the most important branches of philosophy, can help us make good moral decisions and develop virtuous habits.

These answers are wrong, of course. At least if you ask an increasing number of university administrators, politicians, parents, and students who want to know the economic value of

philosophy. Do philosophy departments carry their own weight financially, or are they a drag on the university budget? And what about the earning potential of philosophy graduates? In the words of one recent presidential candidate, “Welders make more money than philosophers. We need more welders and less philosophers.”<sup>2</sup> The implication here is that we need to train students for good-paying jobs, and philosophy does not do that. Even though it turns out that welders do not actually make more money than philosophers, the financial prospects of philosophy graduates are an influential consideration for parents and their college-age children.<sup>3</sup>

We may be tempted to downplay what seems to us to be an overemphasis on the economic value of philosophy. Looming even larger in our own lives, no doubt, is its professional value. We understand that if we become experts in a certain area of philosophy and work hard to publish our views, we may be able to land a coveted tenure-track job in a college or university. Or as these are becoming more and more rare, we may be able to find other ways of establishing ourselves in philosophy. Within the range of available roles in the discipline, there is a variety of specific ways in which we can focus our efforts to further our professional reputations and advance our careers.

For our students, philosophy has a strong academic value. For those majoring in the discipline, taking the right number and distribution of classes is necessary for the earning of their degree. And success in those classes requires the development of a range of academic skills, including, among others, careful reading, effective processing of academic content, and clear writing.

There are specific ways of measuring the economic, professional, and academic value of philosophy. We may disagree with some of these processes, but budget spreadsheets, periodic reviews, and grade point averages provide clear metrics for assessing the effectiveness of these various uses of philosophy. Moreover, there are institutional structures in place to maximize the economic, professional, and academic value of philosophy with employees whose everyday task it is to increase this value.

Yet I suspect these economic, professional, and academic matters are not what first drew most of us to philosophy. Nor are they the considerations that first drew William James to a life of learning. Throughout history, a far greater motivator for the study of philosophy than economic, professional, or academic concerns have been eudaimonic ones.<sup>4</sup> It is not so much what we are going to do with philosophy, but what philosophy may do with us that provides a deeper motivation for its study. Important here are the ways in which philosophy makes a difference to our well-being. William James did not meet with the members of the Metaphysical Club because he was excited about monetizing the ideas they discussed, nor because he thought it was a great career move, and certainly not because he thought it would hone his academic skills. He met with them because they were discussing important questions that mattered for life. My guess is that those of us who have spent a significant part of our lives engaging William James's thought have done so because we have been attracted to his discussion of important questions that matter for life. If asked, we could no doubt articulate various ways in which James's thought has been important for our own well-being.

Well-being was certainly important for James. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he wrote:

If we were to ask the question: "What is human life's chief concern?" one of the answers we should receive would be: "It is happiness." How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness, is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, James's personal struggles to gain, keep, and recover happiness are well-known, as he wrestled with psychological, physical, and intellectual obstacles to his own well-being. In this paper, I would like to look at James's professional efforts to articulate and defend the eudaimonic value of philosophy, psychology, and culture. In a Jamesian spirit of growth and



progress, I will mention some of James's views in each of these areas and then discuss a selection of current developments in these domains that I think continue to carry James's work forward in powerful and promising ways.

### WELL-BEING AND PHILOSOPHY

James, of course, was one of the foundational figures of pragmatism, the most significant home-grown school of philosophy in the United States. I would like to focus here on meliorism, one of the most important themes of pragmatism. John Stuhr argues in the introduction to his anthology of *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy* that meliorism is one of the themes that stands at the center of the classical American philosophical tradition. If we look at the work of classical American philosophers, we see it is William James who makes the most extensive use of this term. Apparently coined by George Eliot in a letter written in 1877, meliorism is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the "doctrine that the world, or society, may be improved and suffering alleviated through rightly directed human effort."<sup>6</sup> The related and more familiar terms *optimism* and *pessimism* come from Latin superlatives—from *optimus*, meaning "best," and *pessimus*, meaning "worst." Meliorism, by contrast, comes from a Latin comparative, *melior*, meaning "better." Meliorism literally means "better-ism" but is used to mean "betterable-ism."

James, in his final lecture in *Pragmatism*, which is entitled "Pragmatism and Religion," contrasts meliorism with optimism and pessimism regarding the "salvation of the world." For James, optimism holds that the salvation of the world is inevitable, and pessimism holds that it is impossible. Meliorism, on the other hand, holds that the salvation of the world is possible and that it depends on the efforts of human beings. James argues that "pragmatism must incline towards meliorism."<sup>7</sup> He contends that most of us have a "healthy-minded buoyancy" that makes a melioristic universe a good fit for us. We welcome opportunities to make meaningful moral contributions to the universe, even though

such opportunities mean that the salvation of the world is not guaranteed. James also acknowledges, however, that not everyone would welcome living in such a world of risk. All of us, some of the time, and some of us all of the time, would rather have more security than this melioristic universe can afford. But James argues that such an attitude indicates a fear of experience, a fear of life, and although he admits that we do not yet know for sure which view of the universe will work out best in the long run, he himself opts for the pragmatic position of meliorism.<sup>8</sup>

A few years later, in an appendix to the posthumously published *Some Problems of Philosophy*, James expounds further on the nature of meliorism, contrasting it with intellectualism. In the appendix, titled “Faith and the Right to Believe,” James defines intellectualism as “the belief that our mind comes upon a world complete in itself, and has the duty of ascertaining its contents; but has no power of re-determining its character, for that is already given.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, of course, both optimism and pessimism are intellectualistic ways of seeing the world. Both presuppose that the world’s moral quality is already predetermined. Meliorism, by contrast, emphasizes the importance of human agency for the determination of the world’s moral quality. James writes:

The melioristic universe is conceived after a *social* analogy, as a pluralism of independent powers. It will succeed just in proportion as more of these work for its success. If none work, it will fail. If each does his best, it will not fail. Its destiny thus hangs on an *if* or on a lot of *ifs*—which amounts to saying (in the technical language of logic) that the world being as yet unfinished, its total character can be expressed only by *hypothetical* and not by *categorical* propositions.<sup>10</sup>

This is a point that was taken up a decade later by John Dewey, also very much a meliorist. As Ralph W. Sleeper contends, meliorism is “central to [Dewey’s] conception of philosophy from

the beginning.”<sup>11</sup> Even so, Dewey uses the term itself quite infrequently (fewer than ten times) in his writings. In fact, aside from a few dictionary and encyclopedia entries (references to William James and the like), Dewey takes up the term only once. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey contrasts meliorism with pessimism and optimism. He points out that pessimism is a “paralyzing doctrine.”<sup>12</sup> If the world is thoroughly evil, then we have no incentive for trying to fight against any particular part of it that is evil. Dewey then goes on to claim that optimism is just as paralyzing:

[Optimism] in declaring that good is already realized in ultimate reality tends to make us gloss over the evils that concretely exist. It becomes too readily the creed of those who live at ease, in comfort, of those who have been successful in obtaining this world’s rewards. Too readily optimism makes the men who hold it callous and blind to the sufferings of the less fortunate, or ready to find the cause of troubles of others in their personal viciousness. It thus cooperates with pessimism, in spite of the extreme nominal differences between the two, in benumbing sympathetic insight and intelligent effort in reform.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, meliorism, he contends, is the opposite of paralyzing. “It encourages intelligence to study the positive means of good and the obstructions to their realization, and to put forth endeavor for the improvement of conditions.”<sup>14</sup>

Both James and Dewey agree that meliorism introduces a salubrious human agency into the question of the ultimate moral worth of the world. The moral quality of the world depends, at least in part, on our efforts. This is a powerful view, and I would like to suggest a distinction that I believe will make the conception of meliorism even more helpful. It is a distinction at which both

James and Dewey hinted, but which neither fully developed. I invite you to explore this distinction with me by means of a thought experiment.

Imagine you run across a flea market near your home, and in one of the stalls you see a lamp for sale. On a whim, you buy it. When you get home, you decide to give the lamp a cleaning, and as you rub it, you realize it is a magic lamp. To your amazement, a genie pops out of the lamp and addresses you by name, telling you she has been looking forward to meeting you. She informs you that she is so impressed by you and what you are doing to help make the world a better place that she has decided to transform you into a superhero. But first she needs you to make a decision. What color would you like your cape to be? There are two options. If you choose a red cape, you will have powers to fight against the things in the world we do not want—things like violence, injustice, and hunger. If, on the other hand, you choose a green cape, you will have powers to help foster the things in the world we do want, things like harmony, love, and abundance. So, which would you choose: the red cape, or the green cape?

If you choose the red cape, you might do so out of a consideration that it is more important to fight against the things we do not want in the world, since they threaten the lives and well-being of everyone on earth. You may also think that the elimination of the things we do not want will give an opportunity for the things we do want to grow on their own. Alternatively, if you choose the green cape, you might do so because you think there are cases where getting what we want automatically gets rid of what we do not want. Abundance takes care of hunger. Or you might think that using the green cape would be more enjoyable than using the red cape. Regardless of which cape you are initially attracted to, which *should* you choose?

This is a difficult question, and the point of this thought experiment is actually not to determine which cape is right and which is wrong. Rather, the point is to demonstrate that they are *different*. The life of a red-cape superhero would be very different from the life of a green-cape superhero. A red-cape superhero

would look for problems in the world. They would, of course, find plenty of them and would have a very meaningful life working to resolve those problems. A green-cape superhero, on the other hand, would look for opportunities in the world. They would find many of them and would have a very meaningful life working to realize those opportunities.

These results of our thought experiment point to two different types of meliorism. I call the red-cape variety “mitigative meliorism” and the green-cape variety “constructive meliorism.” Although they are related, they are not identical, and getting clear about them can help us become more effective meliorists.

In 1877, in what is perhaps the first published use of the term, James Sully describes meliorism as “the faith which affirms not merely our power of lessening evil—this nobody questions—but also our ability to increase the amount of positive good.”<sup>15</sup> Note Sully’s view that lessening evil and increasing good may be related, but that they are not identical. Sully is here distinguishing between what I have called mitigative and constructive meliorism.

William James, in “The Will to Believe,” identifies two different epistemological “commandments”: “*We must know the truth; and we must avoid error....*”<sup>16</sup> James insists that they are not simply two ways of stating the same commandment, but that they are two different laws. He points out, for example, that by obeying the first, we may well, in so doing, obey the second. (If we believe the truth about something, we may automatically avoid believing what is not true about it.) But he argues that obeying the second hardly ever automatically entails obeying the first. (If we avoid one error, we may just as likely fall into another error as into the truth.) He also points out that our emphasis on one or the other of these commandments has a significant impact on our whole intellectual life. If our attention is focused on avoiding error, we will experience life very differently than if it is focused on believing truth. W. K. Clifford, to James’s mind, is someone who is focused far too strongly on avoiding error. This focus gets generalized into the “scientific veto” that tries to circumscribe religious and moral beliefs. In critiquing Clifford and defending a positive emphasis on

believing truth, James is trying to find a healthier balance between these two commandments.

In his 1908 *Ethics*, John Dewey makes use of a similar conceptual difference in the moral realm. He points out that the life of virtue requires both “belief in the realizability of good in spite of all obstacles,” and “a certain intellectual pessimism, in the sense of a steadfast willingness to uncover sore points, to acknowledge and search for abuses, to note how presumed good often serves as a cloak for actual bad.”<sup>17</sup> Although he puts his point in terms of optimism and pessimism in this passage, he is really writing about two moments of meliorism. And we can now see these two moments at play in the passage, cited above, from *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, where he points out that meliorism encourages both the study of “the positive means of good” and “the obstructions to their realization.”<sup>18</sup>

Consider a gardener who uses only a red cape. She can be as diligent as can be about pulling weeds, but if she never gets around to planting seeds, she will not have a harvest. Her neighbor, who uses only a green cape, will not be much better off. He plants the seeds, but because he does not pull the weeds, his plants will get choked out, and he is just as unlikely to have a harvest.

From this point of view, we can see that both the red cape and the green cape are important. Effective meliorism requires attention to both the mitigative and constructive moments. Different contexts require different emphases. As Dewey points out, there are occasions when we need to make a point of looking for what is not working. Not because we want to become pessimists, but because this can keep us from becoming complacent with the status quo and accepting the “all’s well” optimism of those in power. In many aspects of our lives, however, it is all too easy to fixate on what is not working. In these situations, we may well need to increase our use of constructive meliorism to help us achieve balance and make more effective progress. This is especially true in those situations where, as James says, “faith in a fact can help create the fact.”<sup>19</sup> And it is all the

more true if James is right, that progress ultimately requires trust among the various powers in the universe.<sup>20</sup>

With this philosophical distinction in mind between mitigative and constructive meliorism, let us now turn to psychology to see what kind of cash value it may have.

### **WELL-BEING AND PSYCHOLOGY**

Well-being was one of the things that fueled James's interest in psychology. His *Principles of Psychology* contains a variety of hortatory passages on topics as wide ranging as attention, belief, action, habit, and will, where James indicates how the topic he is addressing can be of practical benefit. Near the end of his life, James presented a program for a new area of psychology which would focus on one aspect of constructive meliorism: how to raise our levels of mental and moral energy.

James served as the president of the American Philosophical Association in 1906. In December of that year, he gave his presidential address, titled "The Energies of Men." He observes that we often feel like we are functioning below our capacity:

Everyone is familiar with the phenomenon of feeling more or less alive on different days. Everyone knows on any given day that there are energies slumbering in him which the incitements of that day do not call forth, but which he might display if these were greater. Most of us feel as if we lived habitually with a sort of cloud weighing on us, below our highest notch of clearness in discernment, sureness in reasoning, or firmness in deciding. Compared with that we ought to be, we are only half-awake. Our fires are damped, our drafts are checked. We are making use of only a small part of our possible mental and physical resources.<sup>21</sup>

To demonstrate that we do, indeed, have stores of energy that we do not normally tap into, James refers to a familiar experience. When we feel like we are out of energy, we typically stop to rest. But there are occasions when for some reason we feel like we cannot stop. Perhaps we are facing a deadline, or someone is counting on the outcome of our efforts. If we continue past our exhaustion point, the work gets harder, to a point—and then we often tap into a new reservoir of energy, a “second wind,” and sometimes even a third or a fourth “wind.” This makes evident, not only that we have more energy than we typically access, but that it is also possible to tap into that energy. James notes three specific ways for doing so. First is through emotional excitements, when we need to rise to the occasion in some way, either on normal occasions like getting a new job, or during extraordinary events like shipwreck or warfare. Second is through volitional efforts. We may intentionally set out to raise our levels of energy through methodic efforts of will, as did one of James’s friends by taking up a rigorous program of yoga. Third, abstract ideas like country, flag, the Union, church, truth, science, liberty, and loyalty can awaken these new levels of energy.

However these levels are accessed, James argues, having our energy levels raised is the most important thing that can happen to us. In a later revision of his presidential address, he argues that learning how to raise our levels of energy is crucially important for ethics, economics, and education.<sup>22</sup> For ethics, he contends, high energy is necessary for being able to fulfill our potential for the good life. For economics, he holds that the closer individual citizens come to fulfilling their potential, the greater will be the economic output of their country. Given the importance of these energy levels, James continues, educators need to focus on helping young people learn how to access their most useful levels of energy. James is not arguing, of course, that adolescents simply learn how to become frenetic. He has in mind here not only the quantity of energy available but also its quality.

Since these questions of human energy and its cultivation are so important, James laments that they have been left to moralists,



mind-curers, and doctors, and argues for the founding of a new branch of empirical psychology to study these matters scientifically. James's program for this new field of study is two-fold. First, it will need to take up the problem of our powers. James writes, "We ought somehow to get a topographic survey made of the limits of human power in every conceivable direction, something like an ophthalmologist's chart of the limits of the human field of vision." Second, it will need to take up the problem of means. He writes, "[W]e ought . . . to construct a methodical inventory of the paths of access, or keys, differing with the diverse types of individual, to the different kinds of power."<sup>23</sup>

Since his address, psychologists, instead of following James's program, have tended to investigate very different lines of inquiry from the ones he laid out. In the last twenty years, however, there has been a surge of interest in the kinds of questions James had in mind. In 1998, the psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman served as the President of the American Psychological Association. In his address to that association, he observed that psychology had become focused on the identification and treatment of mental illness and had largely ignored the identification and cultivation of psychological strengths.<sup>24</sup> In our terminology, psychology had become a red-cape discipline emphasizing mitigative meliorism and had left to one side green-cape approaches for constructive meliorism. Seligman argued for a rebalancing of psychology and announced the field of "positive psychology" to complement the orientation of mainstream psychology. His address received a standing ovation, and the field was launched.

Since then, positive psychology has grown rapidly. It has been defined as a "science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions"<sup>25</sup> whose aim is to "discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive."<sup>26</sup> Although positive psychologists acknowledge and respect the importance of treating mental illness, they believe a balanced approach toward well-being is likely to be the most effective for fostering human flourishing. Hundreds of millions of research dollars have now been awarded to study what

goes right with human beings and how to cultivate it. Academic journals have been founded to publish the results of this research. Scientists regularly meet at conferences around the world to discuss the latest findings, and an International Positive Psychology Association has been established to support this research and its evidence-based application and to bring together scientists and practitioners across the globe. In 2005, the University of Pennsylvania started the first degree program in positive psychology to help train the next generation of researchers and practitioners, and there are now some twenty post-graduate programs in this field around the world.

A careful look at current work in positive psychology shows the field is developing in two modes.<sup>27</sup> First is the complementary mode, where it is providing a counterweight to mainstream psychology's emphasis on mental disease by focusing on mental strengths. In this way, it is a green-cape science of constructive meliorism. It is also, however, functioning in a comprehensive mode, investigating the best approaches to human flourishing, regardless of their orientation. In this mode, positive psychology is bringing together the red cape and the green cape into a single reversible cape, with one side red and the other green, understanding that both sides are indispensable for well-being. Positive psychology also understands, however, that given our propensity to use the red side of the cape more often and to focus most of our investigations on how to improve its use, a balanced approach requires increased study of how to use the green side more frequently and more effectively.

One of the key early projects in positive psychology that seems particularly close to James's concerns in "The Energies of Men" is the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues. This classification was created from a realization that the system currently in use for mental evaluation was thoroughly mitigative. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is an important tool developed by the American Psychiatric Association for diagnosing hundreds of mental illnesses. Valuable as this tool is, it does not include what James was interested in: a way to assess

human powers. To complement the scope of the *DSM*, positive psychologists have created a classification of character strengths and virtues which they refer to as the “manual of the sanities.”<sup>28</sup> This classification was created by looking to cultures around the world and throughout history to see what character strengths and virtues have been ubiquitously valued. The resulting classification consists of six virtues (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence), with twenty-four character strengths (like creativity, integrity, kindness, citizenship, prudence, and hope) ranged under them. Positive psychologists have created the VIA Survey of Character Strengths and Virtues, which functions remarkably like James’s ophthalmologist’s chart to assess the level of these strengths in individuals.<sup>29</sup> Positive Psychology is also using a range of other methods to study these and similar aspects of human powers.<sup>30</sup>

Like any science, positive psychology is finding its way through trial and error. It is still a relatively new approach, and much research remains to be done to extend its methods and further establish its results. I think, though, that James would be fascinated by positive psychology, happy that the study of human powers is no longer being left only to moralists, mind-curers, and doctors. We now have a branch of empirical psychology that is studying, scientifically, the important concerns James laid out more than a century ago. And we can see the cash value of making a distinction between the two moments of meliorism, so that we can ensure balanced attention to both mitigative and constructive efforts to improve our lives, our communities, and our world.

Interest in these matters is now so serious and sustained that it makes sense to talk of a “eudaimonic turn,” a turn toward well-being occurring in a variety of domains beyond psychology.<sup>31</sup> These domains include psychiatry, medicine, neuroscience, economics, sociology, business, and education, among others. One remarkable feature of this list is the diversity of disciplines and professions it includes. Just as remarkable, however, is the absence of the humanities. The eudaimonic turn has not yet had as significant an effect in the humanities as it has in some other

disciplines, although this is likely to change soon. In the next section, we will turn to an examination of some significant possibilities in this area, beginning with an example from James to illustrate the importance of considerations of well-being in the humanities and across culture.

### **WELL-BEING AND CULTURE**

One of James's most important and influential works is *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which he examines matters that are centrally important to cultures around the world. He asks the question of religion that we asked of philosophy at the beginning of this address: What is the value of religion? And the value he was interested in exploring was not economic, professional, or academic. Rather, it was eudaimonic. In part for this reason, he decided to focus not on the beliefs or practices of institutional religion, but on the experiences of personal religion. With this in mind, we can frame the central question of *Varieties* as follows: "What is the eudaimonic value of religious experience?"

James begins his answer to this question by arguing that origins are insufficient to establish value. He holds that we cannot, for example, establish the eudaimonic value of religious experiences based on their supernatural origins. This is because claims to supernatural origin of religious experience are in such conflict that it would be impossible to sort out which, if any, of these experiences do actually have such origins. Nor, James argues, can we dismiss the eudaimonic value of religious experiences based on any pathological origins. If an idea is true and valuable, it does not matter whether it was first suggested by someone suffering from a mental illness of some sort. James argues that we should judge the value of religious experiences by their fruits and not by their roots. And he claims that the methods we need to use to make these judgments must be empirical, grounded in the actual experiences of real individuals. Let us consider the results of James's assessment of the eudaimonic value of religion in general, as well as of particular aspects of religion, like conversion, saintliness, and mysticism.

With regard to religion in general, James says it has a distinct practical value over mere morality. Both religion and morality, he argues, are ways of acknowledging our dependence on the universe, our mortality, and our other limitations. Morality, he claims, helps us come to terms with this dependence by means of dutiful submission and volitional acquiescence. Religion, on the other hand, allows for a joyful acceptance and enthusiastic espousal of this dependence. And, James argues, religious joy and enthusiasm can come by means of the more simple experiences of healthy-minded religion, where natural good is maximized, or by means of the more complex experiences of sick-souled religion, where natural good is given up in favor of supernatural good. James concludes that since we have to come to terms with our own dependence, religion of either type provides the important eudaimonic benefit of making “*easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary.*”<sup>32</sup>

In the case of specific aspects of religious experience like conversion, saintliness, and mysticism, James also finds specific eudaimonic benefits. With respect to conversion, James points out that it is not universal and argues that it is not universally superior, either. That is, not everyone experiences conversion, and not all those who do lead better lives than those who do not. He suggests, however, that those who do experience conversion probably lead better lives than they otherwise would have, since it can unify a heterogeneous personality and can result in eudaimonic benefits like reduced anxiety, a perceived access to new truth, a sense of the renewal of one’s world, and even ecstatic happiness. He observes that although the feelings of the converted fluctuate, it seems that these eudaimonic benefits are fairly constant and durable.

With respect to saintliness, James argues that there is a core of characteristics of saintliness across all religions and that this core includes the sensing of a transcendent power that takes us beyond the selfish interests of our daily lives; a friendly connection to this transcendent power and a willing surrender of the self to it; a great sense of joy and freedom; and increased loving and harmonious affections, which move us toward “‘yes, yes’ and away from

‘no.’”<sup>33</sup> Although liable to excesses, saintliness, in James’s view, can bring tremendous eudaimonic value. He observes, “the best fruits of religious experience are the best things that history has to show.”<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, James claims that there are core characteristics to mystical experiences across religions, including ineffability, a noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. And although he acknowledges that mysticism can sometimes lead to useless “stupefaction,” he argues that it is the basis of all personal religious experience and can lead to “indomitable spirit and energy.”<sup>35</sup> This is a high evaluation, indeed, when we remember that, for James, having our level of energy raised is the most important thing that can happen to us.

James’s analysis of religious experience provides a useful model for extending the eudaimonic turn into the humanities. The question to be asked of each discipline is, “What is the eudaimonic value of this discipline?” An answer to this question must address both its mitigative effects on decreasing ill-being and its constructive effects on increasing well-being. Following James’s example in *Varieties*, it must also make use of the best empirical methods available for assessing this value. I believe a Jamesian approach to this question of value in the humanities provides a powerful program for further work, and I will conclude with a few thoughts on the melioristic and empirical nature of this endeavor, as well as some caveats that will need to be kept in mind.

In considering the eudaimonic value of the various disciplines in the humanities, it will be important to adopt a balanced melioristic approach that emphasizes both red-cape mitigative outcomes and green-cape constructive ones. As Seligman pointed out in the case of psychology, the humanities have tended in the last few decades to focus in an imbalanced way on the mitigative side of things. In the field of literary studies, for example, Rita Felski has pointed out in her books *Uses of Literature* and *The Limits of Critique* that critical theory has become hegemonic in that discipline, and that this has led to an overbearing emphasis on the negative.<sup>36</sup> Another literary scholar, Don Moores, observes that

critical theory frequently employs what Paul Ricoeur calls a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” focusing on reading texts against the grain to discover hidden meanings and reveal the presence of psychopathology and the pernicious influence of unhealthy ideologies. As Moores points out, this approach can be useful for identifying obstacles to well-being, but is less valuable for understanding well-being itself and for learning how to cultivate it. For these purposes, Moores suggests that what Ricoeur calls a “hermeneutics of affirmation” is likely to be more helpful.<sup>37</sup>

In considering the eudaimonic value of the various disciplines in the humanities, it will also be important to use the best empirical methods available. This calls for a close and sustained collaboration between the humanities and science. Because human flourishing is such a complex matter, we must work to overcome the separation between the “two cultures” identified by C. P. Snow.<sup>38</sup> As Walter Isaacson argues—and as his biographies of Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein, and Steve Jobs attest—science and the humanities work better together than separately.<sup>39</sup> In particular, we need to foster a collaboration between the science of well-being and the culture of human flourishing. This collaboration holds great promise for both the humanities and the sciences. The humanities can provide science with new insights into the concept of well-being and various means for cultivating human flourishing. At the same time, science can provide a growing array of methods for helping to measure the eudaimonic outcomes of the humanities.

When undertaking this melioristic and collaborative work, there are several caveats we must keep in mind. First, we must be clear that we are not proposing to measure the humanities. It is not apparent what that would even mean. Nor are we intending to reduce the complexity of the humanities to a set of numbers. What we are proposing, however, is that just as James argues in his emphasis on the fruits of religious experience, engagement with the humanities has real eudaimonic effects. Finding ways of measuring at least some of these effects can add to our knowledge and advance the work of increasing those effects.

A second caveat we must keep in mind is that as with all scientific work, the results we obtain will be fallible. To minimize the likelihood of error, we must employ methodological pluralism and include a range of qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory research, for example, can help with conceptual clarification; and questionnaires, physiological measures, data science, and experiments can help us understand how these concepts play out in the experience of individuals across a range of contexts. Representative and longitudinal samples will be key to this work. But even with this mix of approaches, our results will be fallible and will need to be understood in collaboration with a range of methodological approaches in the humanities for the creation and application of knowledge.

Third, we must reject the simplistic notion that the humanities increase human flourishing in all contexts. Empirical investigation will surely yield nuanced results. It is to be expected that some forms of engagement with the humanities will lead to important melioristic effects in certain contexts. It is also to be expected that there are other contexts in which they may be not affect human flourishing at all or may even be detrimental to it. Furthermore, human flourishing is such a complex matter that different types of engagement with the humanities will no doubt have different sorts of effects for various dimensions of flourishing. The goal here is not to demonstrate that the humanities always enhance all kinds of human flourishing, but rather to study the conditions under which different types of engagement in the humanities affect various human flourishing outcomes, how they do so, and when the effects are positive, neutral, or negative.<sup>40</sup>

With these caveats in mind, I believe the melioristic and empirical investigation of the eudaimonic value of the humanities holds great promise. If executed well, this investigation may give us new ways of answering the question, “What is the value of philosophy?” And these answers are likely to be more intrinsic to the discipline than considerations of its economic, professional, and academic value. These efforts will include other disciplines, as



well, allowing us to ask the question, “What is the eudaimonic value of the humanities?” This work promises new answers to that question and, even more importantly, to the question of how we can optimize the well-being effects of the humanities: “What *can* the eudaimonic value of the humanities be?” This final question gets at the kind of cash value that greatly interested James about ideas and their investigation. Not only will the knowledge created be important in its own right, but it can also guide the development of evidence-based policy and practice that can optimize the eudaimonic effects of participation in the humanities. Who knows whether this will lead to the “salvation of the world,” but perhaps it is one small yet important step we can take in that direction.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This question of value is not limited to philosophy but extends across the humanities. I use the example of philosophy

here because I am a philosopher. Those who come from different disciplines in the humanities should feel free to substitute their own discipline.

<sup>2</sup> Youngman, “Marco Rubio Said Wrongly.”

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I use the term *eudaimonic* in a general sense to indicate happiness, well-being, and human flourishing. Beyond that, I do not mean to espouse any particular philosophical or psychological position.

<sup>5</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English*, s.v. “melioration.”

<sup>7</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 137.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 139–44.

<sup>9</sup> James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 111.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>11</sup> Sleeper, “Introduction,” ix.

<sup>12</sup> Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 181.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.; Dewey elsewhere credits pessimism with pointing out the problems with optimism and with helping to transform it into meliorism.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Meliorism.”

<sup>16</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” 24 (italics in original).

<sup>17</sup> Dewey, *Ethics*, 371.

<sup>18</sup> Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 182.

<sup>19</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” 29.

<sup>20</sup> James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 116.

<sup>21</sup> James, “The Energies of Men,” 131.

<sup>22</sup> See James, “The Powers of Men.”

<sup>23</sup> James, “The Energies of Men,” 145.

<sup>24</sup> Seligman, “The President’s Address,” 559.

<sup>25</sup> Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, “Positive Psychology,” 5.

<sup>26</sup> Sheldon, Fredrickson, Rathunde, Csikszentmihalyi, and Haidt, “Positive Psychology Manifesto,” 1.

- <sup>27</sup> See Pawelski, “Defining the ‘Positive’” Part I and Part II.
- <sup>28</sup> Peterson and Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, 4.
- <sup>29</sup> [www.viainstitute.org](http://www.viainstitute.org).
- <sup>30</sup> See *ibid.*; Pawelski, “William James,” 61–64; and Pawelski, “Is Healthy-Mindedness Healthy?,” 408–09.
- <sup>31</sup> Pawelski, “What is the Eudaimonic Turn?,” 3.
- <sup>32</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 49 (italics in original).
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 327–28.
- <sup>36</sup> See Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 1-3 and Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 1–3.
- <sup>37</sup> See Moores’s “The Eudaimonic Turn in Literary Studies,” 27.
- <sup>38</sup> Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, 1.
- <sup>39</sup> See Isaacson’s “The Intersection of the Humanities.”
- <sup>40</sup> See Tay, Pawelski, and Keith, “The Role of the Arts,” 1–2.

# EMBODIED AKRASIA: JAMES ON MOTIVATION AND WEAKNESS OF WILL

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This paper presents an account of *akrasia*, drawn from the work of William James, that sees *akrasia* as neither a rational failing (as with most philosophical accounts) nor a moral failing (as with early Christian accounts), but rather a necessary by-product of our status as biological beings. By examining James's related accounts of motivation and action, I argue that akratic actions occur when an agent attempts to act against her settled habits, but fails to do so. This makes *akrasia* a product of the agent's practical failure to adequately structure her environment to bring about her desired action. Akratic action performs the vital function of revealing to the agent the exact point at which her cognitive effort was insufficient for bringing about her intended action. It also reveals that future improvement is within her control. As such, akratic action is the very foundation of James's meliorism.



**T**he relationship between thought and action is central to our understanding of what it means to be human. We often pride ourselves on our seemingly distinctive ability to act for reasons, as opposed to primarily out of instinct or to satisfy biological needs. Despite this ability, we often fail to act in accordance with what we take to be our reasons for acting—sometimes mere moments after deciding to act in a certain way. Such actions are referred to as *akratic* and are an important part of our conception of the relationship between thought and action. A complete understanding of action requires not only an account of how reasons motivate action, but also how and why that motivation breaks down.

In this paper, I will present an account of akratic action drawn from the work of William James that is grounded in our neurology and evolutionary history. By making akratic action a consequence of our embodiment, this account avoids making judgments about an akratic actor's rationality, as is the case with most contemporary philosophical accounts, or about the actor's character, as is the case with the account found in early Christian writings. Instead, James's work reorients the debate away from focusing on individual reason/intention-action pairings to the practical life of an agent over time. This affords a crucial place for akratic action in the practical life of agents in a melioristic understanding of human development.

This paper will proceed in the following manner. First, I shall provide a brief overview of the problem of akasia in the philosophical and early Christian traditions. Second, I shall examine James's account of motivation and articulate the standard case for reasons/intentions motivating action. Third, I will use this standard case to draw out the defective case. I will then consider how James's account fits within the tradition and what consequences this has for our understanding of James's work, especially with respect to his meliorism.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF AKRASIA

Suppose that you are presented with a choice: you can either take your children to the park, or you can stay home. After a brief consideration, you decide that the best option would be for you to take your children to the park. It is a nice day, they would get exercise, and you would get out of the house. But instead, you do not go to the park. For another example, consider that you have decided that you should refrain from eating cake—you are trying to lose some weight and are trying to cut back on sugar. But then, the next time you are offered cake, you take seconds. In both cases, you are acting in a way contrary to the reasoned position that you have held—this is referred to as *akrasia*, and the actions performed that are contrary to your better judgment are *akratic* actions.

The first substantive treatment of *akrasia* is found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle, *akrasia* signifies cases in which one's passions overtake one's reason, either after deliberation (*propeteia* or impetuosity) or in the absence of deliberation (*astheneia* or weakness).<sup>1</sup> As is generally the case with Aristotle's ethics, *akrasia* was a property of the agent rather than the action. The *akratic* agent is one who reliably succumbs to his or her passions instead of reason; conversely, the *enkratic* agent is one who experiences the same passions, but does not let them affect reasoning processes.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary accounts of *akrasia* focus more on reasoning processes than character formation; as such, *akrasia* is a property of the action and not the agent. One of the most prominent figures on this topic is Donald Davidson, who argues that *akrasia* reflects a breakdown in an agent's practical rationality.<sup>3</sup> If *S* has judged  $\phi$  to be the best course of action (or intended to  $\phi$  at *t*), and then does not  $\phi$  at *t*, then *S* is acting irrationally. This builds on the common sense notion that one's evaluative judgments ought to have special status with respect to causing action; namely, evaluative judgments ought to have motivational force that goes beyond merely the ability to give reasons for an action and actually bring about that action. For Davidson, *akratic* action is necessarily irrational, for it is performed in the absence of a sufficient reason for that act.<sup>4</sup>



While many have detracted from Davidson with respect to the cause or structure of akratic action, most agree with his diagnosis that it is essentially irrational behavior.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this is the through line of the philosophical tradition—actions must be in accord with reason and not succumb to passions (Aristotle) or irrationality (Davidson).<sup>6</sup>

An account of akrasia can also be found in the early Christian writings of Paul and Augustine. This account shares a great deal with Aristotle's account but differs in some interesting and provocative ways. As it is rarely given attention in contemporary philosophy outside of certain circles, I will give a brief description of that account.

As it is with Aristotle, akratic action is rooted in a conflict between different parts of the self. For the early Christian writers, this is the conflict between the spirit and the flesh. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, Augustine writes,

I was aligned with both [the spirit and the flesh], but more with the desires I approved in myself than those I frowned upon, for in these latter I was not really the agent, since for the most part I was enduring them against my will rather than acting

freely. . . . And who has any right to object, when just punishment catches up with a sinner?<sup>8</sup>

As with Paul, Augustine laments that he is torn in conflicting directions and is unable to follow through with his desires, which he views with shame.<sup>9</sup> Other passages reinforce the nature of akratic action for these writers.

Unlike with Aristotle, it is not a matter of mastery over your passions or body; indeed, such a mastery is impossible. It is rather the case, especially for Paul, about what has mastery over you. You can judge  $\phi$  to be a preferable action to  $\psi$ , but fail to  $\phi$  (and indeed, end up  $\psi$ -ing) due to your status as a fallen creature. For this account, akrasia is not a matter of keeping your passions subordinate to reason, nor is it a matter of having the appropriate causal relationship between your evaluative judgments and your subsequent actions. Akratic action is an intractable element of the Christian experience; it is a consequence of the Fall and the corrupting effect it had on human nature. So long as one is attempting to act contrary to the corrupted longings of human nature, one will struggle. Paul and Augustine frame this in terms of their “innermost spirit,” or what they consider to truly reflect who they want to be. They identify with their desires to lead a godly life, but their corporal bodies bar them from doing so. This reinforces the importance of the fact that mastery is impossible. In the early Christian narrative, akrasia is only overcome through death.

There are thus two main lines of thought when considering akrasia and akratic action. Philosophers have long thought that akrasia was a rational failing, in which either one’s passions overtook one’s rational processes, or where one’s evaluative judgments failed to have sufficient motivational force on one’s subsequent actions. In contrast, Paul and Augustine see akrasia as a moral failing that is the result of the Fall, whereby one’s flesh seeks to thwart the Christian’s desire to act in a God-pleasing manner. Despite its long history as a subject of philosophical interest, James himself had little to say about the subject of akrasia.

This is especially surprising given how it was also a topic in his home discipline of psychology. Yet throughout James's corpus, references to akrasia or weakness of will are virtually non-existent. In what follows, I will piece together an account of akratic action based on James's work. I will argue that such a view sits between the philosophical and early Christian accounts of akrasia, although it is ultimately closer to the latter than the former. This view accepts the general picture of the struggle offered by early Christians but replaces the metaphysical idea of "sinful flesh" with a physiological understanding of settled habits. I now turn to an account of James's theory of motivation to set the foundation for this argument.

#### **MOTIVATION AND ACTION**

A psychologist's theory of motivation is central to how she conceives of human behavior. Such a theory must perform two tasks: first, it must provide an account of the different kinds of behavior, especially between voluntary and involuntary; and, second, it must explain how these different kinds of behavior differ from and relate to each other.

Whether James considers behavior to be voluntary or involuntary depends on the presence or absence, respectively, of an idea of how to react to a given environmental stimulus.<sup>10</sup> Involuntary behavior includes behavior such as reflexes, twitches, and evolved instincts.<sup>11</sup> In each case, the behavior simply happens, without the organism having conscious input into its performance or where the behavior might lead.<sup>12</sup> Consider the case of a twitch. If the twitch happens because you have had far too much espresso in a short period of time, there is no conscious intention to move in such a way prior to the muscle's contraction. You can even twitch after the inevitable crash that leaves you unconscious on the couch. However, you are capable of twitching intentionally—perhaps to give the illusion of having had too much espresso, for comedic effect. In this case, your psychological state is significantly different with respect to the twitch, for you have an idea of what you would like to accomplish through that action. Classifying

involuntary behavior in this way drives James's claim that instinctive actions happen only once, since you will necessarily have some bit of information about what the instinctive behavior would do after you have done it even once.

Voluntary behavior is further subdivided into ideo-motor action and wilful action. In ideo-motor action, the idea of the action is the sufficient cause for that action, wherein "movement follows unhesitatingly and immediately the notion of it in the mind."<sup>13</sup> In such cases, we are "aware of nothing between the conception [of the movement] and the execution [of the movement]."<sup>14</sup> For example, if someone wishes to open a door, that person reaches for the doorknob, grasps, turns, and pushes. Yet each step along the way is not considered in a conscious manner—at least not in the day-to-day lives of most people. The idea of opening the door is sufficient to bring that action about. In such cases, "incoming sensations instigate [movements] so immediately that it is often difficult to decide whether to call them reflex rather than voluntary acts."<sup>15</sup> Despite this difficulty, James insists that cases of ideo-motor action are voluntary because of the presence of an idea.

Wilful behavior differs from ideo-motor behavior, for in cases of wilful behavior, there are multiple competing and equally attractive ideas of how to proceed that inhibit each other's successful discharge into bodily movement. We feel that even though we have sufficient information to make a decision one way or another, there is no "imperative principle of choice between them," and we are left at a loss of what to do.<sup>16</sup> The two concepts may be equally as strong and equally as attractive to you, but there is a real sense of loss associated with the option you do not choose and a real sense of gain of what you do. In these cases, "both alternatives are steadily held in view, and in the very act of murdering the vanquished possibility the chooser realizes how much in that instant he is making himself lose."<sup>17</sup> These are the cases in which "we feel . . . as if we ourselves by our own wilful act inclined the beam" to act in one way over another.<sup>18</sup> The distinctive feature of these situations is the feeling of effort that

arises due to the ideational conflict between possible courses of action.

This feeling of effort is central to understanding James's account of action; thus, we must understand its role and function in his psychophysics of action to understand how it motivates behavior. The feeling of effort is a by-product of our neurology and the effect that habituation has on the development of our brains over time. For James, objects of experience stimulate our sensory nerve-roots, which cause nervous energy to travel from those nerve-roots into our brains. Having made their way into the brain, they seek a way out, and in so doing, either "deepen old paths [through the brain] or to make new ones."<sup>19</sup> Whether there is a pathway in the brain will depend on whether the agent has experienced that object of experience or similar objects of experience before and how often. Each pathway corresponds to a series of bodily movements that result in a successful response to the object of experience. The more that an object is experienced, the deeper the pathway gets. As these pathways are used and reused, they become deeper and deeper, making it more and more likely that the behavior which results from this discharge will happen.<sup>20</sup> Once a neural pathway is developed, the agent has acquired a habit.

While habit formation occurs primarily in the brain, its ultimate function is to facilitate more effective interaction between the organism and its environment.<sup>21</sup> This function is accomplished in two ways. First, a habituated action will have a strong degree of motivational force behind that action, merely by virtue of being habituated, regardless of the wishes of the agent at the time.<sup>22</sup> Second, a habituated action suppresses actions contrary to that habit.<sup>23</sup> By both motivating the repetition of the habituated action and suppressing contrary action, the agent does not have to expend much cognitive effort to perform that action.<sup>24</sup> In general, this makes a habit "the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent."<sup>25</sup> It is easy and pleasant to stay within one's habits, and revolution is hard and unpleasant.

From this characterization, we can see how a habitual action relates to the feeling of effort that one experiences in volitional action. If we act in accordance with our habits, we do not experience the sensation of effort that we experience when we have competing courses of action. Indeed, we experience effort in two scenarios. First, we may experience the feeling of effort if we try to act against a habituated response. Since habits are a strong motivator and are difficult to resist, any attempt to act against that habit will be strenuous. Second, we may experience the feeling of effort if we encounter an object of experience for which we have no habituated response. In this case, it is not that we are acting in the absence of any kind of response, for that would make it fall more into the category of instinct for James. It is considered to be an instinct because we would have no insight into how effective our response would be. Rather, we have “general forms of discharge” that present possible responses based on the similarity of the object of experience to other objects of experience.<sup>26</sup> These general forms of discharge are themselves habits, albeit habits that are imperfectly suited to the object of experience in question.<sup>27</sup> Successfully resolving the situation makes it more likely that we activate the same neural pathway responsible for the resolution.

Habituated actions are ideational because they originated as effortful behavior in which there was a clash of ideated possible responses to environmental stimuli. Through practice, the time between stimulus and response is greatly reduced, as is the amount of effort required to overcome competing courses of action. It is this anesthetizing effect of habit that places them in the center of considerations of akrasia. I now turn to a full explanation of what actions are akratic in James’s scheme.

### **EMBODIED AKRASIA**

Akratic actions are universally considered to be defective in some way. The challenge is to determine the character of this defect and the conditions under which it makes actions akratic. To that end, we must now consider which types of behaviors are capable of being akratic in the first place.

All involuntary actions such as reflexes, instincts, or twitches can be automatically excluded because involuntary behavior is not preceded by an idea of how to act or based on any input from the agent. It is rather a direct line from environmental stimulus to response, with no intermediary awareness or insight into why one is responding in that way. Think again of the espresso-induced twitch—this is a result of the biochemical workings of your brain and is not the product of a conscious decision to act in that way. Since you do not intend to twitch or judge twitching to be the best course of action, one cannot act akratically by failing to twitch.

James would exclude ideo-motor actions—well-formed habits—from consideration as well. This is due to the neurological basis of habits and their phenomenological character. In ideo-motor action, an environmental stimulus prompts an idea of how to respond, and the mind acts unhesitatingly on that idea. There is no decision, judgment, or any other sort of *fiat* to act, but rather no resistance put up against the natural discharge of that idea into action. Since there is no judgment, intention, or awareness that contributes to the performance of that action, failing to perform that action does not indicate a breakdown of the causal force between reasons and action, but rather a failure of the action itself. For example, consider a professional baseball player's well-developed habit of reacting to a line drive hit towards him. His reaction is to dive and catch the ball. He does not weigh the options available to him; there is usually insufficient time for such processing. Failing to catch the ball does not mean that he acted akratically; it just means that he failed to catch the ball.

So far, most of this is in agreement with contemporary accounts of akrasia. Where James starts to part ways is with his treatment of wilful behavior. James's account of habit and how it relates to volitional action problematizes traditional thinking about akrasia. Any case of volitional behavior is going to involve multiple competing possible courses of action, all of which have a relatively significant degree of motivational force. Consider the two possible cases of volitional behavior. If you experience the feeling of effort when acting contrary to your settled habits, the

very reason why this is unpleasant and effortful is because your settled habits are strong motivators, and it is difficult to resist acting in this way, especially if this is one of the first times you have acted against that habit. If you experience the feeling of effort because you have no settled habit to respond to a particular object of experience, it is not as though you are acting absent any idea of what to do; rather, you have general patterns of behavior that are motivating you in competing directions towards action. Indeed, if you had no idea about what to do, then by James's account, the response would not be voluntary. There is still a conflict (this is what generates the feeling of effort), and there are still competing sets of habits at work, but the selection is between the sets of these habits. Choosing one set over another will categorize that object of experience as being of the same kind as the objects to which those habits typically respond and result in the formation of a new neural connection. Again, there are competing courses of action, each of which has motivational force.

James draws our attention to the fact that choosing one course of action over another does not neutralize the motivational force of previous contenders or otherwise add enough motivational force on its own to overwhelm the motivational force of those contenders.<sup>28</sup> If it did, then we would never experience the feeling of effort, since all our behavior would be either habit-driven or purely reflexive. James also recognizes that not all our motivations are reasons; in fact, it is impossible for us to act in a rational way, isolated from all other arational motivators, such as emotions, desires, and feelings. The strongest motivator for our future behavior is not our rationality, but rather how we have successfully responded to the environment previously—our habits gleaned from experience. However, we must recognize that our evaluative judgments (or intentions) about the best course of action ought to have some weight in our subsequent behavior.

I believe that the best way to balance these two *desiderata* is to follow James in giving an agent's tendencies, dispositions, and settled environmental responses a central role in his account of akrasia. I argue that for James, akrasia is the situation in which an



agent has attempted to act against his or her settled habits, but has failed in that attempt; the resulting action, which would always involve the agent falling back onto a habitual behavior, would be akratic.

There are two important clarifications that must be made before we progress. First, it must be the case that the agent experienced the feeling of effort at some point in the attempt. Suppose that *S*'s habitual response to *p* is to  $\phi$ , and that *S* has decided that she will not  $\phi$  the next time she encounters *p*. If *S* encounters *p*, does not experience the feeling of effort, and subsequently  $\phi$ s, this would qualify as a case of ideo-motor action, which is not capable of being akratic. *S* may have forgotten about her resolution to refrain from  $\phi$ -ing; she may have not noticed that she had encountered *p*; or, maybe she immediately caved in the face of potential effort and resorted to  $\phi$ -ing. Without the feeling of effort, there is no awareness of what you are doing; without awareness, an action cannot be akratic.

While this makes the most sense with respect to acting against a settled habit, it makes less sense with respect to cases in which there is no settled habit. The second clarification deals with such cases. Suppose that *S* has no settled habit with respect to *p*, decides that  $\psi$ -ing is preferable to  $\phi$ -ing, and then subsequently  $\phi$ s. In this case, *S* must have underestimated the extent to which  $\phi$  was an established habit with respect to *p*-like objects of experience. The feeling of effort matters here, too. If *S* did not experience the feeling of effort when she failed to  $\psi$ , then  $\phi$  was a settled habit that she was unaware was a settled habit; if she did, then she was attempting to act against a settled habit and underestimated just how settled  $\phi$  was. A quirk of this account is that even if *S* had decided to  $\phi$ , and then subsequently  $\psi$ s, then *S* had underestimated the motivational force of  $\psi$ . With these clarifications out of the way, we can now consider how this account fits with previous accounts of akrasia.

An interesting feature of this account is that it is closest to the early Christian accounts previously described more than other accounts, but naturalized (to an extent). James accepts the general

framework common to both the philosophical and religious accounts in that one's cognitive processes are attempting to resist the motivational force generated by the body (vis-à-vis one's neurology). Unlike Aristotle, but like the early Christian writers, James closes the door on the possibility of mastery over the body. So long as you are alive, you will struggle against certain tendencies of action and thought, and sometimes you will fail. James eschews characterizing the struggle as being between one's flesh and one's spirit; indeed, one's body is just as responsible for enkratic actions as it is for akratic actions. Instead, one's settled habits play the role of the antagonist, pulling the agent in directions that she would rather not be pulled.<sup>29</sup> Despite making this change, habit's function in the framework remains the same, and the fight between habituation and cognition is as intractable as the fight between flesh and spirit.

One major point on which James deviates from the Saints is that James does not attach any negative connotations to akratic action with respect to one's moral status. As noted, both Paul and Augustine lament their inability to conquer their bodies' impulses and consider themselves less godly due to this shortcoming. Indeed, sin is required for akrasia to be possible in the first place. James, in contrast, makes no such judgment. In fact, James's clearest description of these actions—which, coincidentally, involves a discussion of Paul and Augustine—makes no mention of akratic action being immoral simply for being akratic, but instead presents both figures as an example of those with “divided wills”—people who have conflicting selves that motivate contradictory behavior.<sup>30</sup> James only reserves contempt for one case, the serially akratic, that will be discussed later in this paper.

The account of akrasia given in previous paragraphs also has consequences for contemporary treatments of akrasia. Given James's treatment of action, philosophers are wrong to consider akrasia a problem of rationality—although he might grant that it looks like one, *prima facie*. While we may wish that our actions are always guided by right reason, many—if not most—of our actions are motivated by things other than reasons. It is easy to

claim that *S* ought to  $\phi$ , because *S* judges  $\phi$  to be the best course of action. However, to claim that *S* is irrational if *S* does not  $\phi$  over-rationalizes the conditions under which decisions are typically made. Further, how we respond to reasons are often dictated by arational features of our psychology in subtle and often uncontrollable ways. When we may fail to act on our better judgments or intentions simply because we are feeling angsty, it is hard for James to claim that such a failure is one of rationality.

The question is thus what kind of failure James would consider akrasia to be if not one of rationality or character. The clue can be found in the one time that James does discuss akrasia directly. In *Principles*, James eschews the then-standard terminology of weak wills in favor of discussing what he calls the *obstructed will*. The will—understood as a relation between an agent’s cognitive processes and its ideas, rather than as a discrete element of our psychology that can innervate bodily movements or decide courses of action by *fiat*—is obstructed when its natural tendency to discharge into action is impeded either through a lack of motivation to act (what James calls *impulsion*) or having an excess of inhibitors.<sup>31</sup> Sometimes this is the result of a lack of focus due to fatigue, conflicting ideas, or even absentmindedness. In other cases, obstruction becomes pathological, where “the vision [attention] may be wholly unaffected, and the intellect clear, and yet the act either fails to follow in some other way. ‘*Video Meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*’ is the classic expression.”<sup>32</sup> The “classic expression” is simply Paul’s lament: “I see the better way and approve it, but I follow the worse way.” In this, we see that James has taken the concept of akrasia out of the moral and/or rational spheres and made it a *psychophysical* matter, where the agent fails to act in accordance with her better judgment because her nervous system does not have a structure conducive to bringing about the actions that follow from her judgments.<sup>33</sup> This is supported by James’s idea that akrasia is a form of lethargy, when motivators to act “fail to *get to* the will, fail to draw blood, seem, in so far forth, distant and unreal.”<sup>34</sup> In these cases, it is always when an agent fails to overcome a physical predisposition; as per

James's example, the alcoholic never talks of overcoming his sobriety.<sup>35</sup>

From this, I argue that akratic actions are those when the agent fails to adequately set himself up for success at resisting his habitual action, making akrasia a practical failure. Consider this in terms of James's recommendations in *Principles* for those who wish to alter their habits. In a striking phrase, James says that the overriding goal in such an endeavor is to "*make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy.*"<sup>36</sup> Our nervous systems can be our enemy because they lock us into certain patterns of behavior that, depending on our age and upbringing, may be impossible to break. James explains that a "low-born" person can never fully learn how to buy the right clothes or speak without a "well-to-do" accent, if his ascension to a higher social class happens after the age of twenty.<sup>37</sup> After twenty, our brain has lost much of its plasticity and therefore cannot be reshaped as effectively as it can be before that time. It is, however, possible to keep oneself reasonably flexible through practice and incremental improvement, and through such exercise maintain some degree of adaptability. Central to this thought is the importance of manipulating one's environment to maximize the chance of success for the desired habit to take root and to act on the new habit as frequently and decisively as one can.<sup>38</sup> For those who have no pressing need to alter their habits, James has the following advice:

*Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day. That is, be systematically ascetic or heroic in little unnecessary points, do every day or two something for no other reason than that you would rather not do it, so that when the hour of dire need draws night, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test.*<sup>39</sup>

James states that those who do practice resisting their comfortable habits in this way will "stand like a tower when everything rocks

around him, and when his softer fellow-mortals are winnowed like chaff in the blast.”<sup>40</sup>

We can see how the failure involved in akratic action is essentially practical: Akratic actions happen because the agent has not trained herself properly and/or has not manipulated her environment to the extent required to bring about successful resistance of her habituated actions. Consider the following example. Suppose you are binge-watching your favorite show on Netflix, but have a stack of papers to grade. You judge that the best course of action is to grade those papers and intend to do so at the end of the current episode. The current episode ends, and you feel the inner conflict—get up and grade or stay at rest and watch another episode. If you take the latter option, then you are acting akratically.

We must keep two things in mind with respect to this example. First, if the action of getting up to grade feels effortful, it is because there are competing ideas of how to respond to your current circumstances that activate contradictory physiological movements. In this case, you are motivated to both grade papers and to continue watching Netflix; contradictory physiological movements would include getting off your couch (to go get your essays) or remaining at rest. Second, performing your intended action is only possible if your motivation to grade is stronger than your motivation to watch Netflix. We should not underestimate the motivational force enjoyed by the act of watching Netflix in this scenario, even just by virtue of being your current behavior.

Given these points, we can see how James would reject the idea that the central failing of akrasia is rational. Note that neither the act of grading nor the judgment that grading is the best course of action are intrinsically rational actions; they are only rational insofar as they are appropriate responses relative to prior commitments. Judging that grading papers is the best course of action relative to the project of exemplifying a virtuous instructor demonstrates that the agent is rational. It is an appropriate response to the agent’s environment and circumstances. For that judgment to immediately bring about an action, it must have sufficient

motivational force to overcome all competing alternatives. Whether a judgment to  $\phi$  will have enough motivational force to cause  $\phi$  is a consequence of the agent's neurological structure. If the neural pathway responsible for  $\phi$ -ing is not as deep as the neural pathway responsible for some other action  $\psi$ , and if  $\phi$  and  $\psi$  are possible responses to the agent's current circumstances, then the agent will not  $\phi$ . In circumstances where  $\psi$  is not a possible response—say, if the choice were between grading and watching curling, the latter of which has no motivational force for the agent whatsoever—then the agent would have no trouble  $\phi$ -ing. This is not a matter of rationality, but of the presence and relative strength of habits—a practical matter.

The same sort of response is applicable to the idea that the central failing of akrasia is moral. The action that an agent takes will always be the one with the stronger motivational force; that is, the action that results from the most efficient pathway of discharge through the brain. In such cases, there is a strong sense in which the agent's action is decided before she struggled with her competing motivations. In our example, the motivation to continue watching Netflix was too strong for you to begin your grading; thus, you were not capable of performing the moral action and cannot be faulted for not doing what you could not do. This chimes well with the tone of James's treatment of the morbidly-obstructed will. James does not condemn those who are in such a condition for being immoral; rather, he recognizes that they have a psychophysiological problem that needs to be addressed.

The failure involved in the grading-or-Netflix case is the failure to put yourself into a situation where you are more likely to grade papers should you decide to do so, both by training yourself to resist the pull of habituated actions (like watching Netflix) and by manipulating the environment to make your chosen action more likely to come about (e.g., by not beginning to watch Netflix when you have grading to do). Although James does not make the connection explicit, his maxims for developing one's ability to resist habituated action clearly resemble physical exercise, such as resistance training. Just as we do not condemn those who do not

exercise in this way as irrational (relative to the project of a healthy life) or immoral (for failing to prepare themselves for situations in which physical strength is required), we would not, under James's view, condemn those who do not do 'effort training' as being irrational or immoral. That said, those who engage in effort training will have relatively more self-awareness about their own tendencies and the necessary steps required to mitigate those tendencies.

In sum, James's account of akrasia does not give akratic action the same degree of negative connotation found in either philosophical or religious accounts. It merely denotes that the agent has not adapted her environment—and herself—sufficiently towards the desired end to allow for to resist her habituated impulse to do otherwise. While this is within the agent's control, and thus is something for which she may be held responsible, it is also something that adds no extra irrationality or wrongness to the action performed that was not already present in the action. If  $S$  intends to not- $\phi$ , but  $\phi$ s, then  $\phi$  is inappropriate relative to some overarching project regardless of whether  $S$  intended to not- $\phi$ , or whether  $S$  intended to  $\phi$ . While akratic action may look irrational or immoral *prima facie*, it instead merely shows that the agent has not reached the point where she can resist her habituated behavior in these circumstances.

This makes James's account of akrasia an interesting point between the philosophical and religious accounts. It accepts the general picture found in religious accounts but rejects its assessment as a reflection on one's character. It also goes further in showing how the disparate selves at war within one person are interwoven with each other and provides a physiological basis for that war. From the philosophical tradition, James accepts that the problem has something to do with one's decision-making ability and the relevance of one's project to determining what counts as akratic action. He rejects the view that it is ultimately a matter of rationality. To both, James adds a sharper focus on the arational factors which contribute to decision-making, including the environmental conditions at the time of decision. This results in

embodied akrasia—akratic action that is the result of a full-fledged agent with competing desires and intentions failing to engage with her environment in a way sufficient to resist her ingrained habits.

### **AKRASIA AND MELIORISM**

The account of akrasia given in previous paragraphs fits neatly with James's work in other areas and illuminates some fascinating connections between such works. The most important of these is the connection to James's doctrine of meliorism, the belief that the world can be made better through human effort. In short, akratic action is a key component of meliorism. Akkratic action provides the agent with valuable information that cannot be gleaned from anything else and acting on that information grounds the agent's belief that improvement is possible through increased effort.

If akratic action involves an agent reverting to her settled habits despite making the conscious effort to act against those habits, then there is a fair bit of awareness at play. The agent must be aware of her decision to make such an attempt, aware that the attempt was made, and aware of the attempt's failure. Her persistent awareness yields information about the attempt and subsequent failure; namely, knowledge of the point at which the failure occurred, and the reason for her failure. Recall that a wilful action is brought about only when all the inhibitors for that action are removed.<sup>41</sup> For James, the strongest inhibitors are alternative courses of action that present an equal—or, quite possibly, superior—amount of satisfaction to the course of action that one is attempting to perform. Watching your favorite show, on a nice, comfortable couch, with some snacks, and texting your friends as they watch along may present itself as a more satisfying way to spend your night than slogging through two hundred papers comparing Locke and Hobbes on the state of nature.

Yet even if you akratically watch Netflix instead of grading, that akratic action reveals the most important factors keeping you from grading. Perhaps you dread the subject matter: You can find new figures to study next time. Perhaps you find essays tedious: You can find new ways to assess a student's grade. Perhaps it is



the isolation: You can find a colleague to grade alongside. Perhaps it is that you leave your grading to the evening: You can rearrange your day to grade in the morning. Regardless, trying and failing provides you with information that you can then take and use to increase the likelihood of success the next time you are faced with a similar situation.

More importantly, akratic action reveals that it is not an external force that is keeping you from following through with your intentions but rather that it is an internal matter. If an action is akratic, then external forces are not responsible for the failure to act in the proper manner. If you decide to grade your papers, realize that you left them at the office, and therefore go back to watching Netflix, that action is not akratic—it was just impossible due to circumstances of which you were not aware. The failure of akratic action is always something within the agent's control; as such, it is something that can be avoided and ultimately eliminated through effort and practice. Akratic actions thus reveal that our efforts can make a difference to outcomes, even if they did not manage to do so in that particular instance. Since this information is only available through akratic action, it makes akratic action a significant component for an optimistic outlook towards human development and progress. Once this optimism is extrapolated to society or the universe, akratic action becomes foundational for James's entire project of meliorism. Akratic action shows that habits do not lead to action fatally, and that it is possible, through extra effort and determination, that an agent could always act otherwise—the very foundation of free will for James. Being able to act otherwise implies that the course of the universe is in some way pliable and undetermined. In short, we know that we can make things better in the world, because we can make things better with ourselves.

Akratic action's cognitive function and its connection to meliorism help explain James's contempt for the serially akratic. James claims that there is "no more contemptable type of human character than that of the nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer, who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotion,

but who never does a manly concrete deed.”<sup>42</sup> This contempt is echoed in “The Sentiment of Rationality,” where James criticizes the “boor” who, through his intolerance for the feelings of unease associated with having unsettled beliefs about philosophical topics, takes the first position presented to him as absolute fact in order to alleviate that unease.<sup>43</sup> In both cases, James criticizes those who make a habit out of resolving an undertaking, but then abandoning it at the first sign of resistance.<sup>44</sup> This makes sense, given the practical nature of *akrasia* and the possibility of avoiding it through preparation: If one repeatedly resolves to not- $\phi$ , but then  $\phi$ s, then one is engaging in a protracted exercise in self-delusion. Trying and failing is only a problem if you make no attempt to use that information in the future to maximize the possibility of success.<sup>45</sup>

This account of embodied *akrasia* not only invites us to think differently about how failure to act in accordance with our better judgment fits in within our understanding of practical reason, but also how to think of its role within our understanding of human progress and our ability to make the universe better through our collective efforts.

#### **THE PROBLEM OF JAMES’S (OUTDATED) NEUROLOGY**

While James’s account of *akrasia* is intriguing, the fact that it is based on his neurology hinders its potential to reorient debates on this topic. To be charitable, James’s neurology is horribly outdated. No contemporary figure would espouse a drainage-channel model of neurology. While it is beyond the scope of the present paper to reconcile James’s work with modern cognitive science, I believe that enough of a reconciliation is possible to preserve the core insights upon which James’s account of *akrasia* is based, if one understands James’s work functionally. To that end, I will now briefly turn to the work of Daniel Kahneman, whose two-tiered model of reasoning both resonates with James’s account of the struggle between habituated, easy responses on one hand and reasoned, difficult responses on the other.

The clearest explanation of Kahneman’s two-tiered model of reasoned action is found in his 2011 work *Thinking, Fast and*

*Slow*. In that book, Kahneman posits that our cognitive abilities fall within one of two broadly-understood systems. System One is characterized by being quick and reflexive (“fast” thinking); System Two is sluggish and reflective.<sup>46</sup> Being quick and reflexive, responses which originate in System One require very little effort on the part of the individual.<sup>47</sup> Responses which originate in System Two, however, place greater demands on our cognitive capacities and thus require varying degrees of effort in proportion to the demands of the task.<sup>48</sup> Since System Two is inherently lazy and seeks to conserve energy whenever possible, we often default to system one responses unless we are strongly invested in the outcome of the decision, or if we have no System One response to which we can default.<sup>49</sup>

While the connection to James’s work is clear, Kahneman’s view rejects one key feature of James’s work: the “explosiveness” of the will. For James, we experience discomfort because the will must act and act now: not having a clear path of discharge results in the buildup of nervous energy. For Kahneman, System Two is not explosive, but lethargic, and discomfort is because burning any energy is unpleasant. Even with this modification, the core picture that James presents is maintained, including the extension to consciousness. According to Kahneman, control and volitional behavior is rooted in System Two.<sup>50</sup> System Two is also what either endorses or rejects the intuitive responses that are provided by System One. In all cases where System Two is at work, we feel effort as extra energy is being expended; in all cases of extra energy being expended, we have System Two at work. Our conscious life is wholly contained in the use of this energy. Indeed, our mental lives are wholly comprised of the instances where System One is insufficient or leads to disastrous results.<sup>51</sup>

Again, it is impossible to fully reconcile James’s outdated neurology here, but it is clear that there is at least one potentially fruitful connection between James’s work and contemporary psychology, and there are likely others.<sup>52</sup> If we take James’s model figuratively or at least functionally, then the model that he presents is not so far-fetched. This is especially the case given that the

phenomenological effects of System Two reasoning, for Kahneman, echo those of wilful action for James; namely, they are effortful and often unpleasant. Further, they are empirically measurable.<sup>53</sup> More work must be done to explore the possibility of reconciling James's work with Kahneman's; I leave this to future scholarship.<sup>54</sup>

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study of akrasia has a long and distinguished history. Although it stems from a common sense insight about how better judgments ought to inform behavior, one's conception of akratic action is a central feature of one's treatment of action as a whole, especially how one conceives of the motivational force between judgments and intentions on the one hand, and actions on the other. James's account of akrasia and akratic action deviates from the traditional accounts found in both philosophy and from early Christian sources. James accepts the Christian view that akrasia is the result of conflicting motives from within, but rejects the framework and language of sin and redemption. James accepts the view of philosophy that akrasia involves some defect in the decision-making process, but rejects that akratic action is indicative of irrationality. Instead, James's embodied view of akrasia holds that akratic action is the result of an agent attempting to act in a way contrary to one's settled habits, but failing. This failure is not the result of a flaw of character or rationality; instead it is largely a misestimation of the effort required to act in such a way. This gives the agent some valuable information for how to avoid akratic action in the future, thus paving the way for gradual self-improvement. This suggests that akratic action is a key component for James's doctrine of meliorism.

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<sup>1</sup> For Aristotle's full account of *akrasia*, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1149a24–52a36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1151a30–52a8.

<sup>3</sup> Davidson, "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?," 42.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> For an overview, see Holton, "How is Strength of Will Possible?," esp. 39–46.

<sup>6</sup> An alternative definition is found in the work of Richard Holton. Holton argues that there is a clear distinction between *akrasia* and "weakness of will" (Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 70–2, 83–6). Holton reserves the term *akrasia* is for cases in which *S* judges  $\phi$  to be the best course of action, but then resolves to not- $\phi$ . (85). Weakness of will refers to "unreasonable revision of a contrary inclination defeating intention (a resolution) in response to the pressure of those very inclinations" (78). Roughly speaking, the difference is this: *akrasia* is a flaw in the priority *S* gives her own evaluative judgments, and weakness of will is a flaw in *S*'s ability to follow through with her intention.

As we shall see, James's account sounds very similar to how Holton defines weakness of will (indeed, this is James's preferred terminology as well). However, James would not accept the distinction on Holton's grounds. As defined by Holton, *akrasia* would be a subset of weakness of will; specifically, the most extreme version of it, where the desire to not- $\phi$  is so weak that it cannot even stave off one's contrary inclination to  $\phi$  long enough for one to form a resolution to not- $\phi$ . As defined, these two concepts exist on a gradient rather than being separate concepts in their own right. As any further consideration of this distinction would take us well beyond the scope of the present project, and that it would not affect my argument regardless of outcome, I will

note Holton's distinction but exclusively use the term *akrasia* throughout the paper.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 7: 15, 18, 22–24. (RSV)

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, 154.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 153–54.

<sup>10</sup> James, *Principles*, 1132.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1004.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1004–5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1130.

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

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1141.

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

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 113–14.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 130. Italics in original.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 128–29.

<sup>29</sup> I must note that habit plays a central role in Augustine's work as well. Consider the following passage: "The truth is that disordered lust springs from a perverted will; when lust is pandered to, a habit is formed; when habit is not checked, it hardens into compulsion" (Augustine, *The Confessions*, 143). Clearly, habit is central to forming a poor character, but for Augustine, this ultimately stems from the corrupted will. James does not see the will as inherently corrupted, but does see it working in roughly the way envisioned by Augustine.

<sup>30</sup> See James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 143–45.

<sup>31</sup> James, *Principles*, 1152.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1153.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 1153.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 1155.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 126. Italics in original.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 127–28.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 130. Italics in original.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 1130.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>43</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, 62–63.

<sup>44</sup> What sets the serially akratic apart from those with a morbidly obstructed will is that the former judge  $\phi$  to be the best course of action, try to  $\phi$ , but then habitually abandon their intention to  $\phi$  at the first sign of resistance, while the latter judge  $\phi$  to be the best course of action, but then never  $\phi$ . A smoker who understands the harm of his habit but never resolves to quit would be a case of the morbidly obstructed will, while a smoker who vows that every cigarette is his last would be serially akratic.

<sup>45</sup> While this may seem similar to Aristotle's virtue-based account of akrasia, it differs in several important respects. First, as noted, James does not believe that mastery is ever possible. Instead, what he is advocating here is being prepared for future circumstances; his fire insurance analogy is particularly noteworthy in this respect (James, *Principles*, 130). The agent is not being enkratic because they have an enkratic character, but rather they are being enkratic so that they can respond effectively to future trials. Second, there is a degree of repetition and awareness of one's akratic behavior in James that is emphasized less in Aristotle. Failing to develop the ability to power through the feeling of effort results in someone who knowingly fails to do anything that might be unpleasant. Knowing that you could



improve, and how to improve, but then not doing what you need to do in order to improve, only compounds the akrasia and leads to self-fulfilling prophecies.

<sup>46</sup> Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 20–21.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 22, 47–48.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–23, 28–29.

<sup>52</sup> Another candidate for reconciliation with James is work on ego depletion; see Baumeister, “Ego Depletion,” 1252–65.

<sup>53</sup> Kahneman, 43.

<sup>54</sup> A recent attempt to modernize James in this way may be found in Brunson, “Fluency, Satisfaction, Truth,” 29–47. Brunson suggests that we ought to read James’s work, especially “The Sentiment of Rationality,” as an early articulation of processing fluency (Brunson, “Fluency, Satisfaction, Truth,” 32–5). While Brunson’s work has merit and ought to be commended, I believe that he has misinterpreted James’s intention behind “The Sentiment of Rationality,” which I believe ought to be read as an early articulation of the affect heuristic instead. Unfortunately, it is well beyond the scope of the present project to articulate my reasons any further.

# AN INCHOATE UNIVERSE: JAMES'S PROBABILISTIC UNDERDETERMINISM

*KYLE BROMHALL*



In this paper, I challenge the traditional narrative that William James's arguments against determinism were primarily motivated by his personal struggles with depression. I argue that James presents an alternative argument against determinism that is motivated by his commitment to sound scientific practice. James argues that determinism illegitimately extrapolates from observations of past events to predictions about future events without acknowledging the distinct metaphysical difference between them. This occupation with futurity suggests that James's true target is better understood as logical determinism rather than causal determinism. This has consequences for James's proposed alternative, which I call his *probabilistic underdeterminism*, a conception of the universe that is built on chance, choice, and a local teleology. All of this forms part of a broader criticism of the scientific practices of his day based on their widespread failure to acknowledge the distorting effects of observation on that which is observed.



The traditional narrative about William James's arguments against determinism suggests that his hostility to determinism was motivated primarily by his personal struggles with depression. This view is reinforced by the fact that James tends to resort to moral arguments instead of metaphysical or scientific ones, even when he is working within such a context. If this is the case, then scholars are right to view James's arguments as an exercise in self-assurance rather than a serious challenge to the doctrine. However, I believe that this narrative is incomplete. While it is right to claim that there is a deep connection between James's mental and physical health and his attitude towards determinism, he presents an alternative argument against determinism that is nuanced, powerful, and in no way motivated by his personal struggles. The purpose of this paper is to articulate this argument and draw out its consequences for our approach to James on this topic.

In the first section of this paper, I argue that the target of James's arguments against determinism is not as straightforward as traditionally thought, for he accepts that certain forms of determinism are explanatorily helpful in scientific activity. As such, I argue that it is more helpful to think of James's arguments as being against logical determinism rather than causal or material determinism. In section two, I articulate James's argument against logical determinism that is motivated not by his personal struggles, but rather his commitment to sound scientific practice. James argues that logical determinism illegitimately extrapolates the causal structure of future events from that of past events without acknowledging either the metaphysical difference between those events or the distorting effect that observation has on our conception of those events. James's proffered alternative to logical determinism is presented in section three; which I refer to as his *probabilistic underdeterminism*. In section four, I demonstrate how this argument is part of a broader criticism of the prevailing scientific methodologies of James's day in order to bolster my claim that this is scientifically motivated, and consider what this means for our conception of James as a scientist.

**WHICH DETERMINISM?**

The traditional narrative about James's struggle with determinism has two key features. First, it holds that his struggle with determinism was intimately connected with his physical and mental health. Second, it holds that James's ultimate rejection of determinism was on personal, non-scientific grounds. I wish to affirm the first feature and deny the second feature.

The relation of James's struggle with determinism to his physical and mental health is well-documented and, in my estimation, above dispute. As the story goes, James's severe depression in his youth made determinism attractive, and his deterministic mindset deepened his depression. Robert D. Richardson notes that James's initial attraction to determinism was intimately connected to the physical health of himself and those close to him; the death of a close friend hit him particularly hard.<sup>1</sup> Jacques Barzun observes that a significant low point for James occurred as he was undertaking his medical degree, given reductive materialism's explanatorily powerful role in that science.<sup>2</sup> John J. McDermott suggests that questions of free will were integral to James's contemplation of suicide.<sup>3</sup> Most commentators agree that James only emerged from his depression after having been, in the words of Richardson, "reborn emotionally" through the professional and personal stability gained by securing a position at Harvard and marrying Alice Gibbens.<sup>4</sup> This emotional rebirth coincided with his engagement with the works of Charles Renouvier, which eventually emboldened James to make his first act of free will: to believe in free will.<sup>5</sup> This led to James writing his 'crisis texts,' which sought to "develop a doctrine to sustain such a belief [in free will]";<sup>6</sup> it is here that we find James's most ardent anti-determinist writings. Thus, the first feature of the traditional narrative about his struggle with determinism seems well-established: The struggle was, in some way, intimately connected with James's physical and mental well-being.

The second feature of the traditional narrative concerns the nature and merit of the specific arguments James advances against

determinism. Many scholars hold to the idea that since his struggle with determinism was highly personal, James's arguments against determinism are personally motivated to an unacceptable degree. This idea is presented most forcefully by Richard Gale. Gale, who claims that James's arguments against determinism "amount to nothing but a skein of question-begging rhetorical definitions."<sup>7</sup> Further, Gale argues that James's positive arguments for indeterminism employed emotive language and traded on common sense intuitions about regret in the place of an intellectually rigorous argument.<sup>8</sup> Gale sees James's arguments against determinism as a psychological exercise meant to assuage his own concerns about freedom rather than being a rigorous philosophical engagement.<sup>9</sup> As such, they are unworthy of serious consideration outside of biographical interest about James.<sup>10</sup> Similar, albeit more charitable, examples of this narrative can be found in the works of Charlene Haddock Seigfried,<sup>11</sup> McDermott,<sup>12</sup> Richardson,<sup>13</sup> and others.

While personal motivations undoubtedly played a role in James's rejection of determinism, I believe that James's motivations are more complicated than is traditionally assumed. The traditional narrative fails to capture two aspects of James's arguments against determinism. First, it does not recognize that his hostility is reserved only for one form of determinism. I argue that taking James's target to be logical determinism, rather than causal determinism, better reflects his concern with futurity and foreknowledge. Second, the traditional narrative does not pay sufficient attention to the scientific motivation behind James's argument against determinism. I will discuss the first point in this section and address the second point in the next.

A strong point in favor of the idea that James does not reject all forms of determinism is that James himself explicitly endorses determinism under certain specific circumstances, a point to which he returns repeatedly, especially in his more scientific works. In the preface to *The Principles of Psychology*, James claims that a psychologist "assumes certain data uncritically" for his or her work to even be possible (e.g., the existence of thoughts and feelings).<sup>14</sup>

This statement caused a furor in the scientific community, provoking negative reviews and responses to *Principles*.<sup>15</sup> James defended his claim in his 1892 article, “A Plea for Psychology as a ‘Natural Science,’” in which he observes that any natural science must “make a number of convenient assumptions” in order to function.<sup>16</sup> Whatever these assumptions are, they are all validated in the same manner: by their explanatory or predictive power as determined through their careful deployment in hypothesis-testing.<sup>17</sup> James makes the same point in his 1911 book *Some Problems of Philosophy* and illustrates his point with the example of atomistic physics. Although atomism is *prima facie* “absurd,” James notes that it is so useful for explaining scientific observations that “we adopt [it] unhesitatingly” along with the related assumption that “the laws by which we describe [atomic structures’] habits are uniform in the strictest mathematical sense.”<sup>18</sup> In this, we see the same commitment expressed twenty years earlier, that science must posit “convenient assumptions” to function. If they are unhelpful or lead to questionable predictions (or retrodictions) about observed phenomena, then the assumption would be abandoned in favor of a more explanatorily powerful assumption.<sup>19</sup>

James claims that the most important convenient assumption of any science is that of hard determinism, or the belief that all events will progress according to observable and predictable laws.<sup>20</sup> This is the case because “[a]ll natural sciences aim at practical predictions and control,” which is only possible if like causes lead to like events in a lawful manner.<sup>21</sup> James gave longstanding support for the idea that psychology should follow the natural sciences, including the incorporation of hard determinism into its methodology. Years before his “Plea,” or even the publication of *The Principles*, James stated in an 1884 letter to the editor of *Open Court* that he “claim[s] determinism in the interest of scientific activity” to rebuff the charge that he held an anti-scientific methodological libertarianism.<sup>22</sup> James carried this methodological hard determinism with him throughout his career, and not just in his psychology. In *Pragmatism*, James explicitly rejects the

possibility that there can be events which cause other events, but are not themselves caused.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, like all convenient assumptions, determinism must be judged on its usefulness. James finds it quite useful—and indeed, necessary—in certain domains, a position he never recanted. Determinism *qua* determinism does not seem to be the target of James’s arguments.

The question of which forms of determinism are the true targets of James’s arguments persisted throughout his career, exacerbated by his notorious penchant for being unclear with his terms and inconsistent with their use. This penchant carried over into James’s correspondence as well. In Shadworth Hollway Hodgson’s March 6, 1886 letter to James, Hodgson complained that in previous correspondence James had taken determinism to be synonymous with fatalism and then had proceeded to criticize this strawman of his position.<sup>24</sup> The clearest distinction James makes between the two is in “The Dilemma of Determinism,” where he argues that the “fatalistic mood of mind” is one possible response to the particular form of determinism with which he takes issue;<sup>25</sup> or seen in another way, fatalism is a *subspecies* of the problematic form of determinism. The form of determinism that leads to fatalism is the form that:

professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be. The future has no ambiguous possibilities hidden in its womb; the part we call the present is compatible with only one totality. Any other future complement than the one fixed from eternity is impossible. The whole is in each and every part, and welds it with the rest into an absolute unity, an iron block, in which there can be no equivocation or shadow of turning.<sup>26</sup>

This passage gives us two features of the “iron block” view of the universe that James finds problematic. First, such a view holds that for any point in the future, there is, at most, one possible state of

affairs. Such a view holds that for any event  $p$ , the antecedent states of affairs of  $p$  are the sufficient cause of  $p$ . As such, to understand why  $p$  is the case, we merely need to examine the antecedent state of affairs while armed with a knowledge of the causal mechanisms of physics. If we have a complete idea of all the forces at play, we can, in principle, perfectly predict all future states of affairs. The second feature of such a view is a consequence of the first. If there is at most one possible state of affairs, then any appearance of multiple possible future states of affairs (what James calls *ambiguity*) is illusory. If the future looks ambiguous, then there must be an as-yet undiscovered cause that, once discovered, would eradicate the apparent ambiguity. This is typically explained as a function of our limited viewpoint: If we had improved methods of observation, then we would be able to see the necessity of each state of affairs. Any form of determinism that makes both claims falls under this category and is subject to James's arguments.

James's rejection of the iron block view has been noticed by James scholars; the very term is one of the rhetorical definitions about which Gale complains.<sup>27</sup> James's hostility to the iron block view creates a tension in his thought. Although James claims determinism precisely for the predictive ability that it affords, he rejects the iron block view, in part, due to its use of that predictive ability. This tension is central to those who advance a "divided self" narrative of James, wherein his scientifically-minded self is constantly at odds with his moralistically-minded self. However, it is only maintained in conditions under which James believes that the debate cannot be settled in his favor. Most treatments of determinism, including those of James's arguments against determinism, extrapolate the causal structure of future events from those of past events. James believes that such an extrapolation will invariably lead to an iron block view of the universe, and as such, any claim to indeterminism is obviously false.<sup>28</sup> James believes that extrapolating the future from the past is neither necessary nor legitimate, for extrapolating in this fashion ignores significant differences in the causal structures between past events and future



events.<sup>29</sup> While this argument developed slowly and was only explicitly articulated later in his career, James's concern with futurity is reflected throughout his corpus and his personal correspondence. It was noted explicitly by Hodgson, who remarked that James was preoccupied with forms of determinism that make a claim to a static future, such as predeterminism or fatalism, to the exclusion of forms of determinism that did not make such claims about the future.<sup>30</sup> This suggests that despite laying out the iron block view in the manner previously described, James's primary concern is not the claim that the universe progresses in a lawlike fashion, but rather that the progression of the universe is towards one necessary future state of affairs. He accepts that there will be only one way that the future will be, but rejects that there is more than one way it could be.

Given James's acceptance of hard determinism in some cases and his overriding concern with claims to the necessary state of future events, I submit that it is more fruitful to think of James's target as being logical determinism rather than causal determinism, even if he never expressed it in those terms. Logical determinism claims that all propositions about future events have a definite and static truth value. Since this is the case, all future events must occur by logical necessity. Gilbert Ryle explains this position as being:

Whatever anyone does, whatever happens anywhere to anything, could not *not* be done or happen, if it was true beforehand that it was going to be done or was going to happen. So everything, including everything that we do, has been definitely booked from any earlier date you like to choose. Whatever is, was to be.<sup>31</sup>

Causal determinism claims that one could perfectly predict any future state of affairs if armed with a sufficiently detailed knowledge of physics and knowledge about a past or present state of affairs. In such a scheme, predictions will only be validated (or

falsified) when the predicted event occurs (or fails to occur). Logical determinism makes an even stronger claim—that since proposition *p* about future event *e* already has a truth value, there is already a fact of the matter about *e* that allows for *p* to have its truth value. In some sense, *e* has *already happened*. J. R. Lucas argues that logical determinism “exclude[s] the possibility of a subsequent change of mind, and in some cases—long-range predictions—exclude[s] the possibility of any factor under the agent’s control being relevant.”<sup>32</sup> The notion of agential control is central to James’s antipathy towards this form of determinism. As we shall see, he argues that what an agent does can be relevant to causal determinism if causation is understood probabilistically. Logical determinism admits no such possibility; the future is, in the words of Ryle, definitely booked. This explains why James thought that fatalism was a “mood of mind” brought about by his target form of determinism: if the future is fixed, then one naturally wonders how the future is fixed. One possible explanation is divine predetermination, whereby the fixity of future events is rooted in God’s infinite knowledge and infallibility. If His knowledge is infinite, then God knows what will happen in the future. If God is infallible, then whatever He believes about the future is true and unchanging. Necessitarianism and fatalism are other explanations for why the future is as static and fixed as the past.

The context of Hodgson’s termination of his correspondence with James further reinforces the appropriateness of considering James’s arguments in the light of logical determinism. Hodgson eventually terminated his correspondence with James because James refused to budge on his position that determinism and free will are incompatible, especially with respect to bringing about future states of affairs.<sup>33</sup> James, however, never shows any reluctance to talk about physiological or psychological causes of behavior or deny the fact that all behavior will have a cause. It is the status of future events that troubles James—the idea that the world could be otherwise. In fact, his entire project of meliorism rests on the assumption that the universe is responsive to individual

striving; this would be impossible if the future was already as set as the past.

Understanding James's target as logical determinism alleviates much of the tension described earlier. He can maintain methodological hard determinism while rejecting logical determinism given the role that determinism is meant to play in science. The scientific upshot of methodological hard determinism is its predictive power. As an assumption, it is quite successful. Logical determinism, in contrast, affords no extra success to science while making unnecessary metaphysical commitments about the state of the universe. Logical determinism adds nothing to science that causal determinism does not bring to the table, while entailing more problematic views about the state of the universe. Given James's standards for maintaining or rejecting the convenient assumptions of science, logical determinism ought to be jettisoned, while causal determinism ought to be maintained.

In sum, James does not reject all forms of determinism, but only a particular subclass thereof. This alone problematizes the feature of the traditional narrative that James rejected determinism for personal reasons; he cannot be said to have rejected determinism wholesale if he claims determinism for himself in some cases. However, it could still be the case that James rejected logical determinism for merely personal reasons. I will now turn to a neglected argument against determinism that is motivated by James's commitment to sound scientific practice and its attendant commitment to methodological hard determinism.

### **CONCRETE POSSIBILITIES AND LOGICAL DETERMINISM**

James's scientifically-motivated argument against determinism is straightforward yet powerful. In a nutshell, James claims that determinists fail to consider the effect that one's observational standpoint has on one's conception of the thing observed, especially with respect to how an event's temporal status affects its causal history. Past events will always *appear* to have been determined because they are past; the passage of time has whittled

away possible alternatives that existed before that event was in the past.<sup>34</sup> The previously dynamic relations between that event, the events preceding it, and the events to which it leads are made static. One should expect that past events look determined, because past events *are* wholly determined. The mistake is to expect that future events would have the same static relations, since static relations are solely the property of past events.

James's argument rests on his account of how *concretely possible* events are actualized. He notes that everything is possible when taken abstractly—even a squared circle—but there are barriers to those abstract ideas from being actualized.<sup>35</sup> For James, an event is concretely possible if there are no “preventative conditions” present for that event to occur and that some “conditions of production” of that event are met.<sup>36</sup> Preventative conditions are general for and apply to all events. They include logical impossibility, “incompatibility with the given laws of nature,” and contradiction with incompatible actual facts.<sup>37</sup> Conditions of production are specific to the event in question, because each kind of event will have a unique set of conditions required for that event to come about.<sup>38</sup> As preventative conditions disappear and more conditions of production are met, the event becomes more and more concretely possible. James applies this to the case of a chicken: “Thus concrete possible chicken means: (1) that the idea of chicken contains no essential self-contradiction; (2) that no boys, skunks, or other enemies are about; and (3) that at least an actual egg exists.”<sup>39</sup> In this example, (1) and (2) are the preventative conditions, while (3) is a condition of production. While (1) is common across all events, (2) introduces probabilistic considerations regarding the specific type of event under consideration. Incompatible actual facts do not make it any less possible that chickens *qua* chickens exist, but rather affect the probability that a chicken can be found in such circumstances. James summarizes, “As the actual conditions approach completeness the chicken becomes a better-and-better-grounded possibility. When the conditions are entirely complete, it ceases to be a possibility, and turns into an actual fact.”<sup>40</sup> James's universe is

dynamic and in a state of perpetual growth that requires constraints to keep the growth in check.<sup>41</sup>

James's account of actualization suggests that there is a distinct metaphysical structure between past and future events that will lead to identifiable and predictable differences emerging from one's observational standpoint. The process of actualization ensures that all past events or states of affairs will have a causal structure which suggests that they are determined. For *p* to be actualized, the preventative conditions of *p* must be removed and the conditions of production for *p* must be met. Only once all the necessary conditions for a state of affairs becomes sufficient, then, and only then, will that state of affairs come about. This explains why it is the case that all past events seem to be fully determined—they only happen when their conditions are met, so of course it would seem as though they were determined to come about. However, this only occurs with the fullness of time and only because of the removal of all impediments, a set which includes contrary or contradictory states of affairs.<sup>42</sup> Even events or states of affairs that are the result of what James calls *absolute chance* will look determined after they happen. As James notes, any event “after it happens will *have been* necessary,” but it only appears that way because it is in the observer's past.<sup>43</sup>

This passage from *Pragmatism* discussed in the previous paragraph helps clarify the point of James's example of choosing which route to take home after a lecture (found in “The Dilemma of Determinism”). James asks us to suppose that there are only two ways to walk home, either by Divinity Avenue or by Oxford Street. Further suppose that the “choice is made twice over, and each time falls on a different street.”<sup>44</sup> Logical determinists in each of the alternative universes will see one's choice of route as being fully determined and necessary, and would view the alternative world as an impossibility borne of our imaginations.<sup>45</sup> But someone from a third universe would see that each universe was possible before the choice was made; to insist otherwise is “a mere conception fulminated as a dogma and based on no insight into details.”<sup>46</sup> As James states, “[I]t is [determinists] rather who seem

to make nature continuous; and in their strange and intense function of granting consent to one possibility and withholding it from another, to transform an equivocal and double future into an unalterable and simple past.”<sup>47</sup>

The ironblock universe is thus a product of not taking into account the metaphysical differences between past events and future events. An issue remains for James: Despite describing the process by which concretely possible events become actual events, James provides little insight into which possibilities will in fact become actualities. In other words, what determines the removal of the preventative conditions or the meeting of the conditions of production? How do past events lead to future events, if logical determinism is false? To answer these questions, we must look into James’s proposed alternative to determinism.

#### **JAMES’S PROBABLISTIC UNDERDETERMINISM**

James’s own view is built on three core tenets: first, the belief that chance is the vital force for determining which events occur; second, the belief that humans have evolved to a point where they have the ability to manipulate events and can therefore increase or decrease the probability of that event occurring; and third, the rejection of global teleology. These tenets are captured best by James’s assertion that in his system, “possibilities may be in excess of actualities, and that things not yet revealed to our knowledge may really in themselves be ambiguous.”<sup>48</sup> When taken together, these tenets establish what I refer to as James’s *probabilistic underdeterminism*.<sup>49</sup>

The first tenet of James’s probabilistic underdeterminism is that chance is the primary means by which events are selected. This view is informed by his deep commitment to Darwinism.<sup>50</sup> James argues that the worldview necessitated by Darwin is that of a “sort of table on which dice are continually being thrown.”<sup>51</sup> Chance is an integral part of James’s worldview. James notes that chance typically carries with it connotations of randomness and irrationality, but he is clear that he intends to use it in its negative sense, denoting merely cases in which an event is “not controlled,

secured, or necessitated by other things in advance of its own actual presence.”<sup>52</sup> James is not claiming that there are events which do not have any causal antecedents. Rather, his argument is that there are points at which the material conditions of the universe are insufficient to cause *any* of the possible states of affairs resulting from it. Instead, the material conditions of the universe may make one state of affairs more likely than the other; however, it is still possible that this state of affairs is not actualized.

Consider this in terms of probability.<sup>53</sup> Logical determinists insist that all events have a probability of either zero or one, and that all apparent probabilities differing from this are a function of our ignorance of causes. In James’s words, according to determinism, “necessity on the one hand and impossibility on the other are the sole categories of the real. Possibilities that fail to get realized are, for determinism, pure illusions: they were never possibilities at all.”<sup>54</sup> James instead argues that events can have an actual probability that falls somewhere between zero and one: “Of the two alternative futures which we conceive, both may now be really possible; and the one become impossible only at the very moment when the other excludes it by becoming real itself.”<sup>55</sup> Note that this does not mean that the apparent probability that we assign matches its actual probability; there is still plenty of room for errors based on ignorance and standpoint.<sup>56</sup> The important part is that, independent of our assignment, future states of affairs can have an actual probability that has a value of between zero and one. James thus means that “possibilities may be in excess of actualities” in a literal sense: The many universes that could be actualized greatly outnumber the one universe that is actually actualized. The future is thus ambiguous, because there is nothing in the past which necessitates only one possible state of affairs.<sup>57</sup>

For James, chance is an inextricable property of the universe, and is responsible for much of its progress.<sup>58</sup> While granting that all events are either more or less probable, he still acknowledges that something has to happen, and that what will happen is largely up to chance. James writes that we “must admit that the content of

the moment of choice is *chance*, as far as the rest of the world goes. The universe is as yet inchoate.”<sup>59</sup> The last sentence is key to understanding James’s point. The world is incomplete and growing, and as it progresses, it “would grow by finite buds or drops, either nothing coming at all, or certain units of amount bursting into being ‘at a stroke’.”<sup>60</sup> While some parts of the universe may influence other parts of the universe with respect to which possibilities exist, chance will always get the final say about what is actualized, when, and to what extent.<sup>61</sup>

The second tenet of James’s probabilistic underdeterminism is that despite chance having the final say, human choice has a significant role in shaping the progress of the universe. In a deterministic system, the universe is cold, uncaring, and all of one’s struggles against it are futile. Not only is your success determined by outside forces, your very struggle is subsumed by those same forces. In James’s system, the universe is still cold and uncaring, but one’s struggles actually can affect the complexion of the universe.

Although mentioned briefly in “The Dilemma of Determinism,” this line of thinking comes into its own as part of James’s defense of meliorism found near the end of *Pragmatism*. James argues that “Meliorism treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become.”<sup>62</sup> The “actual conditions of salvation” are something that we can do based on the choices that we make. The universe, being ambivalent about which possibilities are actualized, may end up unable to adequately effect one state of the universe to be actualized over others. James claims that these cases have “a gap that we can spring into” with “our *act*”;<sup>63</sup> that is, we can nudge the universe towards a certain state. To borrow language James uses elsewhere, the function of choice may be to “incline the beam” in favor of one probability over another, potentially tipping the scales and bringing that possibility about.<sup>64</sup>

Observation again plays a role in determining how we interpret the progress of the universe. James opines that retrospective



analyses of events can yield a variety of equally compelling causal stories.<sup>65</sup> A retrospective analysis of the event could be agent-causal, if that is how one interprets the event. However, a retrospective analysis would admit to an event-causal description, or even a hard determinist view, for its relations are solidified and fixed. However, if the preferences and choices of individuals contribute to—or impede—the conditions required to actualize a state of affairs, and that chance ultimately determines which possibilities are actualized, then it cannot be the case that we could ever perfectly predict the future, let alone claim that propositions about the future have a definite truth value. The future must have multiple real possibilities that are in excess of the one reality.

The third tenet of James's probabilistic underdeterminism is that he rejects any form of global teleology, be it an underlying force compelling the universe in a particular direction (e.g., Hegel's absolute), or towards a final endpoint (e.g., Peirce's *concrete reasonableness*); James considers any such teleology to be a product of rationalism and absolutism.<sup>66</sup> Instead, James is more likely to use terms such as *equivocal* or *ambivalent* to describe the universe's comportment toward which possibilities are actualized.<sup>67</sup> Whether salvation or shipwreck, the universe continues on. Note that James does concede that chance is compatible with Providence, just as long as that Providence leaves open some points to absolute chance. In other words, James leaves the door open for any of the attempts to describe how an event has its eternal truth value—fatalism, predetermination, etc.—to be compatible with this system, just as long as the observer does not claim that every single event is captured by this system. However, I think that this is largely a concession to his audience, since it is always framed as an overbelief borne of considerations other than empirical.<sup>68</sup>

There are two points we must address in order to avoid overstating James's case. First, we must note that the absence of global teleology does not establish the existence of free will, even when taken in tandem with the two preceding tenets. James does not require for indeterminism to be universal; in fact, he

specifically rejects the idea, saying that “indeterminism is no universal claimer. It only asks to exist *somewhere* in the world.”<sup>69</sup> It is still theoretically possible for there to be events which are the result of absolute chance without any of those events being a mental event where someone decides to pursue x over y. Second, even if we were to establish the existence of free will, this does not eliminate the role that chance places in determining which possibilities are actualized. James notes that our predilections and desires are only one factor at play which causes a state of affairs to occur. James claims that “[a]s individual members of a pluralistic universe, we must recognize that even though we do *our* best, the other factors also will have a voice in the result.”<sup>70</sup> Our ability to manipulate the probabilities of concrete possibilities is an evolutionary adaptation of our central nervous system that allows us to improve our chance of survival, but this does not make our choice the sole or even an essential feature of the progress of the universe.<sup>71</sup>

We now have a reasonable understanding of James’s account of the universe, or what I have called his probabilistic underdeterminism. It claims that all events have some probability of occurring, and, in the absence of any event with a probability of one, which event actually does occur is left to chance. It holds that humans have developed the ability to manipulate events so that the probability of an event can be either increased or decreased. While holding that we can manipulate probabilities through our pursuit of ends, James rejects any global teleology for the system, holding that the universe, while constantly growing, is ambivalent about the direction in which it grows. I offer that these tenets do not establish free will; instead, it is left as an overbelief with respect to the evidence. This is reflected in James’s declaration that his first act of free will is to believe in free will:<sup>72</sup> He went beyond the evidence to posit a belief that makes better sense of experience than the alternative.

It is now clear that the idea that James’s rejection of determinism was motivated primarily on personal grounds is untenable. James “claim[s] determinism in the interest of scientific

activity”<sup>73</sup> and rejects logical determinism on scientific grounds. However, this does not mean that James was completely in line with the science of his day. In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that James’s argument against logical determinism is part of a broader criticism of the observational sciences of his day.

### THE BROADER CRITICISM

The idea that James’s argument against logical determinism is part of a broader criticism against all observation-based sciences can be observed in the similar criticism levelled against the introspective psychologists of his day (e.g., Wilhelm Wundt, Edward Titchener, etc.). James argues that there are certain subjective states—namely, the feelings of relation—that can *never* be accurately captured via retrospective introspection. James writes:

As a snowflake caught in the warm hand is no longer a flake but a drop, so, instead of catching the feeling of relation moving to its term, we find we have caught some substantive thing, usually the last word we were pronouncing, statically taken, and with its function, tendency and particular meaning in the sentence quite evaporated. The attempt at introspective analysis in these cases is in fact like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion, or trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks.<sup>74</sup>

James thought that the attempts by those such as Wundt or Titchener to make their introspective analyses more precise ought to be understood as merely getting better at turning up the gas. No matter how well they could perfect the process of introspection, or how rigorous the standards that they impose on those who engage in it, they will always misrepresent a substantial aspect of our experience due to the nature of the act of observation.

Despite this, James still held that introspection was central to the science of psychology, for it furnished the data from which

psychology built its theories.<sup>75</sup> The difficulty with introspection was “*simply that of all observation of whatever kind.*”<sup>76</sup> James notes that while it is tempting to fall into the psychologist’s fallacy where one takes one’s observation of a mental event as the mental event itself, it is possible to avoid this error if one recognizes introspection’s limitations and keeps its distorting effects in mind.<sup>77</sup> James did not reject the works of his predecessors or contemporaries as being without value or irredeemable, but rather saw that those works needed some specific corrections.<sup>78</sup>

James’s argument against introspective psychology can be generalized to all of the observational sciences of his day; in each case, scientists fail to appreciate the depth of the relationship between the scientist observing a phenomenon and the phenomenon being observed, and the transformative function that the observational standpoint of the former has on the data yielded about the latter.<sup>79</sup> In the question of determinism, the effect of standpoint is so strong that one ought not to expect to be able to find indeterminacy through scientific observation, since the very act of observation fixes inherently indeterminate phenomena into determinate relations. Scientific observation presupposes a viewpoint and certain parameters; indeterminacy vanishes under the same viewpoint. In a sense, where observation is, indeterminacy is not; where indeterminacy is, observation is not.

James’s criticisms were not met with an enthusiastic response and only fed into the (still-lingering) narrative that James was somehow anti-science or unscientific. However, the motivating idea behind James’s argument is found throughout the philosophy of science and the physical sciences. Niels Bohr’s argument against the classical model of physics proceeds on much the same grounds.<sup>80</sup> Bohr argues that predicting a future state of a physical system is “only possible if the system is closed, that is, unaffected by external disturbances,” but that “any observation of the system implies a disturbance.”<sup>81</sup> As summarized by historian of physics Max Jammer, Bohr argues that “a system, if observed, is always an open system. A space-time description, however, presupposes observation.”<sup>82</sup> Bohr attributes the success of the standard model of

physics to the standpoint of the observer: The classical model works because of the limited viewpoint of the observer and the relatively small amount of data with which she has to work.<sup>83</sup> Here we see the same sort of argument as advanced by James: previous accounts of science (in this case, physics) had ignored the transformational effect of the act of observation, and once that act is considered, the closed iron block universe presupposed by those previous accounts becomes untenable.<sup>84</sup> Similar arguments for the importance of the observer in scientific practice can be found in the works of Thomas Kuhn,<sup>85</sup> Paul Feyerabend,<sup>86</sup> and more recently in the work of feminist philosophers of science such as Lorraine Code.<sup>87</sup>

I do not wish to suggest that James is somehow the progenitor of this line of reasoning or to suggest that these other figures were heavily influenced by James's thought. Rather, I use these examples to suggest that James's argument against determinism, even if generalized to a criticism of the scientific methodologies of his day, does not constitute a rejection of the scientific enterprise. If it did, then we would have to attribute the same rejection to Bohr, most contemporary physicists, and many philosophers of science. It also need not be considered an unresolved tension in James's thought between his scientifically-minded self and his moralistically-minded self, but rather an objection to the science of his day *by his scientifically-minded self*. James believes that there are good scientific reasons to temper one's expectations of scientific investigations and to refrain from applying the scientific framework beyond its legitimate bounds. For example, by failing to adequately account for the distorting effects of observation, people have extended the scientific view past a methodological tool and into a cosmological commitment. James notes that the main source of logical necessity in our cosmological thinking comes from extending the natural sciences in this way, but this is an unnecessary move to make and, if James's argument about observation holds, it would be an illegitimate move to make.<sup>88</sup>

James's attitude embodies a scientifically-minded approach to the question of determinism. James is committing himself to the

standpoint that he ought to maintain whichever belief best fits the evidence and is willing to defer to scientific consensus on that basis.<sup>89</sup> However, he believes that the evidence for or against both determinism and indeterminism will be necessarily inconclusive; thus, we must decide between the two on the basis of which thesis results in a more coherent worldview when we expand our evidence beyond that which is yielded by the practice of science. This is the same approach that Robert A. Beard ascribes to James in *A Pluralistic Universe*. Beard claims that James is not showing that “Absolute Idealism or any other sort of monism is false, but simply that a universe of the sort posited by such philosophies would be less rational than a pluralistic one.”<sup>90</sup> In the case of determinism, James must show the limitations of that viewpoint and how his proposed alternative does not suffer from the same limitations. This is the exact tack that James takes in his paper “The Dilemma of Determinism.” He shows how determinism fails regardless of which horn one takes and demonstrates how his own view of indeterminism offers a better framework in which to understand the data available. This portrait of James’s scientifically-minded approach to the question of determinism is a far cry from the common narrative of James’s rejection of determinism on personal grounds.

#### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This paper has presented a sustained analysis of James’s argument against determinism and his proposed alternative. Such an analysis presents another key to our understanding of James. James himself does not reject all forms of determinism, but rather those forms that make some claim about the necessity of future events. As such, I argue that a better way of thinking about James’s target is logical determinism, the belief that all propositions about future events have an eternal and unchanging truth value at the time of utterance. James’s argument against logical determinism involves its inability to adequately account for the distorting effects that observation has on the thing being observed—in this case, on how one’s standpoint in the present, with some events being in the past

and some in the future, affects how one conceives of the past and the different causal structure between past and future events. Taking these points into account leads James to propose what I refer to as his *probabilistic underdeterminism*. This view has three main tenets—first, chance is a vital force in determining which events are actualized; second, choice is capable of manipulating the probabilities for or against a particular event; and third, there is no global, but only local, teleology. This was presented as a particular portion of a much broader criticism of the observational sciences of his day. Since observation necessarily distorts that which is being observed, science must always account for this distorting effect when considering which convenient assumptions to take up. Logical determinism not only makes unnecessary and unhelpful metaphysical commitments, but is also the product of the distorting effect of observation. As such, logical determinism—or any of its subspecies, such as fatalism, predeterminism, and necessitarianism—is not a viable convenient assumption of science. This is a scientifically-motivated argument against the use of certain conceptions in science; as such, I submit that it is impossible to maintain the view that James rejected determinism for primarily personal motivations or on primarily moral grounds.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Richardson, *Maelstrom of American Modernism*, 101.

<sup>2</sup> Barzun, *A Stroll with William James*, 16.

<sup>3</sup> McDermott, *Writings of William James*, xxvii.

<sup>4</sup> Richardson, *Maelstrom of American Modernism*, 176.

<sup>5</sup> McDermott, *Writings of William James*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii.

<sup>7</sup> Gale, *The Divided Self*, 80–81.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 79–81.

<sup>11</sup> See Haddock Seigfried, *Radical Reconstruction*, esp. 11–12.

<sup>12</sup> See McDermott, *Writings of William James*, esp. xx–xxvii.

<sup>13</sup> Richardson, *Maelstrom of American Modernism*, 246–47.

<sup>14</sup> James, *Principles*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> For a comprehensive account of the reception of the scientific community to James’s claim and how it has subsequently transformed the philosophy of science, see Klein, “*Divide et Impera!*”

<sup>16</sup> James, *Essays in Psychology*, 271.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 77n., 78.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* For further information regarding how these convenient assumptions are tested empirically, or whether it is appropriate for science to employ them in the first place, see Klein, 141–45.

<sup>20</sup> James, *Essays in Psychology*, 272.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, 445.

<sup>23</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 59. While it is beyond the scope of the present paper to address this point in any sufficient length, the rejection mentioned above also problematizes the idea that James was a voluntarist, since it cuts James off from the agent-causal mechanism required for a thoroughgoing voluntarism.

<sup>24</sup> James, *Correspondence*, 6:119. This sentiment is also found in Gale (see 78–80).

<sup>25</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, 132.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 117–18. This passage is central to Gale’s claim that James’s definition of determinism was question-begging and rhetorical (Gale, *The Divided Self*, 80). While the passage does display some of James’s characteristic rhetorical flourishes, it is important to note, as does Barzun (16), that this definition reflected a real and widespread view in James’s day. A prime example of this was the standard view of the organism among associationist psychologists which reduced all behavior to an inevitable by-product of the laws of nature and the organism’s physiology. Examples can be seen in the works of influential figures such as F. H. Bradley (See Bradley “Is There Any Special Activity of Attention?” esp. 360), Herbert Spencer (See Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*, esp. 185–90), and Alexander Bain (See Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, esp. 369-71).

<sup>27</sup> Gale, *The Divided Self*, 80.

<sup>28</sup> James, *Manuscript Essays and Notes*, 34.

<sup>29</sup> James, *Problems*, 102–103.

<sup>30</sup> James, *Correspondence*, 6:111, 119–20, 180–81.

<sup>31</sup> Ryle, *Dilemmas*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Lucas, *The Freedom of the Will*, 65.

<sup>33</sup> James, *Correspondence*, 6:180. Given Hodgson’s thoroughgoing and unflinching antipathy to the concept of chance, I would wager that the frustration was mutual (see Ibid., 119).

<sup>34</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, 123.

<sup>35</sup> James, *Manuscript Essays and Notes*, 34.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 34–35.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>39</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 136.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> James, *Manuscript Essays and Notes*, 158.

<sup>44</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, 121.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>49</sup> A few words about the intent and scope of my claims are in order. I do not wish to claim that James explicitly argued for this view, or that he had this account in mind when he was arguing against determinism. Instead, my claim is that the three tenets mentioned, taken together, constitute a coherent worldview that effectively rebuts logical determinism. While James himself may never have advanced this position, all three tenets are stable features of James's thought that appear throughout both his psychological and philosophical works.

<sup>50</sup> For an in-depth examination of the role of Darwinism in James's thought, see McGranahan, *Darwinism and Pragmatism*.

<sup>51</sup> James, *Essays in Psychology*, 53.

<sup>52</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, 120.

<sup>53</sup> James's lifelong commitment to probability is an underexplored aspect of James's thought. Paul Croce notes that James was a pioneering figure in the advancement of statistically-informed probabilistic reasoning in both his scientific and philosophical writings (Croce, "The Probabilistic Revolution," 28–29). Setting James apart from the more mathematically minded Peirce is James's attitude towards the end product of scientific inquiry: Peirce turned towards "fallibilism, with the anticipation of ultimate certainties," while James "held out hope for a more thorough-going indeterminism" through the "embrace of chance and uncertainty" (James, *Will to Believe*, 29). As Croce notes, James did not have to reject science in this endeavour; broadly speaking, science was already moving away from determinism and towards probabilism even while James was a young scholar.

<sup>54</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, 118.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> For James's take on what these might be, see *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 113-15.

<sup>57</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, 118-19.

<sup>58</sup> While my language may occasionally suggest otherwise, I do not mean to suggest that chance is a positive causal force. I acknowledge that for James, chance purely denotes the negative state of *not* having a particular sufficient cause.

<sup>59</sup> James, *Manuscript Essays and Notes*, 159.

<sup>60</sup> James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 80.

<sup>61</sup> James, *Manuscript Essays and Notes*, 159.

<sup>62</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 137.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>64</sup> There is an interesting parallel between the second tenet and James's distinction between ideo-motor and wilful action in his psychology. In ideo-motor action, behavior follows unhesitatingly from one's conception of what to do (James, *Principles*, 1141). In wilful action, there are multiple competing, equally attractive ideas of how to proceed that are inhibiting each other's successful discharge into bodily movement. We feel that even though we have sufficient information to make a decision one way or another, there is no "imperative principle of choice between them," and we are left at a loss of what to do. In other words, our previously existing habits underdetermine which course of action to take (*Ibid.*). In these cases, James thinks that "we feel . . . as if we ourselves by our own wilful act "inclined the beam" to act in one way over another, thus resolving the stalemate and bringing about one state of affairs (*Ibid.*). In a sense, James's account of wilful behavior is a microcosmic version of James's account of the progress of the universe.

<sup>65</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, 123; *Pragmatism*, 142-43.

<sup>66</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, 133-34, 136.

<sup>67</sup> See James, *Pragmatism*, 136-37.

<sup>68</sup> See James, *Pragmatism*, 136-37; James, *Will to Believe*, 138-40.

<sup>69</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, 445.

<sup>70</sup> James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 115.

<sup>71</sup> See James, *Principles*, 1221–22.

<sup>72</sup> McDermott, 7.

<sup>73</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, 445.

<sup>74</sup> James, *Essays in Psychology*, 144.

<sup>75</sup> James, *Principles*, 185.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 191. Emphasis in original.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 191–93.

<sup>79</sup> See James, *Essays in Psychology*, 145–46; James, *Principles*, 193–95, 434–35, 651–53; James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 135; etc. For another take on how James’s reflections on the nature of observation affected his understanding of science, see Gavin, “William James’s Philosophy of Science,” 413–20. Gavin employs considerations about the role of observation (specifically the role that the observer’s subjective interest has on his or her preferred scientific hypotheses) to argue that James’s implicit philosophy of science was distinctly anti-positivistic and anti-Baconian. While Gavin discusses this in relation to theoretical entities such as atoms, electrons, etc., he does not extend this to the complexion of the future.

<sup>80</sup> Jammer, *Conceptual Development of Quantum Mechanics*, 184.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 366–67.

<sup>84</sup> There is much dispute over whether or to what extent Bohr was influenced by James on this point. Key to this debate is whether Bohr read James prior to 1932. Jammer, Henry Folse, and others claim that Bohr had read James while he was a student at the University of Copenhagen around 1904 (Jammer, *Conceptual Development*, 184; Folse, *The Philosophy of Niels Bohr*, 49–51); David Kaiser notes that Bohr himself suggested that this was the

case. (Kaiser, “More Roots of Complementarity,” 224–25.) However, even if Bohr had read James early in his career, this does not necessarily mean that James was a direct or even significant influence. According to Kaiser, the consensus view is that Bohr’s exposure to James in his early career was filtered through Bohr’s philosophy professor, Harald Høffding, making any influence murky (Ibid., 225n.). Given the inconclusiveness of the debate and its peripheral importance to my present argument, I will note the similarity but not make any further commitment to the connection with Bohr.

I also suggest that James’s work has found favor with more recent quantum physicists, and thus there appears to be the possibility of a fruitful exchange. See Stapp, *Mind, Matter, and Quantum Mechanics*, 131–34, 227–28.

<sup>85</sup> See Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, esp. 126–27.

<sup>86</sup> See Feyerabend, *Against Method*, esp. 46–60.

<sup>87</sup> See Code, *Rhetorical Spaces*, esp. 23–57.

<sup>88</sup> James, *Manuscript Essays and Notes*, 40.

<sup>89</sup> James, *Will to Believe*, 119–20.

<sup>90</sup> Beard, “James and the Rationality of Determinism,” 150.

# IN SEARCH OF A MORAL EQUIVALENT OF WAR: AN INTRODUCTION

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Conference Proceedings: “The Life and Afterlife of William James’s ‘The Moral Equivalent of War’: Contexts, Reception, Legacy.” Presented at Society for US Intellectual History on Saturday, 28 October 2017, Dallas, Texas. Panelists: Marilyn Fischer, Trygve Throntveit, and Paul Croce. Comments by Alexander Livingston. Chaired by John Kaag.





**W**illiam James's essay, "The Moral Equivalent of War," has inspired, provoked, and baffled readers for over a century. An artifact of a nineteenth-century world not yet shattered by the horrors of trench warfare, the existential threat of nuclear annihilation, or consolidation of the military-industrial complex, the essay has surprisingly remained a beacon for a dizzying array of projects and proposals for waging war against war. Dramatic arts, farming, missionary service, nonviolent direct action, and space travel are only some of the many proposals for moral equivalents of war the essay has provoked.<sup>1</sup> It has been claimed as the inspiration for Franklin Delano Roosevelt's creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps as well as for Benito Mussolini's Battle for Grain.<sup>2</sup> Few other works of self-professed utopian speculation can claim such direct, enduring, and diverse real world influence.

The essay's vibrant and contested uptake as a practical proposal is all the more striking for the contrast with its scholarly reception. "The Moral Equivalent of War" is often described as an admirable but "weak" attempt to apply the insights of pragmatism to politics.<sup>3</sup> In the words of Gerald Myers, its proposal for abolishing war is "naïve" and "could never function as the panacea that James claimed it to be."<sup>4</sup> More pointedly, even sympathetic readers have concluded that James's proposal is myopic for its simple account of the causes of war, elitist for its singular focus on educating the "luxurious class," chauvinistic for its romanticization of manliness, and ecologically catastrophic for its celebration of channeling aggression into a war against nature.<sup>5</sup> If the essay has had such capacious influence in the century since its publication, it is perhaps, as John Dewey suggested, due more to its suggestive title than to James's substantive ideas about abolishing war.<sup>6</sup>

The essays collected in this symposium reconsider "The Moral Equivalent of War" with a hundred years' hindsight. Each offers a critical perspective on what's living and what's dead in James's essay for confronting the challenges of war and politics in the twenty-first century. All three look beyond the familiar portrayal of "The Moral Equivalent of War" as James's "one weighty essay

devoted to a political theme” to reconsider it in light of the renewed scholarly attention to James’s long-overlooked contributions as a political philosopher.<sup>7</sup> A new generation of scholarship has debunked the old common sense that, in the words of Cornel West, “James has nothing profound or even provocative to say” about politics.<sup>8</sup>

One reason James’s political philosophy has received such scant study until recently is the slight attention political institutions receive in his work. “James,” M.C. Otto observed, “treated certain important social facts as he might have brushed against strangers in a crowd.”<sup>9</sup> The very idea of a *moral* equivalent of war, in contrast to a *political* response to the dangers of militarism through international organizations, might seem to endorse Otto’s conclusion. But as Marilyn Fischer shows in her erudite contribution, reading “The Moral Equivalent for War” in historical context reveals that James saw his moral equivalent as a compliment to pacifist demands for a legal system of international arbitration rather than its alternative. Indeed, Fischer demonstrates how the essay’s very form models the case for conciliation that united critics of war at the turn of the century. Trygve Throntveit similarly illustrates how James’s essay contains a model for the role of institutions in a pragmatist polity. But if institutions play a greater role in James’s vision for a world without war than has previously been noticed, so too does the essay hold lessons for the limits of strictly institutional approaches to politics. Paul Croce argues that the essay’s lesson for peace in the Middle East is its call to attend to the ethical aspects of reconciliation if political disagreement is to avoid spiraling out of control into recrimination and violence.

The necessity and insufficiency of institutional mechanisms for securing peace or social change point towards another frequently misunderstood facet of James’s political thought. If institutions remain in the background of James’s writings, it was because the psychic life of power and its practical consequences for politics lay in the forefront. “The Moral Equivalent of War” cuts a path between, on the one hand, the pious moralism of Christian pacifists

like Leo Tolstoy who simply denounced the evils of militarism and, on the other, the scientific rationalism of Andrew Carnegie with his faith that humanity was fated to evolve beyond warfare, to underscore the deepest sources of human aggression and the challenge of devising a realistic political response to war that takes men as they are—not as they might be. “We must cheat our foe, politically circumvent his action,” James told the World Peace Congress in 1904, “not try to change his nature.”<sup>10</sup> Each essay included here examines how elements of James’s radical empiricist psychology, such as instinct (Fischer), the social self (Throntveit), and attention (Croce), inform his distinctive approach to politics. The authors in this symposium disagree, however, as to whether or not James’s politicization of psychology and psychologization of politics offer us valuable optics on power and persuasion. Throntveit and Croce each find critical insights in James’s psychological approach for responding to cycles of violence, while Fischer worries that focusing narrowly on the psychological dimensions of war reduces the search for a moral equivalent to a merely “a niche problem” once institutions for arbitration are secured.

This brings us to the third and thorniest element of James’s political thought these essays touch on. James was an unapologetic admirer of the strenuous life: the manly life of risk, adventure, and effort. This is the vision of the good life Theodore Roosevelt sought to embody in his charge up San Juan Hill and in his plea for white Americans to embrace the duty of colonial rule over their emerging global empire. It is therefore puzzling that James, an avowed pacifist and anti-imperialist, would share the militarist’s vision of the good life and seek to repurpose it for pacifist ends. Fischer argues that this craving for strenuousness is an artifact of a Gilded Age anxiety about elite cultural degeneration that no longer speaks to our contemporary moment. If so, then is “the Moral Equivalent of War”—and by extension James’s political philosophy—simply a curio of a bygone historical era with nothing to teach us today? Throntveit challenges this way of framing the issue. His essay argues that the social self’s desire for esteem lies

at the root of the hunger for war to consider how this same drive can serve contemporary projects of civic renewal in higher education. Croce similarly offers a competing reading of the essay's diagnosis of war that foregrounds the continuing value of cultivating virtues of disciplined self-control as a "psychological prelude" to political engagement in divided societies.<sup>11</sup>

James's world is not ours. "The Moral Equivalent of War" is the artifact of an elite antiwar movement animated by a faith in civilizational progress towards perpetual peace that a century of total wars has disabused us of. The essay's canonization in the archive of American antiwar writing has created an "aura" around it, Fischer notes, that obscures the distance separating it from the realities of modern warfare. She echoes Dewey's conclusion that James would have profoundly revised his account had he witnessed the barbarity of the First World War.<sup>12</sup> Yet it is precisely because of the distance separating past and future that we ought to return to "The Moral Equivalent of War." That the United States is currently engaged in a project of endless war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, Niger, and elsewhere around the globe; that conservatives from David Brooks to Steve Bannon continue to bemoan the emasculating "softness" engendered by consumer culture and celebrate the exercise of American military abroad as a source of civic regeneration; that global antiwar movements are the weakest now that they have been in decades; that we need now, more than ever, an alternative to warfare as an accelerating climate crisis renders old borders and boundaries increasingly unstable; we would do well to continue thinking with and against James's bold and inspiring proposal for a world without war.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See MacKaye, "A Potential Substitute"; Clark, "Farming as a Moral Equivalent"; Cavert, "Missionary Enterprise"; Horsburgh, *Non-Violence and Aggression*; Hoffman, "The Moral Equivalent of War?"

<sup>2</sup> Myers, *William James*, 444; Stewart, "The Mentors of Mussolini," 864–65.

<sup>3</sup> Cotkin, *William James*, 150.

<sup>4</sup> Myers, *William James*, 444.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that the essay is without its defenders. For thoughtful responses to these charges see Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition* and Kaag, "A Call to Arms?"

<sup>6</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 79.

<sup>7</sup> Westbrook, *Democratic Hope*, 53–54. Key contributions to this emerging body of scholarship include *inter alia* Miller, *Democratic Temperament*; Koopman, “Politics of Personal Freedom”; Ferguson, *William James*; Albrecht, *Reconstructing Individualism*; Throntveit, *William James*; Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!*; Bush, *Democratic Individuality*; Rondel, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*. This recent body of literature builds on the earlier groundbreaking contributions by Cotkin, *William James* and Coon, “One Moment in the World’s Salvation.”

<sup>8</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Otto, “On a Certain Blindness in William James,” 188.

<sup>10</sup> James, “Remarks at the Peace Banquet,” 122.

<sup>11</sup> I offer a response to this question that charts a path different from those pursued by the essays included here in Livingston “*In Extremis*.”

<sup>12</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 80.

# “THE MORAL EQUIVALENT OF WAR”: WILLIAM JAMES’S MINOR VARIATION ON COMMON THEMES

*MARILYN FISCHER*



Unlike other scholars who interpret William James’s “The Moral Equivalent of War” in light of the author’s other writings, I read the essay as James’s contribution to conversations being held within the pre-World War One international peace movement. The essay shares the vocabulary, images, and patterns of reasoning widely employed by others in the movement. James’s analysis of violence described a standard frame of mind at that time. Like many of his contemporaries, he assumed that war had contributed to social cohesion and strenuousness in the past, but that this was no longer the case. Like them, he assumed “civilized nations” were moving into a socialist future without war. His specific proposal to enlist young men to fight against nature was not original. Reading James’s essay through this lens demonstrates that it was at best a minor variation on commonly held themes.





James must have had fun writing “The Moral Equivalent of War.” For such a ponderous topic, the essay’s dominant tone is playful. James pokes at the militarists and mockingly toys with his main interlocutors, barely hinting how much he agrees with them. The essay’s few nervous undertones reflect anxieties widely shared at that particular point in time. James was a master rhetorician; his ability to shape his speeches for specific audiences contributed greatly to his popularity as a public lecturer.<sup>1</sup> James prepared the contents of “The Moral Equivalent of War” for organizations central to the pre-World War One international peace movement. In the nineteen-aughts, members of this large, vigorous movement held conferences, formed international associations, and generated much literature.<sup>2</sup> James wrote the essay as a participant in this movement, where the images and patterns of reasoning he employed were common currency. He presented preliminary versions at the Thirteenth Universal Peace Conference held in Boston in 1904, and in a 1906 speech to Stanford University students, commissioned by the Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration. The essay was published in 1910 as a pamphlet for the American branch of *Conciliation Internationale*.<sup>3</sup>

Scholars typically approach the essay by reconstructing its argument and interpreting it in light of James’s other writings. This approach leads to misreadings of the text because it omits a preliminary step. The essay’s philosophical content cannot be identified until after the essay is placed in the context of the peace movement’s discussion about war and peace. While the essay contains argument, its central argument is not contained in the text. Some of its definitions and premises were so widely shared that there was no need to give them more than passing reference. What today sound like key philosophical moves were sometimes insider jokes or rhetorical flourishes for generating emotional energy. My reading reveals that James’s essay, while clever and vivid, was at best a minor variation on common themes. This reading demonstrates that recent assessments of the essay are overblown

when they describe James's "infectious and innovative" approach that presents his "boldest idea for a pragmatist political institution."<sup>4</sup>

I begin with the essay's title and then organize my discussion around the three sections that constitute the essay's form. Contemporary commentators have not viewed the essay as having this form, but doing so is critical to interpreting it. The form was a familiar one, used most notably in essays titled "War" by Emerson, Ruskin, and Zola.<sup>5</sup> The form's timeline and categories were articulated by Herbert Spencer in *Principles of Sociology* and served as scaffolding for peace advocates' debates.<sup>6</sup> In the past, Spencer writes, war was a necessary engine for human progress. He felt that this is no longer the case. Civilized nations, that is, the advanced nations of Europe, Great Britain's settler colonies, and the United States, have now reached the point that wars among themselves can only be regressive. Spencer predicts that in the future, wars between civilized nations would cease.<sup>7</sup> James's essay conforms to this pattern. It begins in the dark past (on instincts and memory), moves to the mixed present (where James makes the militarists' case), and predicts a brighter future (James's statement of his own position). His purpose in writing "The Moral Equivalent of War" was not to theorize violence or argue for pacifism. James's aim was to find a way to "conciliate" remaining and potential militarists to the fact that war was becoming a thing of the past.

#### **THE TITLE: "THE MORAL EQUIVALENT OF WAR"**

The essay's title is a catchy variation on a popular phrase. Throughout the nineteenth century, many people found the term, "moral equivalent," useful for a range of purposes. In 1844, Rev. Hubbard Winslow explained that Jesus's atonement was "a full moral equivalent for the penalty due to sinners."<sup>8</sup> Hepworth Dixon didn't think capital crimes such as "breaking a hop-band or cutting down a tree" were moral equivalents of death.<sup>9</sup> Charles and Carrie Thwing agreed with the legal standard that divorce should only be granted in cases of "adultery or its moral equivalent."<sup>10</sup>

James's addition of "war" to "moral equivalent" is the first I've found. In *Varieties of Religious Experience* James writes,

What we now need to discover in the social realm is the moral equivalent of war: something heroic that will speak to men as universally as war does, and yet will be as compatible with their spiritual selves as war has proved itself to be incompatible.<sup>11</sup>

He proposes voluntary poverty as a strenuous moral equivalent. Others quickly proposed their own moral equivalents of war, including children's play when appropriately directed, being as athletic in one's Christianity as the Old Testament prophets, and for the "army of the Lord" to fight "ignorance, cruelty, selfishness, and disease" while evangelizing the world.<sup>12</sup>

#### **THE PAST: INSTINCTS AND MEMORIES**

In 1910, James turned from voluntary poverty as war's moral equivalent to the question of war itself. He begins the essay by describing how in early tribal times, instincts of pugnacity and love of glory operated in males at full force as they hunted, killed, and looted other tribes. Ancient Greek wars were wars of plunder. James quotes Thucydides on how the Athenians' cruelty gave them dominance over the Meleans, and comments,

We inherit the warlike type; and for most of the capacity of heroism of which the human race is full we have to thank this cruel history. . . . Our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow, and thousands of years of peace won't breed it out of us.<sup>13</sup>

Through all this breeding humans acquired capacities for strenuous endeavor and social cohesion.

James's account assumes, with Spencer, that human history is the story of civilization's evolution from the stage of savagery to

its present-day achievements. Theorists after Spencer paired their understanding of civilization's history with evolutionary psychology. James's *Principles of Psychology* played a central role in turning psychology into an evolutionary and experimental science, replacing the old Lockean introspective model. These theorists regarded primitive instincts as an inheritance from our animal ancestors. They are sturdily embedded in the human psyche and provide the energy that fuels action. The capacity to reason, a more recent evolutionary acquisition, in itself lacks the power to oppose destructive instincts or to motivate action.<sup>14</sup> The history of civilization is the very long story of humans developing habits, customs, and cultures through which social and sympathetic instincts, with reason's aid, came to channel destructive instincts along constructive pathways.

James's account of human instincts in "Moral Equivalent" differs from versions by his peers only in its one-sidedness. He omits the contributions of the social and sympathetic instincts that others discussed at length and that he had discussed in *Principles of Psychology*.<sup>15</sup> There, James writes that humans have all the instincts that lower animals have, and more.<sup>16</sup> Many of these instincts can be roughly sorted into two categories: destructive instincts of "jealousy and antagonism" and constructive instincts of "sociability and helpfulness."<sup>17</sup> While instincts themselves are reflexive responses to stimuli, the organism's experiences shape its specific responses, with reason making its contribution.<sup>18</sup> Instincts persist when they become attached to habits; without such attachment, instincts are apt to fade away. In humans, the "fighting and the chasing instincts" are among the most primitive, and thus, especially "hard to eradicate."<sup>19</sup> But, James writes, they can be "inhibited by sympathy, and by reflection calling up impulses of an opposite kind, civilized men lose the habit of acting out their pugnacious instincts in a perfectly natural way."<sup>20</sup>

James's account in "Moral Equivalent" of how memory preserves war ideals also suffers from one-sidedness. In *Principles of Psychology* James clarifies that memory is not sheer recall. A memory is a complex object in which "perception, imagination,

comparison and reasoning” are all synthesized together.<sup>21</sup> These elements function as “hooks” of associations on “which [a memory] hangs,” creating “a network of attachments by which it is woven into the entire tissue of our thought.”<sup>22</sup> In “Moral Equivalent,” James writes that memories of war from ancient times to the U.S. Civil War formed such a network and constituted “a sacred spiritual possession” for many. These memories hook onto ideals of courage, self-sacrifice, and strenuous endeavor, and so, James notes, quoting Shakespeare, we remember Brutus as “the noblest Roman of them all.”<sup>23</sup> Memories and ideals lie deep, too entangled to be dislodged by rational objections to war.<sup>24</sup>

Again, James’s text omits what his audience knew well, that Greek literature contains an ambiguous mix of war images. At a time when the classics were standard educational fare, James’s contemporaries could also hook their Civil War memories onto ancient images of war’s victims. Their memories would have retained the lament of Hecuba, the Trojan queen, from Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*. As she held her murdered grandson, she cried,

“ . . . Tis I,  
 Old, homeless, childless, that for thee must shed  
 Cold tears, so young, so miserably dead. . . .  
 O vain is man,  
 Who glorieth in his joy and hath no fears:  
 While to and from the chances of the years  
 Dance like an idiot in the wind!”  
 The chorus replies:  
 “Mother of misery,  
 Give Death his song!  
 Aye and bitterly  
 We too weep for thee,  
 And the infinite wrong!”<sup>25</sup>

James’s contemporaries could agree with him that “our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow,” but they

also knew that our ancestors had bred images of war's incalculable pain into our bone and marrow, as well.

James's contemporaries could fill in what his essay's text omitted. The single-focused ferocity of the essay's opening may have served as a rhetorical cue that a reversal was about to take place. Decades earlier, art critic John Ruskin had opened his famous anti-war address by thundering that all great art has come from battle-hardened, warring nations; this was declared just before he directed equal thunder at war's barbarity.<sup>26</sup>

### THE PRESENT: THE MILITARIST'S CASE

For James, civilized peoples are no longer in the age of plunder. Reason has done its work, at least partially. James writes that "reflective criticism" has reshaped "civilized opinion," leaving civilized people with "a sort of double personality," as war-linked instincts and ideals encoded in memory still tug within an individual's psyche. This double personality also maps onto what James calls the "peace-party" and the "war-party."<sup>27</sup> He identifies himself with the peace-party and calls himself a "pacifist."<sup>28</sup>

In the nineteenth-aughts, pacifism and its cognates were new words. *Pacifisme* entered the movement when Emile Arnaud uttered it at the 1901 Universal Peace Congress in Glasgow.<sup>29</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary's* first entry for *pacifist* is from 1906. People who sought to reduce the occasions for war were called pacifists.<sup>30</sup> In 1908, the *Temps* of Paris dubbed Theodore Roosevelt, of Rough Rider fame, "a true pacifist" for his work on a treaty between the U.S. and Japan.<sup>31</sup> The 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica* begins its very lengthy entry on peace by stating that peace no longer simply refers to the absence of war. Peace now refers to active efforts to set up mechanisms for resolving international disputes, thereby avoiding war. As evidence, the entry includes long lists of arbitration treaties established between May 1903 and June 1910, as well as international agreements regarding customs, monetary systems, etc.<sup>32</sup>

James's essay and its preliminary versions assume this expansive definition of pacifism. James never mentions moral or

religious absolute prohibitions on the use of violence, which came to define the term after World War One.<sup>33</sup> The 1904 Universal Peace Congress where James gave the first version of the essay was full of talk about conciliation and arbitration. The Congress was indeed universal in that it was an international gathering of the peace-party's most august members. Its Vice-Presidents represented seventeen countries.<sup>34</sup> Six past and future Nobel Peace Prize recipients attended; of these, Bertha von Suttner and Jane Addams each addressed the Congress three times.<sup>35</sup> Many in attendance were international lawyers and businesspeople, working to create a legal regime of treaties and arbitration methods for settling international disputes.<sup>36</sup>

In his address to the Peace Congress, James described human bellicosity in vivid terms, but reassured the audience that while reason is feeble, its effects over time have been additive in gradually bringing human behavior under control. Keep the army and navy, James recommends, and let people's imaginations thrill at the prospect of war. Meanwhile, "organize in every conceivable way the practical machinery for making each successive chance of war abortive. Put peace men in power, educate the editors and statesmen to responsibility. . . . Seize every pretext, however small, for arbitration methods."<sup>37</sup> With these in place, James predicts, one would find that incidents that might lead to war had "managed to evaporate."<sup>38</sup> The main point of his address, like that of many others at the Congress, was to reinforce the call for arbitration.

James and the internationalists in the audience shared Spencer's belief that the use of violence among civilized nations was diminishing and that peaceful relations among them were becoming a reality.<sup>39</sup> To these internationalists, the history of civilization was a story of the gradual substitution of law for force. At the Congress, Professor Ludwig Quidde, a member of the German parliament and future Nobel Peace Prize recipient, and Dr. W. Evans Darby of the British Peace Society summarized the historical background leading to this moment. Among early clans the "right of the feud" was an accepted use of violence. During the Medieval, era lords and kings established legal proceedings for

settling private disputes, and in the following centuries, elaborate systems of policing, adjudication, and punishment were codified. While interpersonal violence was not eliminated, it was brought under systems of legal control. The challenge for James's generation was to establish similar mechanisms for controlling violence among nation-states, thus substituting law for force in the international arena.<sup>40</sup> In his address at Stanford University James again recommended arbitration treaties to tamp down the impulses to war.<sup>41</sup>

James and his contemporaries defined war in terms of organized violence among civilized nations.<sup>42</sup> The use of violence by a great power to control its colonies was considered a domestic matter, akin to internal policing. The British used the term "punitive expeditions" to refer to military operations in their colonies to subdue tribes that did not accept their rule. This explains the seemingly odd remark with which James concluded his Universal Peace Congress address.

The last weak runnings of the war spirit will be "punitive expeditions." A country that turns its arms only against uncivilized foes is, I think, wrongly taunted as degenerate. . . . It has a conscience. It will still perpetrate peccadillos. But it is afraid, afraid in the good sense, to engage in absolute crimes against civilization.<sup>43</sup>

Just a few minutes earlier, the audience had heard Booker T. Washington describe Belgian atrocities in the Congo. I imagine Washington was not pleased to hear such actions described as mere "peccadillos."<sup>44</sup>

In keeping with his contemporaries' understanding of pacifism as seeking alternatives to war for settling disputes, James states in "Moral Equivalent" that his aim is to find "the most promising line of conciliation" between the peace-party and the war-party.<sup>45</sup> He reveals his rhetorical strategy for doing so in a fleeting reference to essayist John Jay Chapman's advice to "move the point."<sup>46</sup> The



phrase comes from Chapman's discussion of Friedrich Froebel's method of education in which Chapman writes, "The human organism responds in kind. Strike a man and he strikes, sneer and he sneers, forget and he forgets. If you wish to convince him that you are right, concede that from his point of view he is right, then move the point and he follows."<sup>47</sup> This is just what James does. He impersonates members of the war-party, presents their case for militarism, and then slides them right over into the peace-party. Commentators who read the essay as a straight presentation of James's views miss all the fun he has impersonating the militarists. His contemporaries had the background knowledge that enabled them to recognize James's humor.

Now, James's militarists are not bloodthirsty plunderers; they are civilized. He calls them "reflective apologists."<sup>48</sup> This is consistent with the widely held belief that civilized people, even militarists, had gotten their pugnacious instincts fairly well under reason's control. The essay's final two sentences, while offensive, make this point clearly.

The amount of alteration in public opinion that my utopia postulates is vastly less than the difference between the mentality of those black warriors who pursued Stanley's party on the Congo with their cannibal war-cry of "Meat! meat!" and that of the "general-staff" of any civilized nation. History has seen the latter interval bridged over: the former one can be bridged over much more easily.<sup>49</sup>

James here assumes that his earliest ancestors lived much as these Africans still lived.<sup>50</sup> He thought the distance between himself and the civilized militarists was far less than that between Stanley and these Africans. While James opens the essay stating that "the war against war" will be "no holiday excursion or camping party," he did not think it would be all that hard.<sup>51</sup>

James couldn't resist having a bit of fun by making Homer Lea his primary exemplar of a contemporary militarist. He bypasses the

well-known and far weightier German militarists such as Moltke, Bismarck, Bernhardi, and Treischke.<sup>52</sup> James gives three paragraphs to Homer Lea, whose recently published book, *The Valor of Ignorance*, was, at that moment, providing much copy for the scaremongers.<sup>53</sup> Lea warned that the Japanese had the desire and the military capability to gobble up the Philippines and Hawaii, and waltz across the U.S.'s defenseless West Coast, all in less than a month. Short, thin, and sickly, Lea was rejected by the U.S. army. He went to China, somehow got "Lieutenant-General" appended to his name, and tried to raise an army to reinstate the deposed Chinese Emperor.<sup>54</sup> Military leaders derided Lea's book, *The Independent* mocked its "highfalutin' style," and the Lake Mohonk Conference thought that "irresponsible . . . demagogues" like Lea posed a much greater danger to the U.S. than did Japan.<sup>55</sup>

In his guise as militarist, James also pokes fun at his intellectual counterparts with whom he largely agrees. His main interlocutors in the essay are American economist Simon Patten and English political theorist G. Lowes Dickinson. In keeping with the loose documentation practices of the time, James casually drops their names once and then engages in repartee with them throughout the essay without naming them again.<sup>56</sup> For example, James's militarists would be so offended by Patten's advocacy of a "pleasure-economy," that they might mistakenly think it recommended lives of self-indulgent amusement. These militarists would find Dickinson's "exquisite dialogue" among an aristocrat, a laissez-faire banker, and a socialistic professor "mawkish and dishwatery," just as James said.<sup>57</sup> James's claim that "merciless scorn" for inferiors is "the keynote of the military temper," matches what Dickinson's professor tries to get the aristocrat to admit—that he holds Nietzschean contempt for the weak.<sup>58</sup> The aristocrat demurs, fancying himself more philosopher-king than *Übermensch*.

James gives a few paragraphs to a certifiably serious militarist, the Dutch ethnologist, geographer, and sociologist Sebald Rudolf Steinmetz.<sup>59</sup> Here James tucks in what he did not need to explain to his audience, that "militarism" refers to the view that "war . . . is

the essential form of the state.”<sup>60</sup> This statement, though brief, is key to understanding discussions of war and peace before World War One, and key to decoding James’s essay. The contrary of “militarism” is not “pacifism,” but “industrialism.” The terms originated with Auguste Comte, who used them to structure his sociology.<sup>61</sup> Herbert Spencer gave them contemporary currency by placing them within an evolutionary frame and using them as names for sociological types of societies. Spencer writes that a militarist society is organized primarily to defend itself against external attacks. Its social institutions, including religion, governance, the economy, and the household are all hierarchically ordered, like the military itself. By contrast, an industrial society is organized principally for the benefit of its own members. Relations in governance, the economy, and the household are voluntary and characterized by free exchanges. Here “industrial” refers to forms of social relations through which activities, including economic production, take place. It should not be confused with “industrialized,” or the use of machinery in production. Spencer points to the “Esquimaux,” living in virtual isolation, as having a near-perfect industrial society.<sup>62</sup>

Now we see why James could put the words of Dickinson’s aristocrat into the militarists’ mouths. “Militarism” names the family of hierarchically ordered societies to which aristocracies belong. Because a democracy is based on consent, it is not inherently structured by social hierarchies, and thus cannot be militarist by definition. This does not preclude a nation’s having a military and being willing to use it.<sup>63</sup> Pre-World War One peace advocates were trying to move the arena of international relations from militarism, in which disputes are resolved by force, to industrialism, where disputes are addressed through negotiation and adjudication.

#### **THE FUTURE: A PEACEFUL, SOCIALISTIC STATE**

James makes his own position perfectly clear. He calls militarism “nonsense” and asserts that war has become “absurd and impossible from its own monstrosities.”<sup>64</sup> He agrees with the

widely disseminated view of Polish economist Jean de Bloch who had published six volumes of statistical data covering every aspect of war between industrialized nations. Bloch concluded that victory in any conventional sense was now impossible, for neither side could escape absolute catastrophe.<sup>65</sup> James continues, "I devoutly believe in the ultimate reign of peace and in the gradual advent of some sort of a socialistic equilibrium. . . . I look forward to a future when acts of war shall be formally outlawed among civilized peoples."<sup>66</sup> Like Patten and Dickinson, he places his vision of the future within some sort of a collectivist or socialistic frame.<sup>67</sup>

James doesn't explain what he means by his anticipated socialistic future. Of the many versions of socialism prevalent at the time, James's seems closest to some of the British variants. Rejecting Marxist interpretations, their proponents told the story of political and social evolution from feudalism toward democracy. The late eighteenth century revolutions signaled the advent of political democracy. Democracy in industry had begun to evolve with the rise of labor unions. Democracy was now evolving in the social arena as municipalities assumed responsibility for sanitation, utilities, local transportation, public health, and education. These versions of socialism advocated a guaranteed, decent standard of living for all. The aim was to enable all of society's members to become creative, flourishing contributors to the health of the whole community.<sup>68</sup> This description echoes the view presented by Dickinson's socialist professor, who simply calls his position "democracy."

James was not worried about how to end war; that was in the process of being taken care of. What he and the militarists worried about was degeneration, particularly into "effeminacy and unmanliness."<sup>69</sup> James's masculinist fears fit within a larger conversation among Victorians, whose optimism about civilization's progress hovered over deep insecurities.<sup>70</sup> They feared civilization's very success would also lead to its downfall. Ruskin describes this fear at the mid-point of his war essay, just before pivoting from immoral wars to honorable ones.

We talk of peace and learning, and of peace and plenty, and of peace and civilization; but I found those were not the words which the Muse of History coupled together; that, on her lips, the words were—peace and sensuality, peace and selfishness, peace and corruption, peace and death.<sup>71</sup>

Biological research reinforced Victorian anxiety. In *Degeneration*, English zoologist Edwin Ray Lankester projected from his study of marine parasites that the upper classes were “tending to the condition of intellectual barnacles” as they became increasingly parasitic on the laboring class.<sup>72</sup>

James acknowledges the two aspects of this fear of degeneration—the loss of social cohesion and loss of capacity for strenuousness. The militarists maintained that these aspects are avoided when pugnacious instincts are both disciplined and released through military activity. At this point, remember James’s self-assigned task in the essay—to conciliate the militarists to the peace-party. How can he assuage the militarists’ feelings of loss at the coming socialistic peace? How can he assure them that they needn’t fear degeneration? This is where James, in Chapman’s words, “moves the point.” To shape his appeal to the militarists’ sensibilities, James adapts ideas from Patten and Dickinson and adds a reference to H.G. Wells. In signaling his agreement with these theorists, James compresses vast swathes of theorizing into a few phrases, in order to avoid losing sight of his primary objective of conciliating the militarists.

Right after stating his own position, James concedes that “a permanently successful peace-economy cannot be a simple pleasure-economy,” and that “martial virtues” must provide a peace-economy’s “enduring cement.”<sup>73</sup> Yet the peace-economy he goes on to describe is precisely Patten’s pleasure-economy, minus the label. Throughout human history, Patten writes, people have lived in a “pain or deficit economy” in which poverty was inescapable. Poverty is like war—it exacerbates the destructive

instincts of pugnacity, fear, and hostility. The poor live with the “sheer animal terror” that food scarcity provokes. Poverty represses the “constructive instincts,” which, if released, could inspire imaginative responses to problems and foster generosity toward others.<sup>74</sup> Patten surveys recent advances in agriculture, transportation, and labor-saving machinery as evidence that we are no longer condemned to scarcity, but can move into a “pleasure and surplus economy.”<sup>75</sup> Restating his position in Spencer’s vocabulary, Patten notes, “The military state is gradually being displaced by the industrial state.” Patten proposes to abolish poverty by public guarantees of a decent standard of life and employment. This will release creativity and a spirit of cooperation and generosity, all characteristics of a genuine democracy.<sup>76</sup> In the process the old habits and ideals of scarcity will drop away. Patten notes, for example, that “service-altruism,” or voluntary charity to the poor, will become unnecessary, replaced by “income-altruism,” as people cheerfully pay taxes to support adequate material provisioning for all.<sup>77</sup> If James disagrees with Patten at all, it may be in wishing Patten had paid more attention to what James calls “martial virtues.”

James does say that his vision is “an infinitely remote utopia just now,” but other statements indicate that the process is well underway. Individuals, James writes, increasingly feel “civic passion” replacing military passion. Priests and doctors already exhibit virtues of self-sacrifice for the common good. Only a spark of “skilful (sic) propagandism,” James notes, is needed to light up the “whole population.”<sup>78</sup> In James’s peace-economy, as in Patten’s pleasure-economy, social cohesion can be achieved by replacing military honor with civic honor as the collectivity’s glue.

James’s proposal for how to avoid degeneration while on the path toward a peaceful, socialistic future is designed to ensure that no males can escape strenuous toil. He begins by saying that “the whole youthful population” should be conscripted to fight against nature. They should work in coalmines, foundries, and on fishing fleets, build skyscrapers and roads, and wash dishes, clothes, and windows. However, it becomes clear that James’s primary concern

is that privileged males—he calls them “gilded youth”—should have these experiences in order to pay their “blood-tax” and have “their childishness knocked out” of them.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps James assumes that future military and political leaders, those who would direct the nation toward or away from militarism, would be drawn from the ranks of gilded youth. One can ask, though, whether the majority of citizens, those who spend their lives digging and building and washing, would ever finish paying off their “blood tax.”<sup>80</sup>

James’s proposal to turn the fight against other people into a fight against nature was not original. English biologist Alfred Russel Wallace observed in 1899 that the martial virtues of “heroism and self-sacrifice” could be acquired outside of the military. He proposed organizing “great industrial armies” and employing them “in that great war which man is ever waging against Nature.”<sup>81</sup> English economist John Hobson replied to C.H. Pearson’s worry that without war, civilized people will lose their capacity for strenuousness. Hobson stated that as people become more highly civilized, they turn their energies to struggling with the environment rather than with other peoples.<sup>82</sup> We might grit our teeth at others who made the same proposal. Geologist and former slave-owner Joseph Le Conte, in his thoroughly racist book, *The Race Problem in the South* (1892), proposed that peoples of European and of African descent be separated geographically and allowed to develop on their own without outside interference. In this way, people’s “combative instincts” would be redirected toward nature, rather than against other people.<sup>83</sup>

After making his specific proposal, James again “moves the point” in his crystalline statement, “I believe as he does.”<sup>84</sup> This follows a long quotation from *First and Last Things: A Confession of Faith and Rule of Life*, by H.G. Wells. It is a gorgeous book—quite Jamesian, only calmer. Wells thinks that every individual’s distinctiveness matters, even when that individual is the “wheel-smashed frog in the road and the fly drowning in the milk.”<sup>85</sup> His image of socialism reads like an elaboration of James’s conception of the social self.<sup>86</sup> Rejecting Marxism and technocratic versions of

Fabian socialism, Wells identifies socialism with the awakening of collective consciousness, an awareness that we are all parts of each other, as our biology and our very thoughts partake in the same flow of life.<sup>87</sup>

The most important sentence in the passage from which James quotes is the sentence he cuts out. Wells's paragraph begins, "In many ways, war is the most socialistic of all forces."<sup>88</sup> Viewed internally, the military is already structured the way Wells—and James, Patten, and Dickinson—anticipate the coming socialist society will be. For those inside the military, food and employment are guaranteed, ego-enhancing stimuli are diminished, and identification with the interests of the whole is encouraged. Social cohesion is thus achieved.<sup>89</sup> James's proposal to enlist youth in a fight against nature reads like a version of what H.G. Wells claims European countries were already accomplishing through universal military service.

This gives another reason why James does not think it will be all that hard to conciliate militarists with the peace-party. The author acknowledges that life in the barracks is "very congruous with ancestral human nature."<sup>90</sup> Within the barracks, soldiers' constructive instincts are already organized into habits and patterns of daily life that are congruent with a peaceful, socialistic future. For James's militarists, conciliation is simply a matter of detaching memories from the war ideals and hooking them to ideals of peace.

Thus, James's proposal is not a moral equivalent *for* war; that was being taken care of by international lawyers and the intense efforts at social reconstruction by those on Patten's list—social settlements, industrial cooperatives, and labor unions.<sup>91</sup> James's variation is minor because it addresses a niche problem, that of conciliating the militarists by asking them to transfer their well-honed habits of strenuousness and social cohesion from ideals of war to ideals of peace. The militarists' need is psychological and can be serviced in other ways than war. James's essay complements what he recommended at the Universal Peace Congress a few years before. Don't try to argue the militarists out



of their beliefs, but organize society so that the need for military action “manage[s] to evaporate.”<sup>92</sup>

Is that it? Is James’s moral equivalent of war just a conciliation tactic? A way to get gilded youth tempted by militarism to move their hooks of memory from fighting people to fighting nature? The reading I give here works in that it makes sense of James’s words within the historical and intellectual context of his day and uses that context to fill out the essay’s meaning. James knew this literature well; his essay echoes its phrases. While the content of the essay is unoriginal, “A Moral Equivalent of War” is a vivid and rhetorically compelling presentation of how peace advocates before World War One understood their task.

And yet . . . I can’t shake the sense that I’ve missed something. Literary scholar Gillian Beer writes, “Books do not stay inside their covers. Once in the head they mingle. The miscegenation of texts is a powerful and uncontrollable force.”<sup>93</sup> Now texts also mingle in the head with events. The lifespan of James’s essay was exceedingly short; James died six months after it was published. Eulogies for the “greatest American philosopher” quickly appeared in print. As one of James’s last writings, the essay acquired a sacred aura; its afterlife had begun.<sup>94</sup> Four years later, as the guns of August released their fury, it became impossible to read James’s essay with the nonchalance of elites in 1910. Nothing I have said detracts from the high seriousness with which later readers approach the text. Our memories of World War One and its century-long bloody aftermath shape how we apprehend texts written just beforehand.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stob in *William James and the Art of Popular Statement* gives an extended analysis of James's rhetoric in his lectures for popular audiences.

<sup>2</sup> General works on the pre-World War One international peace movement include Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifism*; Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealist*; Chickering, *Imperial Germany and a World Without War*; and Patterson, *Toward a Warless World*.

<sup>3</sup> James, *Essays in Religion and Morality*, 120, also see 251–53.

<sup>4</sup> Myers, *William James*, 444–45; Throntveit, *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic*, 133.

<sup>5</sup> Emerson, "War"; Ruskin, "War"; Zola, "War."

<sup>6</sup> See Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution*, 117.

<sup>7</sup> Spencer gives a summary of his position in *Principles of Sociology*, vol. II, 663–67.

<sup>8</sup> Winslow, *The Christian Doctrines*, 110.

<sup>9</sup> H. Dixon, *John Howard and the Prison-World of Europe*, 219.

<sup>10</sup> Thwing and Thwing, *The Family*, 178–79.

<sup>11</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 292–93.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, "Play as a Moral Equivalent of War"; Brink and Smith, *Athletes of the Bible*, 21; Maynard, *The Moral Equivalent of War*, 16, 10.

<sup>13</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 162–64.

<sup>14</sup> James, *Principles*, vol. II, 393.

<sup>15</sup> See for example, Patten, *The New Basis of Civilization*, 34–36.

<sup>16</sup> James, *Principles*, vol. II, 393.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 409. Evolutionary thinkers typically categorized the instincts as self-regarding vs. other-regarding, egoistic vs. altruistic, or for self-preservation vs. for reproduction. Those in the latter category of each pair were considered responsible for the development of the moral sense and of ethics. See, for example, Darwin, *Descent of Man*, Chapter 3 on the evolution of the moral sense, and Spencer, *The Data of Ethics*, Chapters 11–12 on egoistic and altruistic instincts.

<sup>18</sup> James, *Principles*, vol. II, 390–91.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 648–52.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 662.

<sup>23</sup> James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 164.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 162–163.

<sup>25</sup> Euripides, *The Trojan Women*, 69, 71. This is from the translation by English classicist Gilbert Murray, whose translations were particularly popular at that time. See Albert, “Gilbert Murray,” 62. Until the late nineteenth century, many colleges required knowledge of Greek and Latin for admission. Students subsequently devoted much of their college coursework to the classics. Chautauqua sessions and women’s clubs included heavy doses of the classics in their offerings for the middle-class (Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 1–2, 144–47).

<sup>26</sup> Ruskin pivots from praising war to condemning it in “War,” 152–55.

<sup>27</sup> James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 164–65.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>29</sup> Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, 158.

<sup>30</sup> Chickering, *Imperial Germany and a World Without War*, 14–26.

<sup>31</sup> "The United States and Japan." The article was most likely referring to the Root-Takahira Agreement, signed on November 30, 1908. See Bailey, "The Root-Takahira Agreement of 1908."

<sup>32</sup> Barclay, "Peace," 4–16.

<sup>33</sup> Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 15–16; Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, 309.

<sup>34</sup> *Official Report*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> The winners in attendance included William Randal Cremer (1903), Bertha von Suttner (1905), Ernesto Teodoro Moneta (1907), Henri La Fontaine (1913), Ludwig Quidde (1927), and Jane Addams (1931).

<sup>36</sup> For deliberations by businesspeople, see *Official Report*, 102–16. For a history of this dimension of the pre-World War One peace movement, see Patterson, *Toward a Warless World*, chapters 7–8.

<sup>37</sup> James, "Remarks at the Peace Banquet," 123

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> For a survey of theorists who held this view, see Crook, *Darwinism, War and History*, Chapter 4.

<sup>40</sup> For Quidde's address, see *Official Report*, 67–69. For Darby's address, see *Official Report*, 69–73.

<sup>41</sup> James, *Essays in Religion and Morality*, 251–52.

<sup>42</sup> See Barclay, "War."

<sup>43</sup> James, "Remarks at the Peace Banquet," 123. As one example, see Churchill, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, 304, 308.

<sup>44</sup> For Washington's address, see *Official Report*, 258–60.

<sup>45</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 165.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>47</sup> Chapman, *Causes and Consequences*, 110.

<sup>48</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 165.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 173. The incident is from Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent* (vol. 2, 200–01), published in 1878. Many authors had referred to the incident before James.



<sup>50</sup> Anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor gave an extended analysis of this view. He called such peoples “survivals” and thought that civilized peoples could learn about their deep history by studying these groups (*Primitive Culture*, vol. 1, 19).

<sup>51</sup> James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 162.

<sup>52</sup> See Chickering’s discussion of German militarism, *Imperial Germany and a World Without War*, 392–402.

<sup>53</sup> James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 166–67. James McLachlan, U.S. Representative from California, gave a speech using strong terms to the House of Representatives that presented Lea’s criticisms of the U.S. military’s lack of preparedness (McLachlan, *Defenselessness of the Pacific Coast*).

<sup>54</sup> Rees, “The Enigmatic Homer Lea.”

<sup>55</sup> For the military’s response to the book see Rees, “The Enigmatic Homer Lea,” 60. For *The Independent*, see “Books on Various Topics,” 1149. For the Lake Mohonk Conference, see Brown, Arthur Judson, “International Arbitration as Affected by New World Problems in the Far East,” 32.

<sup>56</sup> James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 168, 169.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 170, 169.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 169; Dickinson, *Justice and Liberty*, 15–21.

<sup>59</sup> van der Wusten, “Sebald Rudolf Steinmetz.”

<sup>60</sup> James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 167.

<sup>61</sup> In his “Law of the Three Stages,” Comte associated theologism (the first stage) with militarism and the third stage (science or positivism) with industrialism. For a summary, see *System of Positive Polity*, vol. IV, 572–73.

<sup>62</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, vol. II, 568–642. For Spencer’s comment about the Esquimaux see vol. I, 541.

<sup>63</sup> At the time, the statement that democracies could not be militarist, was uncontroversial. See Sumner, “The Conquest of the United States by Spain,” 185.

<sup>64</sup> James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 170.

<sup>65</sup> Bloch, *The Future of War*.

<sup>66</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 170.

<sup>67</sup> At the time, "collectivism" and "socialism" were often used interchangeably (T. Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism*, 232).

<sup>68</sup> See Webb, *English Progress Towards Social Democracy*; Kirkup, *A History of Socialism*. Bevir gives an excellent account of the history and variety of British variants of socialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in *The Making of British Socialism*.

<sup>69</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 291; "Moral Equivalent of War," 170. Contemporary scholars have criticized the masculinist elements of his essay. See Schott, "Jane Addams and William James on Alternatives to War"; Martin, "Martial Virtues or Capital Vices?"

<sup>70</sup> Livingston gives an overview of anxieties in the Gilded Age that centered on loss of strenuousness and manly virtues with the closing of the frontier in the U.S. (*Damn Great Empires!*, 77–85).

<sup>71</sup> Ruskin, "War," 152–53.

<sup>72</sup> Lankester, *Degeneration*, 60.

<sup>73</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 170.

<sup>74</sup> Patten, *New Basis of Civilization*, 9–10, 25, 43–44.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 14–27.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 26–27, 43, 69, chapters 7–8.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 85–87.

<sup>78</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 171–72.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 171–72.

<sup>80</sup> James's statement, "The best thing about our 'inferiors' today is that they are as tough as nails, and physically and morally almost as insensitive," itself sounds insensitive ("Moral Equivalent," 169). Kaag hypothesizes that James hoped that by performing physical labor alongside non-elites, elite young men would gain a sense of how people outside their class lived ("A Call to Arms?," 119–20).

<sup>81</sup> Wallace, *Studies Scientific and Social*, Vol. 2, 387.

<sup>82</sup> Hobson, "Scientific Basis of Imperialism," 478–80.

<sup>83</sup> Le Conte, *The Race Problem in the South*, 394.

<sup>84</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 173.

<sup>85</sup> Wells, *First and Last Things*, 66.

<sup>86</sup> James, *Principles*, vol. I, chapter 10, "The Consciousness of Self."

<sup>87</sup> Wells, *First and Last Things*, 92–93, 131–32.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 214–16.

<sup>90</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 173.

<sup>91</sup> Patten, *The New Basis of Civilization*, 103.

<sup>92</sup> James, "Remarks at the Peace Banquet," 123. Patten makes the same point: old patterns of thought will disappear, not because people have accepted reasons against them, but because they have had new experiences (Patten, *The New Basis of Civilization*, 27).

<sup>93</sup> Beer, "Darwin's Reading and the Fictions of Development," 548.

<sup>94</sup> *Popular Science Monthly* reprinted the essay in its October 1910 issue: "It is here reproduced as a tribute to the memory of William James" (400). Immediately following was a eulogy that began, "Is there left to us in this land a man so great as William James? If the list of our leaders is scanned . . . is there a single one to be placed beside him?" ("The Progress of Science," 413).

# CIVIC RENEWAL: JAMES'S MORAL EQUIVALENT OF WAR\*

*TRYGVE THRONTVEIT*



James's essay on "The Moral Equivalent of War" has long been read as either a quaintly naive plan to alter human nature through policy or an insidious scheme for perpetuating norms of male domination under the guise of service. When read closely and in the context of James's political writings, however, the essay reveals a different purpose: to think creatively across the categories of service and the civic, conjuring a single sphere containing all of the collaborative, co-creative work we do (or should do) with those whose lives affect and are affected by our own. James's thought-experiment of a universal civil service corps has not been realized in detail or even in spirit, but by recovering his essential idea scholars can help to realize its potential for renewing American civic life by starting in their own sickly vineyard: the academy.



Most people familiar with William James's life and work know that he applauded efforts to think across boundaries and differences and to place oneself in the company of strangers—whether actual or intellectual. I am therefore pleased to have my thoughts on James's famous essay on "A Moral Equivalent of War" (MEW) follow Marilyn Fisher's very different treatment in this volume of *William James Studies*. In contrast to Fischer's reading, MEW does *not* strike *me* as derivative or even particularly representative of major currents of thought in James's day. Rather, as our fellow contributor Paul Croce finds for much of James's corpus, MEW was both original and generative, even while crafted to resonate with the thinking and concerns of a wide audience. Specifically, the essay reveals James trying to think creatively across the categories of *service* and *the civic*—viewing service as a form of self-government and thus eminently civic while simultaneously viewing the civic as more than mere service to others or even to the polity as whole. Instead, James considers service to be a sphere of symbiotic and ever-evolving relationships, containing all of the collaborative, co-creative work we do (or should do) with those whose lives affect and are affected by our own.

Let me be more concrete. By placing MEW in the broader context of James's political thought, I hope to show that it did not reflect a naïve faith in the abeyance of war nor a chimerical urge to preserve martial heroism through some pacifistic simulacrum. Rather, James was *alarmed* that despite what many contemporaries considered the moral and intellectual progress of the human race, war persisted. At the same time, he was scandalized by the efforts of other contemporaries to defend war as a means of promoting virtue, when in fact, both war and its apologias only diverted energy and thought from the crucial task of formulating and cultivating a civic ethos adapted to a modern, pluralistic, interdependent society.

In short, James envisioned a form of universal service that would be equivalent to war not in a *substitutive* but a *supersessory* sense. He imagined something powerful and compelling enough

not only to displace the institution of war, but to supplant the habits of thought that sustained it with habits that promoted its opposite—the egalitarian, co-creative, continual renewal of an increasingly inclusive commonwealth. Whether original or derivative, James’s vision for that something has yet to be realized or even approximated in our culture. Thus, it has a generative potential at a moment of civic exhaustion as well as civic ferment—a ferment that I hope will spread to and gain sustenance from the academy.<sup>1</sup>

### JAMESIAN POLITICS

James was not a political theorist, yet his moral philosophy is pregnant with political implications. As Walter Lippmann recalled of his Harvard mentor, James always believed that “the epistemological problem” his pragmatism addressed—the imperative to act on partial information and tenuous conclusions—had “tremendous consequences” for politics.<sup>2</sup>

But what are those consequences? James’s concept of an “ethical republic” and his frequent invocations of “republicanism” in moral and intellectual life provide a clue, but no clear answer.<sup>3</sup> His moral philosophy does not mesh well with the individualistic, small-government, free-market, libertarian, or socially conservative ideologies associated with the United States’ Republican Party at various points from the late nineteenth century through the early twenty-first. Nor does it align neatly with any of the various discourses on republicanism that historians of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American thought and culture have identified over the past 40 years or so.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, inverting both modern American conservatism and early American republicanism, James favored the reining in of “egoistic interests” (rather than their *release*) as a precondition for achieving “radical democracy” (rather than a *bulwark* against it). A self-described “individualist,” he also considered expansive, equal, and effective freedoms for all people to be fundamentals of societal health. “The best commonwealth,” he wrote in 1905, “will always be the one that most cherishes the men who represent the residual

interests, the one that leaves the largest scope to their peculiarities.”<sup>5</sup>

James’s association of selflessness with “radical democracy” and of the common good with a personally idiosyncratic society help to clarify his political thought and its objectives—as well as its relevance today. James examined a problem central to modern political theory and pertinent to our daily political life: the problem of individual or minority interests at odds with more powerful or popular agendas. James also sketched the major features of a polity equipped to ameliorate that problem: a pragmatist polity, with powers and authority calibrated to the dynamic historical experience of its members and employed to optimize freedom of thought and action across social space and time.

James was not particularly creative in identifying the institutions that would propagate such radical democracy in a pragmatist polity. In the spirit of pragmatism, he looked first to tools that had proven their value, at least when in good repair: popular government; social equality; an educated citizenry; and even, for all his hatred of violence, the military. Where James was bold, and the originality of his pragmatism evident, was in his vision of the radical purposes these institutions could and should achieve.

For James, popular government meant more than electoral plebiscites on the decisions of professional politicians. Above all, it meant citizen input in the business of state. James saw little logic and no point in a government established *for* the people but not directed *by* them. For that reason, James was deeply critical of the American people (including himself) for their complacency in the run-up to the American invasion of the Philippines at the close of the Spanish-American War. Supposing themselves to be “a better nation morally than the rest,” James and his fellow Americans let their leaders romp, assuming that “the results were fairly safe,” and that a little dose of the strenuous life would be good for a flaccid body politic. The results, instead, were death, destruction, and a “damning indictment” of American civilization.<sup>6</sup> For related reasons, James was generally disgusted with both major political

parties. Controlled by “pecuniary corruptionists” and “unscrupulous” partisans, they were “blind to the real life of the country.” Impervious to fresh ideas emanating from the people, “dead shibboleths” were all they could offer, along with a paralyzing “hatred and prejudice” against the opposition.<sup>7</sup>

Yet for all his disappointments, James never abandoned faith in popular government. For one thing, citizens were still ultimately responsible for their nation’s affairs, even when “Congress was entirely mad” (and citizens themselves were in similar condition); indeed, James wrote his brother, such are the proving times of genuine “liberalism.”<sup>8</sup> After all, the public could vote—their collective reflection and conversation could thereby have consequences, whether their representatives listened or not.<sup>9</sup>

Still, James knew that the trenchancy and efficacy of public discourse depended on broad participatory bases. Thus, he also ranked social equality among the critical institutions of a pragmatist polity. He frequently worried that economic disparities were eroding the nation’s democratic habits and dividing the creative forces of society. That society, James insisted in 1898, had “undoubtedly got to pass toward some newer and better equilibrium, and the distribution of wealth has doubtless slowly got to change.” By the time he wrote his “Moral Equivalent of War” essay, James had grown more radical and identified a “socialistic equilibrium” as central to his pragmatist political ideal.<sup>10</sup>

James also worried about other forms of inequality, including racial inequality. He sometimes indulged in the casual racism that mars so many private letters and diaries from his class and day. But he also publicly celebrated both Booker T. Washington and his former philosophy student, W. E. B. Du Bois, as political heroes, lauding their courage in helping the whole nation, in their different ways, learn to live more democratically. Indeed, for either man to quit his cause would be “a national calamity.” “For colored men openly to forego, simply on grounds of heredity, their right, as individuals, to win the best,” James explained, would turn all of American civilization “into an irrevocable caste-system.”<sup>11</sup> By contrast, a society in which all individuals were free from inherited



constraints would be nearly limitless in its moral potential. “Mankind does nothing save through initiatives on the part of inventors, great or small, and imitation by the rest of us,” he wrote in 1907.<sup>12</sup> Each individual immobilized by social caste was a potential genius shackled, and a chance for “human progress” lost.<sup>13</sup>

James might have had his country’s hardening caste system in mind in 1907, when he made the following striking statement while discussing education, another pillar of a pragmatist polity: “The notion that a people can run itself and its affairs anonymously,” he declared (in “The Social Value of the College-Bred”) “is now well known to be the silliest of absurdities.”<sup>14</sup> James’s point was not to denigrate self-government or the reliance on representative institutions to effect it. Rather, his point was that democracy assumes—and in fact hinges upon—meaningful encounters among interdependent individuals and groups who must learn *about* and *from* one another. A polity of anonyms would be a polity of isolates, living in a literal state of blindness to one another, whereas a democracy, in the pragmatist ideal, is a polity organized to bring its members into one another’s sight.

In “The Social Value of the College-Bred,” James focused on the potential of the modern college curriculum to evolve into a specialized tool for encouraging such civic seeing, by producing a specialized subset of democrats, the *critics*, committed to the task—a class he also described (to the horror of some interpreters) as an “aristocracy.”<sup>15</sup> But James was not suggesting that the country should be ruled by highbrows and “prigs” (as he put it). Rather, embracing the spirit of the liberal arts, the college-bred should table their assumptions and look beyond stereotypes in order “to scent out human excellence” and bring it to society’s attention. In other words, the “educated classes” deserve no formal privileges or power; they comprise an “aristocracy” only insofar as they promote the “rule of the best”—whatever, wherever, and whoever the best may be. Their ranks must be open, their duty being to spread, as widely as possible, the “higher, healthier tone” of life that alone defines membership of their class.<sup>16</sup> And in

meeting that duty, true democratic aristocrats must *view themselves as students* of those they seek to engage and instruct, thereby modeling a virtue that anyone loyal to the democratic ideal must practice. Indeed, all of us, if genuinely committed to moral freedom, must learn, in James's words, to "see how diverse the types of excellence may be, how various the tests, how flexible the adaptations."<sup>17</sup>

After all, as James stated here and elsewhere, "Democracy is on its trial."<sup>18</sup> Only by nourishing citizens determined to accept its critical burdens, yet "bound not to admit its failure," can a democratic polity surmount both complacency and nihilism. This is the service that "the best of us" provide, namely, promoting a "vision of a democracy stumbling through every error till its institutions glow with justice and its customs shine with beauty."<sup>19</sup>

#### **JAMES'S MORAL EQUIVALENT OF WAR**

It was that humbly aristocratic vision of democracy—as precious, even fragile, yet capable of greatness if our best selves do the work—which inspired James's boldest idea for a pragmatist political institution; and here, finally, we come to "The Moral Equivalent of War." On one level, James's argument is indeed simple, even prosaic. Pacifist that he was, James thought military training and combat did often cultivate certain civic virtues, but channelled them in wasteful directions. Pragmatist that he was, he also reckoned the baser instincts inflamed by war impossible to extinguish fully. Rather than excoriate the military as a hopeless evil or aberrant excrescence, James sought to replicate its best features in a civil institution that might ultimately transform its parent and the polity: a national service corps that was conscripted from "the whole youthful population" in an "army enlisted against *Nature*."<sup>20</sup>

By stopping there, however, readers have missed the profounder implications of James's essay. It should not be read as a celebration of force, for instance, or environmental destruction, or the subjugation of "feminism" to "manliness" that James himself imagined war's genuine apologists to endorse. From the

essay's beginning, James's position is clear: any benefits of war come at too high a cost. "In modern eyes, precious though wars may be, they must not be waged solely for the sake of the ideal harvest."<sup>21</sup> Those modern eyes were his: in 1895, he had called for a "permanent safeguard against irrational explosions of the fighting instinct," suggesting a war-spending freeze to divorce "armament" from "opportunity." Four years later, with US forces suppressing the Philippine independence movement, he warned "what an absolute savage and pirate the passion of military conquest always is," insisting that "the only safeguard . . . is to keep it chained for ever." Despite the qualms of the "modern" conscience, war at the turn of the twentieth century was as destructive as ever, to both weak and powerful. As James wrote in 1899, while the "cannon of our gunboats at Manila" brought bodies and buildings low, the "excitement of battle" that swept America had its own "disorganizing effect" on speech and conscience and revealed its "corrupting inwardness more and more unmistakably" as the victories piled up.<sup>22</sup> Modern war, in sum, was a high-risk and nearly zero-reward affair.

Nevertheless, the stubborn fact of human nature remained. "Our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow," James wrote; the human "capacity for murderous excitement," he lamented, is "aboriginal."<sup>23</sup> The central problem of war was its appeal to this capacity which partakes of both our drive to control our environment and our desire for social esteem.

But here is the key insight of the essay and the glimmer of a solution to the problem it addresses. For war, as organized pugnacity, had taught our ancestors to seek the esteem of *groups*, whether fearful enemies or grateful allies. It also taught that struggle and sacrifice for an uncertain goal are the greatest earners of esteem, whether or not a direct or immediate gain results. Since we all experience life as a struggle for ideals, we admire as "moral" those who are swayed "by objective ends that call for energy, even though that energy bring personal loss and pain"—and we seek to emulate them.<sup>24</sup> For much of history, war had been "the gory nurse that trained societies to cohesiveness."<sup>25</sup> But war

was not the only field of struggle in which such training could occur. Rather, the experience of struggle and desire for camaraderie *precede* war, psychologically. War is but *one* outlet for the primal moral drive to reconcile our surroundings to our will and but one demonstration of the original ethical lesson that *other* wills are *relevant* to such efforts.

That primal ethical insight guided James in nearly all his writing. Only by attending to its role in his thinking can we understand his solution to the problem of war: namely, a new kind of service corps dedicated to universal training and concrete exercises in “civic passion” that would not simply *conserve* martial virtues in an era when war had become too costly, but would *transform* our collective moral lives without denying our deepest psychological needs and drives. After all, James argued, given the contingency of human ideals and the social purpose of all moral inquiry, *any* vision of collective achievement might serve as a cause patriots could rally around. Whether they choose war over more “constructive interests,” James wrote, depends on which “spark” is fanned by the winds of their deliberations.<sup>26</sup>

For his part, James thought the cause of collective justice the better use of breath. To conquer other people is to shrink our moral universe; to conquer the forces oppressing them is to expand it. Thus, James’s effort was to imagine an institution that could practically advance that goal. By working together to ameliorate pain and suffering, build better public spaces, and ensure employment and leisure to all, citizens could hope to see “the injustice” of their society “evened out” with “numerous other goods to the commonwealth” sure to follow. Universal service, like war, would instill the “hardihood and discipline” that some of James’s contemporaries thought lacking in the nation’s youth. But more importantly, and far better than war, universal service would reveal to the eyes of citizens their “relations to the globe” including the “hard and sour foundations” of the physical comforts, moral commitments, and intellectual premises they might otherwise take for granted. Having “done their own part in the immemorial human warfare against nature,” these foot soldiers of a

new civic empire would know the social as well as material dimensions and challenges of that struggle and teach the next generation to appreciate them.<sup>27</sup>

### **JAMES'S UNFINISHED CAMPAIGN**

Pacifists, environmentalists, and feminists thus have little to fear from James's suggestion—and we have much to learn. Despite his rhetoric of a manly army conquering nature, James sought to obviate aggression and destruction through the promotion of inclusive, mutually educative experiences and causes. The moral equivalent of war did not consist in the specific tasks of a civilian corps, but in supplanting, through democratic organization, the volatile “morals of military honor” with robust “morals of civic honor” (as James put it)—morals made manifest in the continuous effort of a free commonwealth to enlarge its effective membership as well as its collective moral imagination.<sup>28</sup>

Few, I assume, would argue that any such moral equivalent of war has been established since James's day. Consider James's own United States. In 2000, scholars across fields heard and recall Robert Putnam's warning bell regarding the state of American civil society in *Bowling Alone*. Despite that book's best-seller status, however, major indices such as the National Conference on Citizenship's America's Civic Health Index and the University of Southern California's Understanding America Study reveal that Americans' civic skills, dispositions, opportunities, activities, and sense of agency have continued to decline since its publication. To take just a few measures:

- The percentage of Americans who read a newspaper every day has declined, along with trust in all forms of news media.
- Confidence in all branches of government has declined, along with voter turnout.
- Fewer than 25 percent of Americans devote time to volunteering.

- The percentage of survey respondents expressing “displeasure” at the thought of their child marrying someone outside their political party increased from 5 percent in 1960 to 40 percent in 2010.<sup>29</sup>

These figures paint a grim picture of ostensibly democratic citizens displaced from the center of self-government. Indeed, they conjure a nation composed not of citizens at all, but rather of consumers, accepting or rejecting proffered solutions to their problems or enhancements to their lifestyles rather than co-producing their commonwealth. Ironically, the current hyperpolarization of American politics is exacerbated by this torpid civic climate, in which policy questions are presented as binary choices to constituents who ignore or simply lack opportunities to engage civilly across their differences.

Thankfully, in the unfinished universe that James’s work reveals to us, the chance for something better remains. In my brief remaining space, I will point to two broad efforts to advance a co-creative civic culture that might have particular resonance for readers of an interdisciplinary academic journal. The first is the burgeoning scholarly interest in the field of *Civic Studies*, an enterprise uniting citizens within and beyond the academy in critical analysis and collaborative production of the society they aspire to share.<sup>30</sup> Civic Studies is a conceptually elastic, intellectually plural response to the uncertain and unfinished phenomenon of politics. It comprises a field of interdisciplinary (across the academy) and transdisciplinary (beyond the academy) research, scholarship, and practice in support of the kind of civic renewal James sketched in his work. As such, its purpose is to understand and strengthen the work of citizens who endeavor to govern themselves and shape their common world. It does not seek, either in theory or practice, to divorce citizenship from government, but to restore government to its role as a tool and organ of citizenship.<sup>31</sup>

Emerging originally among political philosophers disenchanted by ideal theory and economists influenced by the work of 2009 Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom, the Civic Studies enterprise has since attracted attention and intellectual investment from scholars and practitioners in disciplines including history, social work, pediatric brain science, family therapy, business ethics, public administration, engineering, medicine and physiology, sociology, education research, and many more. A small but growing number of institutions have developed valuable stores of research and wisdom regarding how to weave the Civic Studies ethos of collaborative inquiry and co-creative, egalitarian community relationships into academic structures and practices. Preeminent among them is the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University, which for years has united sophisticated research into the current state of civic life with community collaboration to improve it and which recently launched a new major giving interested undergraduates a direct incentive to join the enterprise.<sup>32</sup>

That brings me to a second broad movement that testifies both to the crisis of citizenship in America and to its potential amelioration. Nationwide, professionals across multiple domains find themselves chafing at the barriers dividing their working and civic lives; they yearn to define and adopt a new posture of *citizen professionalism*.<sup>33</sup> Among scholars, the citizen-professional ideal finds nascent expression through academy-wide efforts to harness the “public” potential of disciplines such as history and sociology; to advance “translational” and “participatory” research paradigms such as those gaining traction in mental health, public health, education research, and developmental science; and to adopt standards and methods of “public engagement” for colleges and universities that are clear and evaluable without being technocratic or chauvinistic.<sup>34</sup>

Missing, however—at least at the vast majority of our institutions of higher education—is any systematic effort to address the professional crisis by exploring how scholars themselves can fulfill their potential as co-creative citizens while simultaneously advancing their research through exposure to the

data, perspective, wisdom, and legitimacy that emerges from public scrutiny and exchange. In short, the Civic-Studies/citizen-professional ethos has moved only a small minority in the academy. This is both a shame and an opportunity, for I believe it can help us answer the existential question facing higher education generally and public institutions of higher education in particular—namely, what public purpose does it serve? For decades, the most frequent and persuasive answers have been “workforce development” and “technology transfer,” both viewed as proxies for the university’s contribution to economic growth. In other words, the *public* purpose of higher education is often reduced to its capacity to provide *private* goods—whether to students, to the corporate entities demanding their skills, or to those who consume the product of the two. This capacity is important. Indirectly, it does serve public purposes, like helping to raise standards of living and levels of health (however unevenly). Unfortunately, when the public image of the university is that of a provider of private goods, all of its activities become subject to the narrowest market reasoning. Why should someone not getting a high-paying job, a stream of dynamite employees, or a life-saving medical device from the university invest in the institution? And why should the university—or the state—invest in curricula that do not directly create such jobs, workers, and products?<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, such questions are being posed by scholars themselves. As many as twenty years ago, John Bennett identified a growing “faculty malaise” stemming from their self-perceived “alienation” from public life.<sup>36</sup> Sadly, a 2012 study by Robin Wilson that was focused on associate professors reported that little had changed. This seems in part due to the referred civic frustration radiating from students who feel pressure to treat their education as a purely economic instrument. In 2012, the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement discovered that only one-third of twenty-four thousand surveyed undergraduates felt that college had helped them expand their civic awareness, develop skills to change society for the better, or deepen their commitment to the common good.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, at a 2015 Chicago convening,



faculty from multiple disciplinary clusters spread across two-year, four-year, and comprehensive institutions “spoke of how many of their students were searching for ways to live meaningful lives, wrestle with big problems facing their generations, and contribute to making a more just world.”<sup>38</sup>

Fortunately, research reveals secondary and postsecondary education to be among the most effective means of fostering citizenship. This is doubly fortunate, in fact, for research also shows that education for citizenship not only produces graduates with capacity and confidence to combat the forces undermining civic health, but also *improves learning across all domains*. The “open classrooms” best suited to fostering civic dispositions and civic agency further benefit students by nurturing critical reflection and disburdening working memory through productive confrontation (rather than awkward, artificial suppression) of tensions and differences. These outcomes are only reliable, however, if education for citizenship is *infused throughout the curriculum*, rather than segregated into co-curricular or extracurricular spheres inevitably construed (by students and faculty) as secondary or even discretionary.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, a civically reformed academy might provide just the sort of moral equivalent of war that James was looking for. Identifying the public implications and civic potential of their disciplines would not only permit scholars to explain their profession and their work in a more broadly relevant and accessible way, but would also help them make more informed and more publicly responsible choices about the teaching, research, and outreach they choose to undertake in the first place. Moreover, bringing such civic clarity to disciplinary commitments and practices would influence the frameworks through which scholars justify and transmit civic learning to students. If fully embraced, this academic commitment to citizen professionalism would mean weaving civic learning throughout the disciplinary course of study for students in all fields. The result would be graduates who are not just more civically-minded but also more knowledgeable, skillful, adaptable, and thus productive—graduates whose professional and

public lives are integrated in such a way as to drive the nation's democratic as well as economic, technological, intellectual, and cultural growth.

James is finally getting his due as a political thinker and deeply engaged intellectual after decades of scholarship casting his pragmatism as irrelevant, or even an impediment, to politics.<sup>40</sup> His effort to sketch a moral equivalent of war is not his best work. But if it can guide his heirs in the contemporary academy between the Scylla of technocracy and the Charybdis of social criticism toward a land of common public work and wealth, it will prove to be among his most important.

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## NOTES

\* Sections of this essay are reproduced, with minor omissions and changes, from Chapter Four of Throntveit, *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic*.

<sup>1</sup> The best and broadest analysis of the roots and implications of civic crisis in the American context as well as the creative responses of citizens to it is Levine's *We Are the Ones*.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Lippmann to Graham Wallas, 30 October 1912, Lippmann, *Papers*, reel 32. On Lippmann's close relationship with James during the former's undergraduate days at Harvard, see Steel, *Lippmann and the American Century*, xv, 16–18, 66; and Kloppenborg, *Uncertain Victory*, 317–18.

<sup>3</sup> James, "Renouvier's Contribution," 266; James, "Will to Believe," 30.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Rodgers, "Republicanism."

<sup>5</sup> James, *Correspondence*, 12:291; James, "Thomas Davidson," 103.

<sup>6</sup> James, *Letters*, 2:73; James, "The Philippines Tangle," 154, 157.

<sup>7</sup> James, *Correspondence*, 5:505.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Perry, *Thought and Character*, 2:307–08.

<sup>9</sup> James, *William James and Theodore Flournoy*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> James, "What Makes a Life Significant" 298; James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 286.

<sup>11</sup> James, "Problem of the Negro," 193.

<sup>12</sup> James, "The Social Value of The College-Bred," 318.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Miller, *Democratic Temperament*, 24. Somewhat bizarrely, in 1968, Robert L. Beisner grouped James with 11 other "mugwumps" and "dissident Republicans" who opposed many of America's imperialist adventures from 1898 onward because, in Beisner's opinion, they saw jingoism and economic expansion as part of a syndrome of mass democracy that threatened enlightened government by the well-born elite to which they belonged. In contrast, Jonathan M. Hansen has argued persuasively that James's anti-imperialism was in fact inspired by a broad rather than a narrow vision of the civic nation, while Leslie Butler has shown how the impulse to reinvigorate rather than resist popular government lay behind James's domestic and foreign political views, and behind those of others whom Beisner portrayed as fundamentally conservative liberals. See Beisner, *Twelve against Empire*, ch 3; Hansen, *Lost Promise of Patriotism*, esp. Chapter 1; and Butler, *Critical Americans*, esp. Chapter 6.

<sup>16</sup> James, "Social Value of the College Bred," 315, 316–17, 323.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 313–14.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 315–16.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 317–18.

<sup>20</sup> James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 287–88.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>22</sup> James, *Letters*, 2:29; James, “The Philippine Tangle,” 155–156.

<sup>23</sup> James, “Moral Equivalent,” 272; James quoted in Perry, *Thought and Character*, 2:317.

<sup>24</sup> James, *Varieties*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> James, “Moral Equivalent,” 272, 287–88.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 285, 289.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 290–91.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>29</sup> Atwell, Bridgeland, and Levine, *Civic Deserts*, esp. 4–6; see also Iyengar, Sood, and Lekles, “Affect, Not Ideology” and Jones, “Record High.”

<sup>30</sup> The best brief overview of the field is Levine, “Civic Studies.” For a more comprehensive introduction providing a taste of the field’s pluralism see Levine and Soltan, eds., *Civic Studies*.

<sup>31</sup> *Citizenship* in this context does not denote legal membership in a particular polity, but a guiding ideal and practical ethos embraced by individuals loyal to, empowered by, and invested in the communities they form, inform, and continually re-form together.

<sup>32</sup> See Tufts University, “Civic Studies.”

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Dzur, *Democratic Professionalism*; Doherty, “Beyond the Consulting Room”; Santoro, “Good Teaching”; Reardon, “Civility as the Core of Professionalism”; Snyder-Hall, *Civic Aspirations*; Christopherson, Scheufele, and Smith, “Civic Science Imperative.”

<sup>34</sup> On this last point see Saltmarsh, Hartley, and Clayton, *Democratic Engagement White Paper*; and National Task Force, *Crucible Moment*, esp. chapters IV and V.



<sup>35</sup> See Burwell et al., “Claiming Our Story.”

<sup>36</sup> Bennett, *Collegial Professionalism*, vii

<sup>37</sup> National Task Force, *Crucible Moment*, 41

<sup>38</sup>; Musil, *Civic Prompts*, 8–9.

<sup>39</sup> Gould et al., *Guardian of Democracy*, 20–25; National Task Force, *Crucible Moment*, 11–13.

<sup>40</sup> Recently Throntveit, *William James*; Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!*.

# WILLIAM JAMES'S PSYCHOLOGICAL PRELUDE TO POLITICS: WHAT PLACE FOR MORAL EQUIVALENTS IN AMERICAN POLARIZATION ON THE POTOMAC AND THE JORDAN?

*PAUL CROCE*



This article presents William James's "Moral Equivalent of War" in light of the evolution of his own thinking about war, his psychology, and its application to US debates about the Israel-Palestine standoff. This conflict now takes on the coloration of American polarization between military and religious conservatism, and liberal advocacy for international diplomacy and human rights. James's psychology contributes to possibilities for reducing antagonisms by highlighting the selective attention of opposing players who literally focus on different facts and interpretations in conflict situations. Political action needs a prelude to prepare contesting cultures for any degree of possible effectiveness. James's ideas suggest the importance of steps toward honest acknowledgement of the respective and substantial reasons for antagonisms and toward cultivation of civic interactions. This psychological prelude to politics does not offer a peace plan, but suggests what he called the "legitimacy ... of some" steps toward less violence.



There are many valid criticisms of “The Moral Equivalent of War.” The essay reinforces gender stereotypes with its talk of manly toughness. Marilyn Fischer argues that James was not particularly “worried about how to end war,” but concerned because its loss would lead modern society to devolve into “effeminacy and unmanliness.”<sup>1</sup> President Jimmy Carter used James’s phrase to encourage energy conservation in 1977, and critics pounced on the idea that expecting a moral equivalent to such realistic problems would only bring a weak MEOW (in literal and ridiculing use of the essay’s initials), compared to the real and rigid truths of de facto economic and military power relations.<sup>2</sup> John Kaag even finds James agreeing with the “reflective apologists for war.”<sup>3</sup>

I turn to James’s essay from the perspective of the author’s intentions, as an evaluation of human “pugnacity,” the impulse for fighting, which he presents before his proposals for less-destructive “substitutes” for war.<sup>4</sup> Now my question becomes, can this psychology of war be useful in efforts to prevent or reduce conflicts that so consistently turn to violence?

Following James’s interest in the Stoic medical assessment of theorizing to address the persistent plagues of human affairs, my presentation is in three parts: first, on James’s psychological diagnosis of the roots of warfare, second on his prescription with substitutes to prevent or reduce those warrior impulses, and third, on the support his thoughts could provide as steps toward healing persistent human antagonisms, with the Israel-Palestine standoff as a case study.<sup>5</sup> As with his pragmatism in general, James’s ideas on war do not suggest a miracle cure, but they may serve as a psychological tonic for politics with more peaceful relations.

#### **DIAGNOSIS: TOWARD A PSYCHOLOGY OF WAR**

While the “Moral Equivalent of War” drew upon James’s earlier psychology, if he had written it earlier, he would have shown little interest in finding substitutes for organized violence. During the Civil War, he cautiously supported the high purpose of

emancipation but was repulsed by the whipping up of warrior ferocity for “spread-eagleism” during the Civil War.<sup>6</sup>

When the Spanish-American War began in April of 1898, James was cautiously optimistic about this war’s democratic promise, with potential even to encourage reform. He openly dismissed pacifism, and he even said that the point of the violent action was “humanity,” in apparent support of popular descriptions of the American mission to free colonies from Spanish control. But he continued to display the classic American fears that this “model Republic,” as he had declared during the Civil War, would follow the corruption of aggrandizing European states. He warned that “it may end by conquests” even as he maintained optimistically “it was certainly begun by no desire for them.”<sup>7</sup> Within weeks, as his skepticism about US war aims grew, he “confess[ed] I can feel no enthusiasm for the cause.” As fighting passions flared, his bountiful hopes eroded still further. Instead, psychologist James noticed mere political “blindness and instinctiveness.”<sup>8</sup> Without renouncing war in principle, he was already renouncing this war.

As the war expanded from the Caribbean to the Pacific, James’s disgust hardened, even as his position still drew upon his initial hopes—now dashed. He punctured the veneer of democracy and benevolence (including his own recent hopes for “humanity”) by defining “philanthropic empire, educative for freedom” as “just *empire*” pure and simple.<sup>9</sup> He did not extend this critique to explicit acknowledgment of the empire-like conquest of Native Americans and domination of African Americans, but he returned to his republican hope to keep the US out of ancient cycles of conquest and destruction. He reluctantly acknowledged war’s role as “the great force that has hammered the [E]uropean states,” but he had not yet thought of any alternative.<sup>10</sup> As warfare led to occupation of overseas territory, James’s views of war soured still further.

**PRESCRIPTION: DEMOCRATIC SUBSTITUTES FOR WAR**

James is well known for not producing political philosophy, but he was “profoundly attuned,” as Alexander Livingston shows, “to the psychological ... dimensions of politics.”<sup>11</sup> That is the prime task he set out to perform in the “Moral Equivalent” essay. He gazed with increasing horror at the politics of war, with victory prompting easy acceptance of territorial rule. “Missionaries of civilization,” such as Theodore Roosevelt “sow our ideals [and] plant our order” as justified by “the white man’s burden,” James pointed out, but in the US-controlled Philippines, this march of “modern civilization” only “amounts to ... [a] big, hollow, resounding, corrupting, sophisticating, confusing torrent of more brutal momentum and irrationality.”<sup>12</sup> To his own counter-torrent of denunciation, James added the argument he developed the same year in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings”: warfare amplifies human blindness, so that in the Philippines, “individual lives are nothing.” He then imagined a very non-political substitute, contrasting the work of “civilization” pushed by expansionist US power with the impact that one decent person could implement. He imagined “a saintly sort, ... a missionary, ... ethical reformer, or philanthropist.” That person connecting with the Philippine people “would do more real good in these islands than our whole army and navy can possibly effect with our whole civilization at their back.” If the energies directed toward destruction could be redirected in constructive ways, they would “build up realities” with more significant lasting impact; no matter that this impact initially comes “in however small a degree.”<sup>13</sup> While Americans justified war for spreading civilization, James was considering ways to displace the energies for war.

James’s experiences from 1898, as he witnessed raw examples of political pugnacity, prodded his shift from cautious supporter of war to identification as “pacifist” in the “Moral Equivalent.” He reported on the appeal of “militaristic sentiment[s]” while clearly disagreeing with these enthusiasts of the “war-party.”<sup>14</sup> He even acknowledged some “virtues” in their position; war brings “fidelity, cohesiveness, tenacity, heroism, ... and vigor” mixed in

with its vices.<sup>15</sup> The “peace-party” should recognize the value of these war-propelled virtues, since they “count in peaceful as well as in military” settings.<sup>16</sup> So by “enter[ing] more deeply into the ... point of view of their opponents,” he and his fellow pacifists could “cheat our foe,” that is, undercut the effectiveness of war’s appeal.<sup>17</sup> That posture, he recognized in 1904, could offer some “preventive medicine,” even as the grip of fighting impulses would prohibit more “radical cure” in ending warfare.<sup>18</sup>

James’s incongruous hope to “conciliate the side I don’t belong to,” shows an enlistment of his psychology of attention.<sup>19</sup> This mental function serves as a gatekeeper at the cutting edge of conscious awareness for processing “the mass of incoming currents.”<sup>20</sup> The mind makes selective choices about parts of experience for particular purposes as shaped by immediate needs or interests, while “we actually ignore most of the things before us.”<sup>21</sup> His point is that there is always more in experience than the human mind can comprehend or even perceive. In “The Sentiment of Rationality,” James applied this way of thinking to the development of intellectual positions, which for all their elaborate intricacy, generally begin with selective attention to particular facts and interpretations. This explains how “pacifism makes no converts from the military party,” even when summoning sound and bold arguments about “war’s expensiveness and horror.”<sup>22</sup> Warriors simply argue that “war is *worth* these things” while selecting fighting virtues for attention.<sup>23</sup>

Without “substitutes” for what war provides, the “anti-militarists ... as a rule do fail.”<sup>24</sup> This tragedy, James laments, has been amplified in modern times when “whole nations are the armies and the science of destruction” has made “war... absurd and impossible from its own monstrosity.”<sup>25</sup>

James was not cowed by the “war-function” even though it has been so strong and persistent in human affairs. “War-making” is “subject to prudential checks ... just like any other form of enterprise,” he insisted, and war is not the only way to manifest “martial virtues.”<sup>26</sup> Instincts for sociability that draw upon “*other aspects of one’s country*” could excite passions and virtues

conventionally associated with warfare.<sup>27</sup> In place of destructive “morals of military honour, ... morals of civic honour” could be built up toward “constructive interests.”<sup>28</sup> Life is hard enough without the addition of war; and that “toil and ... pain” should be distributed across social classes, rather than leaving the privileged few immune to such hardships.<sup>29</sup> James challenges his fellow critics of war: focus on tasks that spur “civic passions[s]” or watch your pacifist words evaporate without impact while “war must have its way.”<sup>30</sup>

James suggests “a conscription of the whole youthful population” for national service, in particular, recruitment of muscular labor in the “immemorial human warfare against nature.”<sup>31</sup> Writing before the time when human development would clearly place so much of the environment in critical danger, he could still think of “an army against nature” as an opportunity to live in closer touch with nature, encouraging people to renew human “relations to the globe.”<sup>32</sup> By tapping the “*strong* life, ... life *in extremis*,” these moral equivalents would draw upon martial virtues without destruction, producing “toughness without callousness.”<sup>33</sup>

James's suggestions lack political realism about the prohibitive challenges in implementing his “utopia.”<sup>34</sup> However, he displays psychological realism about both the depths of human pugnacity and its constantly amplifying capacities for destruction, grown beyond the violence that originally sculpted human aggressiveness in evolutionary development. James challenges political realism's routine acceptance of organized violence by proposing and encouraging ways to reduce the violence, even while he did not expect war to become completely “forever impossible.”<sup>35</sup>

Instead of trying to eliminate war, James encourages small steps toward reduction of warfare wherever possible. His often-quoted 1899 critique of “bigness & greatness in all their forms” also includes another form of bigness, large scales of time.<sup>36</sup> He knew that his own moral equivalents were just “so many soft rootlets,” mere “molecular moral forces” subject to impatience or ridicule. They only gain power “if you give them time.”<sup>37</sup> In “The

Social Value of the College Bred,” he amplified his confidence that “the steady tug of truth and justice, give them but time, *must* warp the world in their direction.”<sup>38</sup> As with the probabilistic force of Darwinian species development from countless particular adaptations, small social steps over a long time, he maintained, add up to moral bigness.

James’s awareness of the relation of small steps and big hopes is a political application of his pluralist philosophy, where he argues for “the legitimacy of ... *some*.”<sup>39</sup> Just as he dismisses absolutism because “the substance of reality may never get totally collected,” so he does not hold out for the ideal of settling every conflict.<sup>40</sup> Still, he urges “seiz[ing] every pretext, however small” for encouraging peace.<sup>41</sup> His utopia is more pragmatic than perfect, with practical prods toward idealistic moral goals. James’s “Moral Equivalent of War” provides a framework for improving the chances for peace.

#### **HEALING: PROSPECTS FOR LESS WAR**

“The Moral Equivalent of War” contains political applications of James’s psychology and philosophy. His evaluation of politics suggests how humans can relate with each other in more moral and humane ways than he was witnessing in his experience of politics. The ideas of the essay suggest a framework, supported by his other works, which is an enriching adjunct to politics for preventing and reducing conflict and turns to violence. The standoff between Israelis and the Palestinians manifests an unmistakable gulf of disagreement and hostility akin to James’s identification of pugnacity steadily triumphing over peace, even as this conflict encourages persistent hopes for better outcomes that reflects his utopian vision for less warfare. It is a fitting if difficult test case for James’s diagnosis and prescription about the psychology of warfare.

James’s observation, “as things stand, I see how desperately hard it is to bring the peace-party and the war-party together,” could readily apply to the Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>42</sup> Contrasting narratives about the very same history, in the very same place, and



during the very same years, fuel the sharpness of their disagreements.

The dominant Israeli narrative emphasizes the state of Israel as a remedy for the history of anti-Semitism. The early Zionists in Palestine expected that their European connections would be welcomed by the indigenous Arab people. Moshe Dayan, famous for his military leadership during the 1967 Six-Day War, as a boy in the land "called Palestine" in the 1920s, felt "no doubt that it was possible to live at peace with them," and one of his childhood Palestinian friends even played the flute at his wedding.<sup>43</sup> The hopeful prospects of Zionist-Arab encounters were marred by anti-Semitism, including the 1930s collaboration of Palestinian leader Amin Al-Husseini with Nazi Germany. Al-Husseini linked his hope for Palestinian independence to the murderous "solution for the Jewish problem."<sup>44</sup> Israelis have doubted the plausibility of Palestinian cultural identity and emphasized the strategic vulnerabilities of their small nation, even as Palestinians can become Israeli citizens. Israelis also emphasize the poor governance by Palestinians in their own lands, and radical Islamic terrorism as reasons to be skeptical of Palestinian claims, and of the movement for Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions (BDS) of Israel, which they regard as a product of misguided left-wing activists duped into support of anti-Western militants.<sup>45</sup>

While Israelis stake claims to the Palestinian territory from Biblical history, Palestinian people have resided in this place for centuries. Their collective identity, like that of many non-Western nations, was partly imposed and partly in gradual development after colonial subordination, first to the Ottomans and then to the British. Immigrant Jews seemed like another set of Europeans, with wealth and connections to colonial powers. The Zionist slogan made Palestinians feel downright invisible, "A land without a people, for a people without a land."<sup>46</sup> Repeated humiliations fueled anger and terrorist attacks, often in response to militant attacks by Zionist terrorists, including the Stern Group, Lehi, and Haganah, some of which simply became the Israeli Defense Force. Haganah founder Vladimir Jabotinsky defined its purpose, "to

colonize a country against the wishes of its inhabitants, in other words, by force.”<sup>47</sup> They also observe that Zionists, in their eagerness to encourage Jewish migration to Palestine, negotiated with Nazi Germany; and Palestinians point out that their casualties have been higher than Israeli losses. Palestinians present themselves as the victims of a far greater military power with vastly more wealth. Harry Truman himself, who as president helped to shepherd Israel toward independence and stability, feared for the prior occupants of their territory if the “underdogs” would now become the “top dogs.”<sup>48</sup> Palestinians greet BDS and international criticism of Israeli settlements and military attacks as long-overdue recognition of their rights in the face of adamant US support of Israeli assertions of power over them and remind Americans that from 1980 to 2005, the FBI reported terrorist attacks in the US by comparable numbers of both Jewish and Islamic extremists.<sup>49</sup>

While opposition to anti-Semitism has been a hallmark of modern liberalism, the contemporary support for Israel has taken a conservative turn, with heavy emphasis on security fears, identification of Israel with Western civilization and global markets, and alignment of Israel supporters with conservative critics of post-colonial arguments. Reflecting the polarized character of American politics, Israelis gain support based on conservative security and anti-terrorist concerns while Palestinians make references to liberal critiques of imperialism.<sup>50</sup>

In a macabre application of James’s psychological observation about the abundance of experience which no one mind can fully grasp, the Israeli-Palestinian standoff provides ample complexities for each side to select particular gruesome cases which amplify grievances that encourage retribution on each side.<sup>51</sup> However, James’s explicit attention to the psychological depth of each side’s belligerence, along with searching for alternatives, could offer steps out of the constant cycles of fear, anger, and violence.

James’s theories resemble Gerald Graff’s call concerning American cultural conflicts to listen to and teach each opposing side. They both observe that there will always be conflicting

voices. In his impatience with both warriors and peace advocates, James like Graff advocates “respecting the ... minds one presumably hopes to change.” When encountering views in disagreement, they suggest learning how those views gain their appeal.<sup>52</sup>

The ideas of James and Graff, with assessment of whole contexts, do not lend themselves to immediate military or policy effectiveness, but they can be used as psychological preludes to politics. They can divert those slides from fear and hostility to overt violence with guidance toward practices that provide small steps toward less destruction. While the history of Israel and Palestine of the last century has provided a perfect storm with each side's views and actions reinforcing the worst fears of the other side, there have indeed been steps in more peaceful directions. For example, historian Mark Cohen highlights “memories of Jewish-Arab coexistence in past times,” with hopes that awareness of this history will serve as “a distant mirror of what might yet be.”<sup>53</sup> This message from his deep learning receives popular reinforcement in current efforts to encourage each side to listen—and first even to notice—the other side's historical narratives. The educational group Tiyul-Rihla brings Israelis and Palestinians on tours of places central to their respective histories, with the experiences spurring “long-term, subtle changes.”<sup>54</sup>

Striving for a less-violent world requires thinking beyond the effective vs. the ineffective. By that standard of evaluation, the peacemakers will almost always come up short because they are frankly ineffective by the standards of political realism: the conflicts are in place; calls for peace are naïve about those facts; preparation for conflict is essential. The focus on immediate security then reinforces cycles of fear and fighting. James's framework suggests different questions to ask: not about effectiveness as things stand, but about which scenario or action step gains attention. The narratives of political realism and the fighting that comes in their wake receive enormous attention. James's outlook suggests that efforts for peace are of course small, but they can grow if they get more attention. Without at least some

attention to “molecular moral forces,” we induce a kind of sleepwalking toward constant warfare.<sup>55</sup>

With realistic assessment of threats and constant preparation for war, someone, acting with humanity’s creative “spontaneity,” as James points out, will combine selective attention with fiery passion that will trigger the implementation of those realistic plans into realistic action, in very real warfare.<sup>56</sup> James offers a way to think past and beneath those politically realistic scenarios; he offers a realistic diagnosis of war’s psychological grip on our imaginations and prescriptions for less violence to gain attention. His suggestions are not perfect, and his framework has limits, but if he had lived to witness the Israel-Palestine standoff and other deeply polarized conflicts, he likely would have joined the chorus, because really all he is saying, about his psychological prelude to politics, is that it can give peace a chance.

James’s view of war is embedded in cultural views full of masculinist and misogynist assumptions with limited recognition of class and racial hierarchies. Another criticism, that his views include proposals full of political impracticality, is both true and limited in its critique of his actual goals. He was not even trying for an explicitly political policy proposal, but he offered a psychological prelude to politics. For potential challenges to the various versions of the “war-party” in the US, the Middle East, and wherever pugnacious humans live and persistently conflict, James counters those assumptions of political realism with psychological realism about the factors that normalize the turn to war. Middle East tensions and the U.S.’s intimate relations with its dilemmas make up just one set of so many knotty problems that beset the contemporary world. While experts in foreign policy, economics, the environment, social justice, and other specialties can provide valuable insights toward resolution of these enormous issues, the piece that James provides is a way of thinking that can foster a prelude to making use of those insights for political implementation. “The Moral Equivalent of War,” as Tryg Throntveit points out, serves as a political “tool” that the democratic “polity needs” to maintain its health because it suggests

the kinds of public applications of “epistemic virtues” that Francesca Bordogna sees in James, with potentials “to transgress cognitive and social divides.”<sup>57</sup> James’s framework can inject entrenched old problems with new thinking starting with paying attention to each side’s substantial grievances. Politically realistic paths have not substantially reduced inclinations toward war. James’s pragmatism, with political ideals and psychological realism, may be among the worst options we have, except all others.<sup>58</sup>

#### **APPENDIX A: WILLIAM JAMES ON ACCEPTANCE VS. STRUGGLE LEADING TO “THE MORAL EQUIVALENT OF WAR”**

This chart displays the presence of key ideas about the psychology of war and its prevention in James’s essay as they appeared, directly or indirectly, throughout his career. After earning his medical degree in 1869, he wrote in a private notebook about the twin tugs to “accept the universe” or to “protest against it,” as he himself considered the choice between a life of “resignation” or taking on “the effort to improve.”<sup>59</sup> His point, in his youth and throughout his life, was that each outlook plays a significant role in human life, within particular personal temperaments, as bases for different ways of philosophical thinking, and at the root of different ideologies. He had a preference for the struggle approach to life, but he sometime turned to the acceptance mode for time of relief and recharge. As he reported in 1877, he preferred life “without any *guarantee*,” because then he felt, “provided I am *überhaupt* [at all] in vigorous condition,” a “willingness to do and suffer anything.”<sup>60</sup> In 1867, even when he was feeling so depressed that he actually considered suicide, he also said “I still cling to the hope of amelioration.”<sup>61</sup> Before developing his theory of “meliorism,” he was striving to keep his struggling spirit going, even as the efforts exhausted him.<sup>62</sup> This placement of James’s views on war within the whole span of his life and work also reveals that he did not confine war or peace to only one side of his thinking about acceptance vs. struggle:

**Acceptance vs. Struggle**

<i>Personal</i>	Sickly Seeking Help	Healthy Living with Energetic Strength
	Recognizing Limits Willingness	Taking Risks Will
<i>Theoretical</i>	Religion Holidays for the Spirit	Morality Meliorism with Strenuous Life
	Tender-Minded Certainty with Convictions	Tough-Minded Uncertainty with Inquiry
<i>Social</i>	Peace Safety and Prosperity Righteous, Routine War	War Hardihood Negotiations for Arbitration
	Selfless Military Calling	Fighting for Peace

**APPENDIX B: JAMES'S IDEAS APPLIED TO POLARIZATION IN ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES**

The stories here provide a preliminary collection of ideas and activities about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that exhibit at least some features of the Jamesian framework about warfare, in diagnosis of its psychological appeal, with prescriptions for redirecting that appeal in less destructive directions, and with its healing potential for preventing or reducing violence.

Imam Shamsi Ali and Rabbi Marc Schneier moved past their initial suspicions of each other to start a practice they call "twinning," with leaders of each faith community, Islamic and Jewish, visiting each other's houses of worship, not only in North

American and Europe, but also in the Middle East; and in *Sons of Abraham*, they pursue their hopes for reducing conflict by rooting dialogue in the resemblance of their distinct religions.<sup>63</sup>

Irshad Manji founded the Moral Courage Project, now at both New York University and the University of Southern California, designed to encourage speaking out for peace with justice even in the face of improbable odds and overwhelming power. As a Muslim ready to recognize the "trouble with Islam," she critiques the manipulators of Palestinian rights, "both Israeli soldiers and Arab oligarchs," and urges nonviolent resistance to both forces.<sup>64</sup>

Arab-Israeli cook Nof Atamna-Ismaeel has ambitions to open a Jewish-Arab cooking school to "create common ground between Arab and Jewish Israelis." "I really think," she explains, that cooking and eating "together, laughing, talking about what they like in food," may be "the only way we can solve a little bit of this conflict." Cultivating this commonality can encourage "trying to talk to each other."<sup>65</sup>

The Mohammed Bin Naif Counseling and Care Center on the outskirts of Saudi Arabia's capital, Riyadh, is a rehabilitation center for convicted terrorists. Counselor Awad Al-Yami explains that, in addition to psychological counseling, religious re-education, vocational training, and financial incentives, they employ art therapy; the captured violent activists use drawing as a substitute for their destructive impulses. Through their art, they express emotions, anger, and depression. The Center boast a success rate of 80% of former terrorists not returning to their violent ways.<sup>66</sup>

The Palestinian organization Hamas in the Gaza Strip continues to engage in attacks with no hope of military victory, which prompts overwhelming retaliation by the Israeli Defense Forces, followed by restrictions on Palestinian movement in their own territory, which of course has a withering effect on the local economy and encourages more hostility. Professor Said Zidani of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem urges a simultaneous Israeli removal of military siege and Palestinian focus on economic and social development on the model of the West Bank town of

Ramallah. Ahmed Helou endorses this change; he turned from his former membership in Hamas and now says, “no more blood.”<sup>67</sup>

Jad Isaac monitors and assesses the environmental degradation caused by political changes in Palestine. As Director General of the Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem, he is dedicated to using the tools of sustainable development to promote the “self-reliance of the Palestinian people.” He addresses the political dilemmas indirectly by focusing on the land, with work to increase Palestinian “control over their natural resources.” He points out that “all our life is humiliation. Only the land will bring us back to self-respect.”<sup>68</sup>

Zatoun is a fair-trade company dedicated to using the cultivation of olive tree to promote prosperity and peace in Palestinian territories. This company is one example of a business path for the promotion of peace as advocated by Arab-Israeli businessman Nieme Ayoub. He has laid out a platform with “economic drivers for peace.” In particular, he hopes for “more tangible mutual projects, such as joint industrial parks, and multicultural organizations that aim to accelerate economic growth.” Despite his large ambitions, he insists that such “big change starts small” not only because of the intricacies of development, but also because of his view that gradual steps allow momentum to build with avoidance of overreach. While poverty encourages desperation, he argues, “people who have jobs, homes, future prospects, ... are less likely to resort to violence,” and “more interaction will lead to more understanding and more receptivity of the other side’s opinions, beliefs, and thoughts.” On the path to economic cooperation, however, the group known as Who Profits? warns about the profits that Israeli companies generate from occupation of territory where Arabs live.<sup>69</sup>

As with James’s awareness of human temperamental and intellectual differences, these approaches offer a range of different practices. As with his approaches to conflict and war, they are not panaceas for immediate transformation, but offer outlooks and actions that can enable development of relationships and practices with substitutes for violence. As with James’s hopes for healing,



they do not present complete political solutions, but no peaceful solution can begin without them.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Fischer, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 104.
- <sup>2</sup> Carter, “President’s Proposed Energy Policy,” 418; Wihbey, “Jimmy Carter’s Solar Panels”; Frick, *A Companion*, 414.
- <sup>3</sup> Kaag, “A Call to Arms?,” 110.
- <sup>4</sup> James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 164 and 162.
- <sup>5</sup> See Martha Nussbaum’s description of Stoicism’s medical assessment of philosophy as intellectual therapy (Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 7, 33, 353, and 316); James took daily doses of “Old Mark’s” writings because he found Stoic Marcus Aurelius’s ideas served as effective remedies to his own personal and theoretical puzzlements (James to Ward, 8 June [18]66, in James, *Correspondence*, 4:140–41).
- <sup>6</sup> Henry James, *Social Significance*, 1–2. William James likewise criticized “theatrical” patriotism with a mocking sketch of a spread eagle over conquered territory and the words “Let the eagle scream!!!!”(William James to Alice James, 5 March [1865], in James, *Correspondence*, 4:97; and see James, “Garth Wilkinson James’s Return”).
- <sup>7</sup> James to Salter, 8 April 1898, in James, *Correspondence*, 8:355; and James, “Reading Notes,” 22.

<sup>8</sup> James to Salter, 21 April 1898, in James, *Correspondence*, 8:360. In historiographical terms, James was shifting from the type of argument made by Boot in defense of the “colonial wars” fought by the US against Spain and in the Philippines that were “better than average,” to critiques of unjustified aggression in the American turn to empire in, for example, Hoganson’s *Fighting for American Manhood* (Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace*, 127).

<sup>9</sup> James to Salter, 18 November 1898, in James, *Correspondence*, 8:454.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Critiques of James and other pragmatists for overlooking the racial hierarchy all around them, even as they benefitted from those privileges, include Eddie S. Glaude and William David Hart. In addition, however, Glaude and Cornel West treat pragmatism as a resource for responding to the “risk-ridden future” in striving for social progress toward the nation’s “precious ideals” (Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 34, 46; West, *Keeping Faith*, 113). John Thomas writes that in the late nineteenth century, “the specter of Rome in decline from republican splendor to imperial decadence appeared with disturbing clarity” (Thomas, *Alternative America*, 1; see also, 79 and 117). James’s internal debate in evolution over a few days anticipates the debate between John Dewey and Randolph Bourne almost two decades later. Dewey supported the US entrance into the “Great War” in 1917 also for its potential to promote progressive ideals; Bourne criticized him with a James-inspired skepticism. He enlisted James’s stance on war in doubting that such ideals could “control and mould” war to “liberal purposes.” In 1917, Bourne warned that martial passions engulf civic virtues once the shooting starts, and repeatedly take on a savage life of their own beyond the original moral motivations. He echoed James’s belief that, in the constant cycling of problems unanswered and passions flaring, with organized fighting in response, “every war leaves such miserable legacies, fatal seeds of future war” (James, “Robert Gould Shaw,” 73). So Bourne challenged Dewey by asking “If William James

were alive would he be accepting the war-situation so easily and complacently?" (Bourne, "Twilight of the Idols," 688–702; Bourne, *World of Randolph Bourne*, 195 and 191).

<sup>11</sup> Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!*, 7. Also see page 76 on James's "psychological approach to politics" and the politics in his pragmatism.

<sup>12</sup> James, "Philippine Tangle," 157.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. In "The Philippine Question" James observed that it never "occurred to anyone at Washington that the Filipino could have any feelings or insides of their own whatever that might possibly need to be considered in our arrangements. It was merely a big material corporation against a small one, the 'soul' of the big one consisting in a stock of moral phrases, the little one owning no soul at all. . . . We have treated the Filipinos as if they were a painted picture, an amount of mere matter in our way. They are too remote from us ever to be realized as they exist in their inwardness. They are too far away" (James, "Phillipine Question," 159–60). This criticism of treatment of the "other" is not explicitly about Filipino ethnicity, but that is implied by his recognition that they are a people "far away"; and while he is patronizing about the "little one[s]," he does recognize they have "insides of their own" (Ibid., 160).

<sup>14</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 165.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 165, 167.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 168; James, "Remarks at the Peace Banquet," 122.

<sup>18</sup> James, "Remarks at the Peace Banquet," 122. James's opposition to war evolved: his strong ideological opposition to this war pulled him toward social commentary to develop ways to prevent war or reduce its cruelties, and even toward moral objections to war in general, but especially to the amplified destructive efficiencies of modern war. See Fischer's helpful research showing the first entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for "pacifist" from 1906, for those who "sought to reduce the

occasions for war" (Fischer, "Moral Equivalent," 98). It is very common to hear soldiers talk about the personal "virtues" of war that James describes, even as they feel guilt about these positive personal traits emerging with such destruction. The comments of Special Forces officer Robert Reault about his Vietnam War experiences are typical of this combination that James describes: this loyal soldier was not proud about the coldness of his military behavior, and in fact "it was distressing to realize that I was at my best doing something as terrible as war" (quoted in Burns and Novick, *The Vietnam War*, episode 2: "Riding the Tiger," minute 37).

<sup>19</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 170.

<sup>20</sup> James, *Psychology*, 192.

<sup>21</sup> James, *Principles*, 273.

<sup>22</sup> James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," 34–38 and James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 168.

<sup>23</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 168. Girard, in *Violence and the Sacred* and "On War and Apocalypse" shows kinship with James in recognition of deep impulses for violence: Girard identifies its source in persistent human envy and desire to gain what others have, while insisting that these belligerent impulses can be quelled by religious traditions that offer substitutes for violence in rituals of sacrifice.

<sup>24</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 169.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 170. See the "Introduction" of Holden and Conley-Zilkic's *Indefensible* for critiques of the sale of high-technology weaponry for the enormous expenses, multiplied by contracts generated for political purposes, and doubtful enhancement of security. In *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker shows skepticism about the alarm that James and so many observers share about modern warfare. He makes a case for the actual decline of violence in modern times by focusing on the reduced frequency of wars (225), even as he admits that wars have become more destructive with enhanced technology and organization (226), and

with these forces, modern warfare has been destructive both on the battlefield and off (300). This, of course, is precisely James's point about the "monstrosity" of the modern "science of destruction" (James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 170). Pinker recognizes the tremendous "destructiveness of the world wars," but calls those events "freakish" in the context of a marked decline in warfare among Western nations in modern times (Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, 301). So the precise point of his proposition about humanity's better angels in modern times is that the twentieth century was, on average, indeed the "bloodiest century in total numbers, but not relative" to the increased population of the time (193). Pinker's broadest point is that modern democracies with free trade and rights revolutions have committed to social contracts with their citizens leading to less organized violence. While the West enjoys MAW, mutually assure (enormously destructive) warfare, the maw of industrial-scale killing, sent around the world with Western sales of military technology, continues these amplified destructive potentials in non-Western countries. Rather than a wholesale decline of warfare, modern times have witnessed its shifts: there are more inhibitions to war in some regions of the world and more implementation of individual conscience on a wide scale to inhibit violence, while also ever-more sophisticated technologies enable more massive killing in ways more distant and therefore less personal, making the violence less subject to the inhibitions on violence that Pinker praises. Richard Koenigsberg challenges the optimism of Pinker's claim about reduced warfare. In *Nations Have a Right to Kill*, he argues that modern nationalisms with the civic religions of nation states have amplified the tug toward warfare through their insistence on sacrifice in combat as violent rituals of devotion to the nation.

<sup>26</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 170.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 172; Fischer describes James's discussion of both destructive and constructive instincts in *Principles* (Fischer, "Moral Equivalent," 96). James's emphasis on pugnacity rather than sociability anticipates Steven Pinker's critique of the "Hydraulic Theory of Violence," the view that "humans harbor an inner drive toward aggression, which builds up inside us and must be discharged. Like Fischer (and as with James in his psychology), Pinker believes that humans are "not innately good or evil," so he argues that in addition to those aggressive impulses, humans also possess "better angels," that is, motivations that "can orient them away from violence and toward cooperation and altruism" (Pinker, *Better Angels*, xxv). Walter Lippmann provides a tough-minded endorsement of James's psychological realism in striving for peace first by recognizing the appeal of war. In fact, Lippmann used this framework to enlist a wide range of citizens in reform projects; as he put it, the "moral equivalent" way of thinking encourages "the establishment of positively good things instead of trying simply to check bad ones" (Lippmann, *Preface to Politics*, 42). By contrast, idealist reformers forget that "a ban does not stop the want" (35); such proposals "cover about as much of a human being as a beautiful hat does" (42). Along with James, he believed that "instead of tabooing our impulses, we must redirect them" because then the political and moral goal would "fit the whole man," and the reform measure would "turn the power" of the "whole nature of man . . . to good account" (42), but simply "ignore what a man desires and you ignore the very source of his power" (175). Like James, Lippmann supported the argument for moral equivalents to maintain a democratic engagement with average citizens. Popular but misguided political movements, such as jingoistic enthusiasm for war, are the political equivalent of "indigestible food." There is a disservice to the public in merely criticizing such political positions because that simply leaves the public no "less hungry" because they had been taking in "the wrong food" (76). The moral

equivalent argument takes the psychological impulses seriously while redirecting the destructive political choices.

<sup>31</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 171–72.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 163, 172. On the Anthropocene, the name for recent history when "human being increasingly order the world," with a case for its emergence in the 1940s, see McNeill and Engelke, *The Great Acceleration*, 100.

<sup>34</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 165.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 168. Hans Morgenthau provided the classic modern expression of political realism, maintaining that, because the actions of people and nations are based on unchanging human appetites for self-interest, "all politics is a struggle for power" (Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nation*, 25). Also advocating political realism, Edward Carr actually shows agreement with James in criticism of idealist hope for peace because this outlook puts too much faith in reason and cooperation. "The role of force . . . is indeed more constant and more conspicuous than most sentimental democrats care to admit" (Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, 215). Also with James, Carr took this as a challenge for politics: "How to effect necessary and desirable changes . . . without war" (209). He held out hope for the end of the reign of the "independent nation-state," and dedicated his book "To the Makers of the Coming Peace" (viii, ix).

<sup>36</sup> James to Sarah Whitman, 7 June 1899, in James, *Correspondence*, 8:546.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> James, "Social Value," 110. When thinking about accumulation of small steps, James drew upon the long-term thinking in Peirce's philosophy of science; see Croce, *Eclipse of Certainty*, 191–95. On the role of probabilities in Darwinian theory and James's awareness of and use of this thinking, see Croce, "From History of Science," 19–32; *Eclipse of Certainty*, 99–106, 198–201; *Young William James Thinking*, 73–75.



<sup>39</sup> James, *Pluralistic Universe*, 41.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> James, "Remarks at the Peace Banquet," 123.

<sup>42</sup> James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 165.

<sup>43</sup> Dayan, *Story of My Life*, 31, 34, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Katz, "Muftism and Nazism," section 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, especially "The Evolution of US Policy Toward Israel," 3–26; Glick, *The Israeli Solution*, 13; "The Boycott/Divest/Sanction Movement"; Babbin and London, *BDS War Against Israel*; Troy, "Sabra, Shatila"; Pipes, "End the False"; Harris, "Why Don't I Criticize Israel?"; Herf, "Fresh Air in Europe;" and Hirsch, *Contemporary Left Anti-Semitism*.

<sup>46</sup> Muir, "A Land without a People," traces the origins of the phrase to nineteenth-century British Christian Zionists who enthused about the biblical prophecy about Jewish return to the land of Israel.

<sup>47</sup> Judis, *Genesis*, 90.

<sup>48</sup> Judis, "Seeds of Doubt."

<sup>49</sup> Rodinson, *Israel*, especially 35–78; Weiss, "The Transfer Agreement," 1 and 10–15; Pappé, *The Forgotten Palestinians*, especially 1–8 and 265–75; Abunimah, *Battle for Justice*, 169–226; Booth and Eglash, "Israeli Leaders"; Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Terrorism 2002–2005*, "Chronological Summary of Terrorist Incidents"; ProCon.org, "Deaths in the Conflict." The Israeli Assaf (Vol 1.) mocked claims of Palestinian in his "book," *History of the Palestinian People*, with 120 blank pages; see Bernard, "Amazon Removes Controversial Bestseller"; and Suarez, "Amazon Pulls Blank."

<sup>50</sup> While Palestinians have gained some liberal support, there are still many Democratic supporters of Israel, even of its military policies. For example President Barack Obama authorized an increase in military aid to Israel (see Baker and Davis, "U.S. Finalizes Deal"). By contrast, US contributes 1/5000<sup>th</sup> to Palestinians (see Lieber, "State Department"), and the Donald

Trump administration has cut off aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency which provides aid to Palestinian refugees (see Harris and Gladstone, “U.S. Withholds”). The following works offer a sampling from two large literatures, each with advocacy for US support of contrasting narratives, respectively, about Israeli vulnerabilities and Arab intransigence and violence, and about Palestinian victimhood in the face of Israeli strength. In support of the Israeli narrative, see Lieber, *Retreat and its Consequences*, especially 46–70; Troy, “Anti-Zionist War on Academia”; Dershowitz, *Terror Tunnels*, especially ch. 17–19; and in support of the Palestinian narrative, see Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Israel Lobby”; Blumenthal, *Goliath*, especially 101–44; Chernus, “The Middle East.”

<sup>51</sup> James, *Principles*, 273–77.

<sup>52</sup> Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars*, 36; for a contemporary application, see Croce, “Historians.”

<sup>53</sup> Preville, “Interview with Mark Cohen.” Also see Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, especially 3–15 and Cohen, “Islamic Policy toward Jews.” For another example in the same spirit, see the fall 2017 Fordham University lecture series, “A Different Take,” taught by David Myers, head of the Center for Jewish History in New York and Hussein Ibish, senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington; and Seliger, “Myers and Ibish Co-Teach.”

<sup>54</sup> Tiyul-Rihla educational initiative, whose name is based on the Arabic and Hebrew word for “trip” (<https://www.tiyul-rihla.org/>); Miller, “Israelis and Palestinians.” For more examples, see Appendix B. Thinking about how to encourage a psychological prelude to politics has kinship with management work on wickedly difficult problems and with the practice of multi-track diplomacy. On the identification of wicked problems and strategies for coping with them, see “Wicked Problems;” Camillus, “Strategy as a Wicked Problem;” and Brugnach and Ingram, “Ways of Knowing and Relational Knowledge.” On Track Two Diplomacy, see

“What is Multi-Track Diplomacy?”; and Little, ed., *Peacemakers in Action*, 9–21 and its examples of Track Two civil society “diplomats” in Israel. On the surrounding Israel territory, see Abuna Elias Chacour, “I am Palestinian, Arab, Christian, and Israeli,” 321–41; and Rabbi Menachem Froman, “The Settler Who Spoke with Arafat,” 341–56.

<sup>55</sup> James to Sarah Whitman, 7 June 1899, in James, *Correspondence*, 8:546.

<sup>56</sup> James describes the evolutionary advantages of the human mind for its ability creatively to break from routine thoughts, with each person making choices, for good or ill, in his “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition,” 12.

<sup>57</sup> Throntveit, *William James*, 132; Bordogna, *William James*, 10. Frega suggests related ideas and defends “our epistemic powers,” arguing that they are “adequate in fixing our moral and political beliefs;” in particular, pragmatism provides mental resources for addressing “problematic situations” such as “moral disagreement” and “public controversies,” by turning them into “objects of rational inquiry” (Frega, *Practice, Judgment, and the Challenge*, 8, 10).

<sup>58</sup> Winston Churchill said “that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time,” when speaking in the House of Commons on November 11, 1947; see Langworth, “Democracy is the Worst.”

<sup>59</sup> “Pomfret” notes quoted in Perry, *Thought and Character*, 1:301.

<sup>60</sup> William to Alice Gibbens James, 7 June 1877, in James, *Correspondence*, 4:571.

<sup>61</sup> William to Henry James, Sr., 5 September 1867, in James, *Correspondence*, 4:194.

<sup>62</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 137.

<sup>63</sup> O’Neil, “Unlikely Friendship.”

<sup>64</sup> Manji, *Allah, Liberty, and Love*, 110. See also, Manji, *The Trouble with Islam*.

<sup>65</sup> Fehling, “Arab Israeli Celebrity Chef.”

<sup>66</sup> Amos, “Treating Jihadists.”

<sup>67</sup> “Making Peace.”

<sup>68</sup> Isaac, “Jad Isaac”; Isaac and Saad, *A Geopolitical Atlas*.

<sup>69</sup> See “Zatoun is Palestine in a Bottle.”; Ayoub, *Economic Growth*, 1, 7, 4, and 15; and “Who Profits?”

Review of *Pragmatism As a Way of Life*. By Hilary Putnam and Ruth Anna Putnam. Edited by David Macarthur. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. 496 pp. \$49.95.

Reading *Pragmatism As a Way of Life*—a synoptic collection of essays written by the authors over the past half century—is a fresh, healthy, mind-clearing exercise that every student or scholar of pragmatism should experience, even if he or she disagrees with what the Putnams are saying. Before going into the details of what this reviewer finds correct and incorrect about the arguments in the book, the relevance of the book to scholarship on pragmatism, and the intellectual streams the book follows or does not follow, I want to acknowledge the remarkable style of the Putnams’ philosophical writing. Their book is one of the most clearly reasoned and written books about a philosophical subject that I can recall having read. Among scholars of pragmatism, only Max H. Fisch had this extraordinary ability to the same degree. It is part of the experience of the book, and it must be acknowledged prior to any discussion of its substance.

What is the kernel of the Putnams’ understanding of classical pragmatism? Their particular take on pragmatism grasps its core with a crystalline vision. The pragmatist maxim is not mainly a strict rule of logic, but a more general philosophical understanding of “the interdependence of our conceptual abilities and our practical abilities,” both of which exist in beliefs as complex and multitracked habits of action” (35). Around this maxim, the Putnams envisage a common project that, according to them, and contrary to almost any previous study on “the only original American thought,” encompasses all classical pragmatists.<sup>1</sup> In reference to James, Ruth Anna Putnam writes that according to classical pragmatists, the most important characteristic of human

thought, in both epistemology and morals, is to craft our ideas and values because we need them. “We make moral values because we need moral values, just as we make other things which we need and which unaided nature fails to provide. We make tools, we design and build machines, we cultivate plants and domesticate animals” (73). The crafting of our thoughts and values is a habit of action not so different from humans making their first knives when they needed them. Thinking and doing are really one entity for pragmatists, and Hilary Putnam is right in suspecting that in the critics’ dismissive attitude toward pragmatists, they perhaps overlook something profound and important because of the way in which classic pragmatists described their view. “Given the profound originality of their vision, it is hardly to be wondered if the pragmatists sometimes depicted the relationships between these various abilities as simpler than they actually are” (35). For the time being, it is worth noting that the Putnams have captured the deep anti-intellectualism and even anti-apriorism (49) at the bottom of the classical pragmatists’ common project, which, as Hilary Putnam remarks on, James often called “our” vision that “we” propose (343).

Having clarified the maxim, the Putnams identify the content of this common project as mainly a moral project. Careful understanding is required to appreciate what the authors mean by this characterization. The short version of it appears in the title—*Pragmatism As a Way Of Life*. The moral picture in which they place pragmatism has nothing to do with an exercise in applied ethics or a compartment or shelf in the vast wardrobe of philosophy (331–35). They understand pragmatist morality in the same sense as Pierre Hadot described morality in ancient Hellenist philosophy—morality is a comprehensive attitude toward the universe as expressed in both scientific and humanistic enterprises.<sup>2</sup> It is not by chance that pragmatists do not recognize the notorious split between the hard sciences and the humanities. In the same way, the Putnams refuse to recognize the supposed dichotomy between facts and values, both of which they include within their overall understanding of morality.<sup>3</sup> Morality is neither

a set of beliefs nor a set of norms. Instead, morality is a way of life in which we strive for truth while remaining fallibilists, and we consider the method of scientific inquiry as the only one apt to foster human beings' belonging and surviving in an evolving universe in which we need a community to keep developing both socially and individually. The authors' point was:

[R]ather that just as from the perspective of some shared moral values we are able to defend our preference for the scientific over the fundamentalist religious stance, so from within the shared scientific perspective—the willingness to regard what happens as relevant to a reappraisal of values—we can defend our moral choices. (81)

Sometimes the Putnams sound like Giovanni Papini since he identifies pragmatism with the courage of living in order to transform the world. Papini and the Putnams would probably disagree about what this transformation implies, but both emphasize pragmatism's drive toward a different style of life that sometimes remains hidden to classical American pragmatists themselves, possibly because of the strong intellectualist impetus received from Peirce's early work. Peirce himself changed his mind profoundly over the years, but it is true that the first versions of pragmatism were affected by a Kantian-transcendental tendency. The Putnams do not acknowledge this change in Peirce, but, notwithstanding this oversight, it is hard to exaggerate the importance of the Putnams' reading of pragmatism as a unitary and moral project. Scholars will need to address this reading, which is surprisingly closer to interpreters like Colapietro and Margolis than to those such as Hookway and Misak.<sup>4</sup> The Putnams' revival of pragmatism is not intended to put some parts of pragmatism within an analytic contemporary framework; their view is a return to the original project.

In the short space of this review, I will focus on two aspects of the Putnams' work that I consider significantly flawed. The first

one is a residual Kantian legacy that occasionally threatens the project. In order to arrive at the most profound interpretation of the pragmatist maxim, Hilary Putnam conducts an analytic dissection of Peirce's stance because he tends to reduce the maxim to a verification of statements whereas Peirce's original text was talking about ideas and beliefs in a vaguer sense (24). Hilary Putnam's interpretation of Peirce is generally accurate, but the idea is that sometimes Putnam's reading drifts into a Kantian view of the American philosopher. Hilary Putnam quotes Hookway's reading of these rules as a "universal voice" when he speaks about rules of conduct and refers to Kant's Third Critique (222). Hookway ends up by joining Peirce's realism with "a kind of 'presupposition of science' in a Kantian sense" (224), which forgets how much Peirce insisted on how these rules of conduct change over time; he addressed these issues in *What Pragmatism Is and Issues of Pragmatism*.<sup>5</sup> In Peirce, as in James, the historicity of any law, including any logical law, means that synthesis precedes analysis, and that reality is a metaphysical development in which human knowledge is a fallible, limited kind of grasping. There is no transcendental presupposition in classical pragmatism, and it is in this absence that one finds most of its novelty.

Ruth Anna Putnam, even in her wonderful vision of sciences as "continua" (85), still thinks of communication as an addendum of a unique, individualist perspective to other perspectives, where the unique, individualist perspective "has to be tolerant and to seek communication" (85). I think that many pragmatists would have thought the opposite to be true—community is the radical starting point, of which the individual is but a secondary form. Even James's attitude toward the role of single individuals does not escape this vision of a broader all-preceding continuum of experience in which the individual plays a limited role of attention and selection. Paradoxically, Ruth Anna Putnam acknowledges exactly this point in her essay "The Moral Life of a Pragmatist" (360–84).

As David Macarthur notes in his introduction, the Putnams describe the content of the pragmatist way of life as "a third



Enlightenment” (4). I think he is right. Even in their profound grasp of pragmatism, they try to preserve the enlightenment tone that, in one way or another, leads to a residual intellectualism. It is true that sometimes classical pragmatists, themselves, incorporated this residual legacy into their work. However, their profound conception of the continuity of reality and their comparison of human reasoning to artwork, to a crafting of tools, has a very different drive and aim. Pragmatism is a radical alternative to any form of enlightenment and involves a different conception of reason, well beyond the classical conceptions and distinctions that one can find in Descartes and Cartesian philosophers and in Kant’s transcendentalism. When you accept that the pragmatists’ common project was to get rid of those conceptions and distinctions and to paint a completely different picture of reason as an embodied activity,<sup>6</sup> you will find the right place for each of the pieces of the puzzle that, taken individually, carry a great deal of explanatory power in the Putnams’ “reconstruction of philosophy” (331).

The second weakness of the book involves another form of the same residual intellectualism that obscures the radical revolution created by pragmatism. This concern centers on religion. In one of the best passages of the entire book, Ruth Anna Putnam recapitulates James’s view of religious experience (232–47). The reconstruction of James’s work is clear and keen. James, himself, is not a believer in any particular God, and his attitude is not deist or theist. However, in analyzing the psychology of those who believe with an open mind, he accepts that our selves are part of a broader subconscious reality; he does not exclude the possible existence of “the subconscious as the near shore of a sea on whose far shore is God, or the Higher Powers” (245). I consider this to be a splendid, pluralist, fallibilist, consistent acceptance of an important experience in the history humankind, one that—all in all—has brought more good than evil into human history and into many individual lives. Nevertheless, Ruth Anna Putnam concludes: “I find James’s conception of a deity quite appealing and inspiring. But we must recognize that it is just that, a conception” (246). As at many other points in the book (see 74–

75), the Putnams' adherence to an enlightened view of reality and to a closed naturalism seems more rooted in dogma instead of being a real outgrowth of the views of classical pragmatists. Naturalism was certainly part of Dewey's pragmatism but certainly was not part of James's or Peirce's. Naturalism is not a necessary characteristic of the pragmatist movement, whose most admirable feature is its open window on the evolving reality to which we belong. Dewey's struggle with naturalism (314–27) shows that possibly an open attitude that does not preclude anything, not even religion, was closer to the complete revolution of the Cartesian and Kantian project of modernity, which pragmatists initiated without completing.

Despite these important but limited criticisms, the Putnams' wonderful joint effort offers the reader an understanding of the overall common project of classic pragmatists and the depth of the unity between theory and practice. The authors illumine a path for everyone who wants to take pragmatism seriously and put it to work in our contemporary epoch.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Different recent accounts that see a profound split among classic pragmatism are to be found in Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn*, 1–13; Brandom, *Perspectives on Pragmatism*, 1–32; Malachowski, *Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism*, xiii–xv, 1–45; Misak, *The American Pragmatists*, xiii–xv, 1–45. The idea of the pragmatists' common project is instead at the heart of Calcaterra, Maddalena, and Marchetti, *Il pragmatismo*, 13–18.

<sup>2</sup> Hadot, *Exercices Spirituels*, 25–41.

<sup>3</sup> An important parallel of this view can be found in Calcaterra, *Interpretare l'esperienza*, 133–73.

<sup>4</sup> See Colapietro, "Allowing our Practices to Speak," 1–21; Hookway, *The Pragmatic Maxim*, 182–196; Margolis, *Pragmatism's Advantage*, 1–47; Misak, *The American Pragmatists*, 1–6.

<sup>5</sup> Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, 331–59.

<sup>6</sup> See Maddalena, *The Philosophy of Gesture*, 43–67.

Review of *William James, Pragmatism, and American Culture*. By Deborah Whitehead. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. 194 pp. \$28.00

The borders of pragmatism, like those of any “ism,” have long been sites of protracted disputes. Deborah Whitehead’s *William James, Pragmatism, and American Culture* takes these disputes as its subject matter. With nationalism and gender as her primary lenses, Whitehead considers pragmatism not as a historical phenomenon with a discrete essence, but as a contested term that is deployed in particular contexts and for specific purposes. Therefore, despite what its title implies, this book is as much about the neo-pragmatist revival as it is about James—and its primary subject is pragmatism’s future. Pragmatism in this book is a “bricolage” (8), “a way of explaining America to itself at critical moments in U.S. history” (6); and Whitehead’s purpose is to synthesize a century of claims regarding pragmatism in order to remind those who would deploy it that “the pragmatist tradition is and has always been heterogeneous” (136). Her hope is that “pragmatist scholars might reflect more critically on the specific histories of pragmatist narratives and discourses being offered as theoretical resources” (137).

Because its goal is to spur inquiry and its secondary purpose is to participate in that inquiry, this volume makes fewer arguments of its own than one may expect. Yet it raises considerations that are essential for any careful steward of pragmatist methods and concepts. In particular, Whitehead builds upon the work of other scholars to critically read the ambivalent claim to “Americanism” that has been present in pragmatism since its inception, and she

shows how James's gendered presentation of pragmatism as mediator has been taken up by feminist theorists. Thus, she tackles pragmatism's primary claim to historical importance—its status as an American philosophical tradition—and one of its most productive sites of present-day (re)formulation—feminist pragmatist theory. In so doing, Whitehead attempts her own Jamesian “unstiffening” of pragmatism's meaning within the academy. In short, this book attempts to radically contextualize narratives of pragmatism so the term can remain productively contested, open to all “voices with a stake in the pragmatist narrative” (140).

*William James, Pragmatism, and American Culture* begins by situating itself among recent narratives of pragmatism. The book's first chapter rejects attempts, such as those by John J. Stuhr, John E. Smith, and Louis Menand, to provide a single, historically-driven definition of pragmatism. Instead, Whitehead follows those like Cornell West in incorporating the neo-pragmatic renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s into her assessment of pragmatism's meaning. But while those like West, Giles Gunn, and James T. Kloppenberg argue that pragmatism is popular because its epistemology is uniquely suited to unite people and ideas across the identity-based divides that preoccupied the 1990s, Whitehead asks how and why pragmatism gained its reputation as a *via media* in the first place. Her quotations show her approval of both David Hollinger, who note the importance of cultural resonance in determining pragmatism's popularity, and feminist theologians like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rebecca Chopp, who portray textual interpretation as sites of contestation and dialogue in order to argue that pragmatism's definition not only is, but ought to be an ongoing project. Whitehead seeks less to capitalize upon pragmatism's supposed uses than to demonstrate the varied uses to which it has been put. This is especially important, she argues, given the recent concentration of scholarship on pragmatism and rhetoric, including the work of Stephen Mailloux, Robert Danisch, and Paul Stob. If pragmatism is a “mode of rhetoric” (22), then

understanding what that rhetoric does is essential for a clear picture of pragmatism's past and future role in American intellectual life.

This discussion is continued in the book's second chapter, in which Whitehead aptly demonstrates the uncertainty that was baked into pragmatism's definition from the start. Ever since Ralph Barton Perry's first biography, scholars of both James and Peirce have long debated whether James was telling the truth when he credited Charles S. Peirce with pragmatism's conception, or whether that assertion was simply one more of James's attempts to rescue his ne'er-do-well friends through intellectual (and fiscal) generosity. Whitehead clearly favors the view that Peirce contributed less to the early formulation of pragmatism than James gave him credit for, but her ultimate claim is not one of intellectual biography. Instead, she stands back from that argument in order to remind readers that the so-called essence of pragmatism has always been contested. After continuing her discussion with an overview of the term's more recent contestations, Whitehead engages Richard Bernstein's work to argue that no narrative should be elevated above another, whether it be James's, Peirce's, Rorty's, Seigfried's, or West's. Instead, the book promises to move beyond Bernstein and use social and historical context to explain the emergence of these competing narratives.

The book's remaining chapters take up this task, first in regard to nationalism and then to gender. While these discussions are brief, the author does an excellent job raising key issues for historians of pragmatism and pragmatic theorists alike, fragmenting the putatively unified body of thought that scholars would examine. Chapter 3 traces metaphors of Americanism, the frontier, and empire in James's work, ultimately concluding that pragmatism has a "mixed heritage" (58). Building on the work of Scott Pratt in *Native Pragmatism*, Whitehead demonstrates the clear influence of manifest destiny and its metaphors upon James's descriptions of pragmatism. Rife with imagery of the frontier and the pioneer, James's lectures on pragmatism from 1898 onward depict the philosopher as "a kind of Columbus figure whose watershed discovery . . . signals the beginning of a new era" (67).

This imperial claim to Americanism, Whitehead declares, sounds a cautionary note to those who would claim pragmatism as America's signature inclusive philosophy. This is true despite James's anti-imperialism and infamous disgust with bigness, with which Whitehead also engages. Even from 1895 onward, Whitehead argues that James was tempted by American superiority, expansion, and jingoism; yet, she concludes, he did ultimately turn against the ideal of a "big" America. But given the evidence assembled for these discussions, one must ask whether this heritage is as mixed as Whitehead claims. Are pioneer-driven images of the individualist American frontier and imperial claims to the Philippines truly two competing narratives present in James's work, or are they, in fact two, sides of a Jamesian nationalism? While this chapter raises the crucial issue of pragmatism's implication in narratives of American power, it does not go far enough to explain how James's work welded together some of these seemingly competing narratives, even though he was well-known for declaring his distaste for the Philippine War. Missing, too, is a discussion of Kristin Hoganson's *Fighting for American Manhood*, which would have aptly connected James's views on character and the nation to the book's subsequent analysis of gender.

Chapters 4 and 5 connect James's presentation of pragmatism as a feminine mediator between opposites to the present-day resurgence of feminist interest in pragmatism. Chapter Four centers on a key paragraph from *Pragmatism* in which James provides a lengthy description of his philosophy while using the feminine pronoun. "She 'unstiffens' our theories," James writes; "She is completely genial" (83). Yet, while this female-gendering of pragmatism remains constant, Whitehead argues that James's other designations move fluidly between genders: tough- and tender-minded, healthy and sick souls, and rationalism and empiricism all fluctuate between male and female depending on the context and mood of the text. In one of the book's most exciting arguments, this chapter concludes that James's use of gender generally implicates the differences between the competing



ideals of manhood that clashed at the turn of the twentieth century, rather than the differences between men and women. In turn, James's emphasis on mediation between these fluidly-gendered notions acknowledged the reality of extremes and yet the rarity of their existence, thus implying that "existing gender ideals are far too thin to encompass the whole of reality" (110).

The book's final chapter addresses the same themes of gender and mediation in a different light. Beginning with a sustained critique of Richard Rorty's insistence on secularism, the chapter argues that Rorty treated religion as a feminized other—a derogation of both femininity and religion which, Whitehead argues, Rorty's feminist interlocutors have thus far overlooked. This gendered depiction continued even after Rorty's attempt to reach out to feminism in his 1990 Tanner Lectures. While Rorty's portrayal of a feminized pragmatism as the prophet crying in the wilderness inverted the usual Romantic dynamic of the virile, strong poet, it still cut the feminized discourse off from society at large, as the feminist critic Nancy Fraser argued (116). Yet, Whitehead claims, what is interesting here is that these varied views all see pragmatism as "neutral theoretical terrain," (127)—the sole space upon which rapprochement could occur between different interpretive systems. Whitehead concludes that even for feminists, pragmatism has gained rhetorical power as a seemingly viable *via media*.

The author succeeds in her attempts to destabilize pragmatism's meaning and make its heterogeneity productively obvious for future claimants upon the tradition. The book is a concise, richly sourced, and essential reminder that pragmatism has always been many-voiced. Whitehead deals deftly with many of the central figures of the neo-pragmatist renaissance and her main arguments are compelling and detailed—especially those regarding James's fluid idea of masculinity and Rorty's feminized otherization of religion. This book will prove useful to scholars looking for a perceptive, concise angle on the debate over pragmatism, and it will add innovative points to discussions on its specific subtopics, especially nationalism in James and gender in

James and Rorty. It deserves especial credit for treating pragmatism's central truism as a question: why and how has pragmatism claimed its role as mediator, and what images of mediation have played into—and been furthered by—those claims?

While Whitehead definitively establishes that the history of pragmatism is full of live debates, this book's tendency to leave important questions unanswered may dissatisfy some readers. For example, why is James's pragmatism presented as female, and what are the effects of this portrayal upon the discourses of both philosophy and gender? How does this gendered depiction relate to the kind of mediation that either James or others desire? One wonders whether this feminine vision of mediation relates to the sentimental Victorian ideal of the genial, comforting wife and of the home as the place where males go to relax, perhaps even to "unstiffen." Yet it also calls to mind James's persistent characterization of his moral theory in terms of heterosexual love, most memorably at the start of "What Makes a Life Significant?", which was delivered around the time of the 1898 Berkeley lecture in which James first defined pragmatism in terms of the solitary male explorer.<sup>1</sup> Is pragmatism a system in which mutual recognition occurs on equal footing between loving members of different sexes, or is it a cosmology in which a female mediatrix works behind the scenes to draw together reluctant men? Similar questions could be asked of Chapter 3, which provocatively assembles a myriad of pioneer metaphors from James's lectures and correspondence but does not inquire into the implications of those metaphors within James's text. For example, one wonders whether Whitehead's analysis of James's use of the frontier myth could be combined with David Leary's recent work on James and Wordsworth in order to assess the relevance of Romantic primitiveness James's understanding of truth, as well as the complicated hierarchies it implies.<sup>2</sup>

Given the author's comfort with these open questions, her tendency to foreground other historians and theorists, and her generous use of block quotations, this book can at times feel like a

long literature review. As such, as well as for the original arguments it puts forth, it is certain to be of use to pragmatic theorists and intellectual historians alike. Whitehead's dissection of James's rhetoric and imagery is especially timely given the current interest in James and literary studies. The book may be timely in another sense, as well, since pragmatism "has historical ties to periods of great cultural change" (21); we may be due for another high water mark in the constant flood of neo-pragmatist thought. The old refrains regarding division and its threat to democracy have begun to sound again. As we bemoan our inability to communicate across social chasms, will the Trump era spur wholly new forms of intellectual innovation? Or, as Whitehead hopes, will its challenges lend new vigor and diversity to this old way of thinking?

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Note for *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical & Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times*. By Romand Coles.  
Durham. NC: Duke University Press, 2016. 240 pp.  
\$23.95

**I**n *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical & Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times*, Romand Coles traverses the boundaries between scholarship and activism to articulate radical democratic politics under the conditions of neoliberalism. At the center of Coles's book is his conception of visionary pragmatism, which he develops by mediating various genres of writing and literatures to arrive at how to generate new modes of thought and action under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism. As a result, *Visionary Pragmatism* begins from the pragmatist insistence on the interconnectedness of theory and practice to contribute to a range of literatures in both contemporary democratic theory and pragmatism. Although Coles does not position himself within the pragmatist tradition, both methodologically and substantively, he puts pressure on this body of literature by reviving classical pragmatism's commitment to bringing experience to bear on the task of inquiry.

Coles begins the book by uniting his political diagnosis with personal narrative. He frames his analysis of "a hypermalignant form of capitalism" with the story of his early academic career at Duke and his family's move to a Durham ghetto (1). Coles relates the ways in which his experience talking and listening to his neighbors prompt his involvement in activism for affordable housing and drug rehabilitation. At the same time, these practices of receptivity and attention to his neighbors and to the conditions

of their life together also prompt reflection on his reading and teaching, an observation that Coles develops later in the book.

As Coles moves across these various registers of writing, thinking, and acting, he reworks the conceptual frameworks of several thinkers and writers to understand how these registers are related. Coles's appropriation of three concepts in particular should be of interest to democratic theorists and pragmatists—Pierre Bourdieu's habitus, William Connolly's resonance machine, and Naomi Klein's shock doctrine. For example, in Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Coles finds a means of understanding how individuals might reshape themselves, their communities, and their environment in "transformative" and "durable" ways (7; 31–34). He then brings this understanding to bear on his work on grassroots democracy education at Northern Arizona University. More specifically, Coles describes how students and faculty working together to build "residential learning communities, alternative gardens, a café" create enduring spaces for new connections, interactions, and confrontations with the politics shaping their lives (66).

This collage of ideas and sources functions to represent the structure of what Coles calls visionary pragmatism. The author captures visionary pragmatism in two parts. First,

[v]isionary pragmatism is pragmatic insofar as it relentlessly thinks, works, and acts on the limits of the present, drawing forth and engendering new resonances, receptivities, relationships, movements, dynamics, and forms of commonwealth, in an effort to contribute to desirable changes in our lived worlds. (175–76)

Second,

it is visionary in the sense that it maintains an intransigent practice of peering underneath, above, around, through, and beyond the cracks in the

destructive walls of this world. It moves to the edges of the megafloes of contemporary power, slips beyond the currents, lingers in the eddies, catches crosscurrents, and cultivates new sorts of flows and solidarities. (176)

In sum, *Visionary Pragmatism* is wonderfully expansive in its potential for retheorizing the very activity of political theory in an effort to make it receptive and perhaps even reconciled to the activity of political activism. Moreover, *Visionary Pragmatism* contributes to contemporary pragmatist scholarship's concern with thinking through the intersection of ethics and the environment. Perhaps most significantly, *Visionary Pragmatism* stands to reinvigorate classical pragmatism's own unique work at the "nexus of theory-practice" (175). In this way, Coles' book recalls William James's assertion that pragmatism is a "program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed."<sup>1</sup>

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. In *William James: Writings 1902–1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 509.

Review of *Evolutionary Pragmatism and Ethics*. By Beth L. Eddy. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016. 156 pp. \$84.00

**F**rom the historian's point of view, significant epochs rarely track cleanly onto calendrical units; the "long" 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, bleeds into the "short" 20<sup>th</sup> century, which itself arguably ended a decade or so before the year 2000. From the philosopher's perspective, this disjuncture is potentially even greater, for the topics and problems which arose within the intellectual landscape of the 19<sup>th</sup> century suggest in some ways that there hasn't been a 20<sup>th</sup> century at all. The controversies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are still ours and its philosophers can appear to be our contemporaries. In *Evolutionary Pragmatism and Ethics*, Beth L. Eddy takes on the task of tracing the wide-ranging effects of evolutionary theories on religious and ethical discourse in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially within the then newly emerging pragmatist thought; her purpose was to gain insights for an evaluation of the current debate sparked by new atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett.

In the first of her six chapters, Eddy sets the stage of evolutionary thinking in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a synoptic overview of its main currents. Crucial for the dialectical structure of the book is Herbert Spencer's evolutionism, which, instead of taking Darwinism and its introduction of "chanciness and contingency into natural history" (2) seriously, offers a Lamarckian account of the development of nature and society as harmonious parts of a

secularized eschatology. There is no reference to God; rather, Spencer's views were authorized by a crypto-theistic cosmic force branded as the "Unknowable."

In Eddy's narrative, T. H. Huxley functions as the antithesis to this Spencerian thesis. In Huxley's view, discussed in the second chapter, the "cosmic process" is in itself at best amoral, though with regard to the concerns and aspirations of human beings unambiguously immoral—marked by aggressive competition, senseless suffering, and arbitrariness. Such a discourse is far from a depiction of a successful, consistent, and laudable path. Like a gardener who constantly has to tend to his plants, humanity has to actively preserve its "ethical process . . . against the tide of natural selection and any physically inherited instincts" (25), instead of the Spencerian *laissez-faire* approach.

In the subsequent chapters, Eddy introduces John Dewey (Chapters 3 and 5) and then Jane Addams (Chapters 4 and 5) as offering a synthesis of the monism of nature and society (Spencer) and their antipodean dualism (Huxley). Dewey's philosophy is explicated as a critique of Huxley's proto-existentialist bifurcation in favor of an all-inclusive conception of nature. It is written as a critique of the deterministic optimism of Spencer, which Dewey loosens to a meliorism: mankind has to actively achieve the realization of the good by use of experimental social intelligence, which is nevertheless an integral part of nature itself. Additionally, Eddy does not only outline the social reformist thought of Jane Addams by means of actual and "speculative conversation[s]" (59) with Dewey and the anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin. On a deeper level, she argues that Addams needs to be fully incorporated in the canon of classical pragmatist thought. Eddy claims that if Dewey is authoritative for defining this philosophical approach, Addams's philosophy powerfully advocates the overcoming of paternalistic and passive forms of action for the benefit of democratic and cooperative forms.

In her last chapter, Eddy focuses on the latest atheism dispute, the evaluation of which is the ultimate aim of her historical excavations. With regard to the dramaturgy of the book, it is



somewhat surprising that Eddy doesn't refer back to Dewey and Addams, the central characters of her narrative in previous chapters, but rather to George Santayana and William James. James is introduced for the first time at this point by citing his "cautions about human blindness" (118) in order to criticize the egotistical tendency of the individual, groups as well as the whole human species to view themselves as an ontological necessity and the center of universe. In contrast, Santayana has only been cast so far as the skeptical supporting act with regard to Dewey's social mysticism, inherited from Hegel. For Eddy, Dewey (as a social reformer) is focused on success in an exaggeratedly one-sided manner instead of on contingency and tragedy. Thus, it is Santayana who puts the romantic egotism of attainability in its place of ultimate cosmic impotence.

Beyond this *deus ex machina*, one can appreciate Eddy's both innovative and plausible reconstruction of the current debate, making it clear that the real fault line does not run between atheists and theists, but between those who reject any form of contingency (by determinants like God, the selfish gene, the neuronal architecture—or formerly the Unknowable), and those who, like Stephen Jay Gould, recognize the irreducible cosmic, organic, and human reality of contingency, defining it as "the causal power of individual events" (121) and thus defending the plasticity and autonomy of individual life. Eddy's book thus reveals itself to be more than an academic work on one possible genealogy of pragmatism which could easily be further substantiated with F.C.S. Schiller's contingent and fallibilistic teleology developed in critical dialogue with Spencerism and which has to prove itself experimentally *in praxis*.<sup>1</sup> Rather, in accordance with its author's confession ("I think of myself as a pragmatist," xvii), this work is one that also pragmatically *does* something; it fuels engagement and hope of change against lethargy "in our contemporary context of moral malaise and spiritual fatigue" (xvi). Eddy achieves this by disrupting the notions of ethics and evolution, religion, and atheism within a debate now seemingly stuck, in order to rearrange them creatively with regard to contingency and determinism and

thereby to make them more productive as well as to raise them to the level of the discourse of our contemporaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The work is thus not only of interest to anyone concerned with intellectual history of that period and its thinkers but it is also rewarding to read for anyone interested in contemporary conceptualizations of religion, secularization, ethics, and the impact of biology and evolutionary thought on these issues.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> F. C. S. Schiller, *Riddles of the Sphinx. A Study in the Philosophy of Evolution* (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1891).

# RELATED SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS ON JAMES

November 2017 – May 2018



In recognition of the fact that James scholars are publishing articles in other academic journals, the editors feel that it is important to keep our readers informed of the diversity within Jamesian scholarship by drawing attention to relevant publications outside of *WJS*. The Periodicals section of the journal aims to provide our readers with information about related scholarly articles that address the life, work, and influence of James's thought. If you have recently published a peer-reviewed article on James or have noticed an omission from this list, please contact our Periodicals Editor, Kyle Bromhall, at [periodicals@williamjamesstudies.org](mailto:periodicals@williamjamesstudies.org) and we will include it at the next opportunity.



**Dianda, Alexis. "William James and the 'Wilfulness' of Belief." *European Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (March 2018): 647–62.**

This paper explicates and defends some of William James' more controversial claims in "The Will to Believe." After showing some of the weaknesses in standard interpretations of James' position, I turn to James' *Principles of Psychology* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* to spell out in more detail James' account of the nature of the attitudes of belief, doubt, and disbelief and link them to an account of the subject. In so doing, the moral force of the argument comes to the fore by casting the question 'Can we believe at will?' in a new light. Through a discussion of the conversion experiences of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and the kinds of self-transformations in which beliefs that once appeared dead become live (or vice versa) that appear throughout James' psychology, the moral urgency of James' position in "The Will to Believe" is clarified.

**Gundlach, H. "William James and the Heidelberg Fiasco." *History of Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2018): 47–72.**

Urged on by his father to become a physician instead of a painter, William James pursued three evasion stratagems. First, to avoid becoming a practitioner, he declared that he wanted to specialize in physiology. Based upon this premise, he left for Germany in the spring of 1867. The second step was giving up general physiology and announcing that he would specialize in the nervous system and psychology. Based upon this premise, he declared that he would go to Heidelberg and study with Helmholtz and Wundt. However, he then deferred going there. When, at

last, he was urged by an influential friend of his father's to accompany him to Heidelberg, he employed his default stratagem: He simply fled. He returned home after three terms in Europe without enrolling at a single university. There is no evidence that he had learned anything there about psychology or experimental psychology, except, possibly, by reading books. James's "Heidelberg fiasco" was the apogee of his evasion of his father's directive. A dense fog of misinformation surrounds his stay in Heidelberg to this day. By analyzing circumstances and context, this article examines the fiasco and places it in the pattern of his behavior during his stay in Europe. Nevertheless, experiencing this fiasco potentially shaped James's ambivalent attitude toward experimental psychology on a long-term basis.

**Jensen, Graham. "Beyond the Temple and the Cave: William James, E.J. Pratt, and Christian-Spiritualist Syncretisms." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 1–26.**

Although the Canadian poet E.J. Pratt had lifelong attachments to the Methodist and then United Church, critics have struggled to reconcile the various aspects of Pratt's religious vision as they materialize in his writing. Focusing on one largely ignored aspect of that vision, this article examines Pratt's mystical and spiritualist poetry of the 1920s and 1930s. More precisely, it considers Pratt's blending of spiritualist and Christian thought in relation to the syncretistic, non-dogmatic, anti-institutional notion of "personal religion" advanced in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, thus illuminating at once both Pratt's religious commitments and a seldom-discussed point of contact between James's philosophy and modernist

literature. Ultimately, this article argues that, as a result of his exposure to James and to spiritualism in the crucible of Toronto's liberal Protestant milieu, Pratt – like many other writers of his time – began to move beyond the polarities of personal and institutional religion.

**Moon, Jane S., Catherine M. Kuza, and Manisha S. Desai. “William James, Nitrous Oxide, and the Anaesthetic Revelation.” *Journal of Anesthesia History* 4, no. 1 (Jan 2018): 1–6.**

William James greatly influenced the fields of psychology, philosophy, and religion during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This was the era of Modernism, a time when many writers rejected the certainty of Enlightenment ideals. Positivism, which rose to prominence in the early 19th century, had emphasized physical phenomena, empirical evidence, and the scientific method. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), with its theory of natural selection, provided an explanation for the evolution of species apart from a divine Creator. Within this context, William James served as a “mediator between scientific agnosticism and the religious view of the world.” James' own experience inhaling nitrous oxide played an important role in shaping his views. For James, the use of nitrous oxide served a key role in elucidating some of his most central ideas: 1) the value of religion, and the emphasis on mysticism and revelation (as opposed to theology and doctrine) as religion's foundation; 2) the universe as pluralistic (as opposed to absolutist, constant, eternal), driven by chance, experience, and change.

**Pott, Heleen. "Why Bad Moods Matter: William James on Melancholy, Mystic Emotion, and the Meaning of Life." *Philosophia* 45, no. 4 (Dec 2017): 1635–45.**

A number of philosophers have called into question the wishful thinking reading of "The Will to Believe." According to them, William James is not encouraging us to will what we want to believe; rather, he is making the case that under certain epistemic conditions we have a right to believe. I contend that this right to believe thesis, while an important part of James's essay, fails to capture his full view. First, I inquire into what James means by 'our passional nature.' I distinguish three roles the passional nature plays with respect to belief. I then illustrate how each role of the passional nature informs three related arguments within the "The Will to Believe." Ultimately, I argue that James is not simply advocating the permissibility of religious belief. His primary thesis is that individuals who have a right to believe ought to believe.

**Vandenberghe, Frédéric. "Experiments with Truth. A Sociological Variation on William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 48, no. 1 (March 2018): 31–47.**

William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* is a classic psycho-philosophical study of the experience of the sacred and of its practical effects on the ordinary life of extraordinary persons. In a pragmatic variation of Kant's proof of god's existence, James uses personal accounts of converts to empirically demonstrate that there's "something" that has causal effects on the well-being of the person. While the article is largely sympathetic to James explorations of the mystical, it offers a sociological

variation on the *Varieties* that foregrounds the social, cultural and political aspects of religion.

**Williams, Neil W. “Absolutism, Relativism and Anarchy: Alain Locke and William James on Value Pluralism.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 53, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 400–24.**

This paper aims to compare the pluralistic theories of James and Locke on the three criteria by which Locke proposes that any pluralistic axiology should be assessed: normativity, objectivity and loyalty. A pluralistic account of value must be able to account for the normativity of particular value systems without appealing to universal standards. It must be able to provide some objective ground for value so that different values can be constructively compared across cultures, without becoming monistic. And it must provide an account which still allows people to find their particular values meaningful and motivating, whilst at the same time encouraging tolerance for differing values. The conclusion of the paper will be that, despite Locke’s accusation of anarchism, James’s appeal to a limited form of realism means that his theory is better placed to meet these three criteria.