

Review of *Experiencing William James: Belief in a Pluralistic World*, by James Campbell. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017.
398 pp. US\$35.

William James's work is widely read for its clear thinking on a breadth of topics and, thus, commonly embraced and utilized by scholars in a variety of fields. Philosophers, psychologists, and theologians alike rightly believe that James is relevant to their respective disciplines. But this raises a problem: James's readers from one academic discipline often fail to situate and understand him within the broader context of his multi-disciplinary writings. A philosopher will know *Pragmatism* as well as *A Pluralistic Universe* and *Radical Empiricism*, but may never have read James's psychological or religious studies; a psychologist will know *The Principles of Psychology* as well as *Psychology: Briefer Course*, but is unlikely to have studied James's philosophical or religious works. A theologian may be very familiar with *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and the title essay of *The Will to Believe*, but may have missed or misused James's other psychological and philosophical writings. Yet this problem is even worse: James was an unusually well-rounded scholar, whereas most contemporary academics are specialists, and thus a guide is needed and useful for those exploring less-familiar territories within James-land.

In *Experiencing William James: Belief in a Pluralistic World*, James Campbell provides such a guide and a corrective to narrow

readings of James. By correlating James's multiple works via common thematic threads, methodologies, and philosophies, he aims to connect and contextualize the full body of James's thinking. The ultimate effect of the book is to provide readers with a new "experience" of William James.

Campbell, Distinguished University Professor in Philosophy at the University of Toledo, is exceedingly well-versed in Jamesian literature and the legacy of Jamesian application and criticism. His doctoral training four decades ago was in large part under the guidance of the giant John J. McDermott, the first president of the William James Society (this journal's publisher), and Campbell himself recently served as president of the William James Society. Further, this book is his third in a four-volume analysis of American pragmatism, a series that also includes Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Dewey. Thus, Campbell's new book also keeps James in conversation with these other American philosophical thinkers, illuminating areas in which their thinking coalesces or collides. For example, John Dewey is notably present in chapters on "Pragmatism," "Radical Empiricism and Pluralism," and "Ethics and Social Thought," where Campbell demonstrates differences between James's and Dewey's philosophies, including their criticisms of each other, as well as lines of pragmatic thinking common to both.

Campbell's arguments are succinct and cogent, and after Chapter 1 on "Preliminary Considerations," the book's chapters are organized logically according to the principal themes of Jamesian thought: (2) "Psychology and Philosophy," (3) "Rationality and Belief," (4) "Pragmatism," (5) "Radical Empiricism and Pluralism," (6) "Ethics and Social Thought," and (7) "Religion." Campbell's appreciative tone, numerous quotations, and descriptive style allows the voices of both Campbell and James to be heard clearly, creating a poetic and enjoyable reading experience that parallels that of reading James's own body of literature. All chapters follow a topical organization, yet the themes of pragmatism, radical empiricism, and pluralism (as both philosophies and methods) buttress and link each

of the various topics. To provide a feel for his approach, we will comment below on the first and last substantive chapters.

In “Psychology and Philosophy,” Campbell invents new language to reflect James’s unique and innovative perspective. “Regardless of” James’s “shifting academic titles” (i.e., as Professor in anatomy, physiology, psychology, philosophy), Campbell argues that “it is better to consider him a hybrid,” that is, a “psycholopher.”¹ This chapter, thus, opens up a fresh understanding of James’s psychologic-philosophic legacy as well as renews an exploration of his continued influence on contemporary thought. *Experiencing William James* presents an overall vision of William James’s psychological contributions by grounding his thought within his context and with the issues of his own contemporary interlocutors. For example, James engages psychology as a science via a descriptive and physiological approach that locates human patterns of thought and states of consciousness within new scientific understandings of the body, i.e., within the plasticity and neural pathways of the brain. He also incorporates philosophic metaphors, like consciousness as a stream of water or a stalk of bamboo,² and he posits pragmatic evaluations by considering the ramifications of states of consciousness in literature, architecture, social life, and spiritual practices.³ By attending to consciousness and its bodily and embodied conditions, James scientifically grounds a field often obscured in abstraction.

In the final chapter on “Religion,” Campbell outlines central points in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (treating it as a primary text) and traces its connection to James’s other works, including *A Pluralistic Universe*,⁴ *Pragmatism*,⁵ and his collection of essays. Campbell thus highlights James’s pragmatic and radically empirical approach to the study of individual religious experience. Unlike *The Varieties*, Campbell’s chapter on “Religion” does not labor over a legion of examples and lengthy quotations. Instead, the chapter homes in on James’s own conclusions. The work echoes James’s own position in positing religious experience as a viable and necessary area of philosophic inquiry, even though Campbell critiques James’s final conclusions; for example, that James neglects

to consider the negative repercussions of religious beliefs in his determination to defend religious experience and the right to believe. Curiously, however, the chapter does not address the many ways that *The Principles* informed James's approach to studying religious experience in *The Varieties*. Campbell ends "Religion" with a personal reflection, honestly admitting his own potential bias that he may be reading James through a "spiritually myopic" positionality.⁶

The greatest strength of *Experiencing William James* is its milestone correlation of James's variety of topics, methods, and conceptual tools. Although, in our personal histories, many readers initially engaged James through focused/isolated commentaries or reprinted essays on particular Jamesian issues (e.g., "habit," "will"), Campbell effectively engages particular Jamesian ideas in an exploration that coheres with James's overall thinking throughout his myriad works (e.g., habit's constructive role in conserving physical and mental energy and destructive role in maintaining social institutions and the status quo at times when social change is most needed).⁷ James, of course, does not always agree with himself, in large part because he is always sensitive to align his message with the needs of different audiences at different times and located in different social contexts. Campbell's contextualized correlations, similarly, demonstrate sensitivity to James's conflicting allegiances, uncertainties, and creative paradoxes. Thus, Campbell's examination of Jamesian thought advances its integrity, establishes its cohesion for continued scholarship, and translates his ideas to modern sensibilities. For example, Campbell skillfully mines and merges James's thinking on race and class, emphasizing James's progressive thinking in these areas while also exposing his shortcomings.⁸ *Experiencing William James*, in sum, offers an accessible entry into James's religious studies for philosophers and psychologists, into psychology for philosophers and religious studies scholars, and into philosophy for psychologists and scholars of religion. That said, it also is true that Campbell himself stays ever the philosopher, focusing primarily on the philosophical relevance of James's psychology and religious studies.

One area in which the book might perhaps be improved is in the analysis of pluralism, which would benefit from more engagement with today's particular landscape of religious pluralism, interreligious movements, and contemporary varieties of modern psychologies. Campbell wonders in the preface if his work may have a "historical feel," such that James may remain "an exclusively historical figure."⁹ But, in fairness, perhaps that is a different project—religious pluralism experienced today is distinct from James's context, and the relevance of James's ideas, which still pepper all of the contemporary varieties of psychology. Most certainly, the overall work establishes James's continued relevance for current religious and psychological scholarship, as well as both historical and contemporary philosophy, by carefully refuting much of the criticism James's work has received over the years. Nevertheless, the book's subtitle, *Belief in a Pluralistic World*, feels overstated.

In conclusion, Campbell succeeds in correlating James's multiple works via common thematic threads. He does this, in part, by fashioning useful links between James's psychology, pragmatism, pluralism, radical empiricism, and religious studies—emphasizing the importance of dialogue between the allied disciplines. Campbell's work recapitulates James's diverse thinking and synthesizes James's range of topics much more cohesively than James himself ever managed. *Experiencing William James* connects a range of substantive material in a holistic and productive portrait of pragmatism and pluralism. The work's full picture of James's thought is a challenge to the reader to pursue a life of pragmatic responsibility and plurality, and it will likely be generative of further application of James to a variety of fields and topics.

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¹ Campbell, *Experiencing William James*, 25.

² Campbell, 44.

³ Campbell, 50.

⁴ Campbell, 267.

⁵ Campbell, 282.

⁶ Campbell, 283.

⁷ Campbell, 215.

⁸ Campbell, 221-224.

⁹ Campbell, x.