

2021 WILLIAM JAMES SOCIETY PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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This Presidential Address, delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the aftermath of the storming of the United States Capitol Building, reflects upon the affective insights that James and those who study his work might gain and offer in reckoning publicly with current affairs.



I come here today to deliver the Presidential Address to the members of the William James Society. I need to begin by noting that one of the more jarring things in these last twelve months has been summoning the wherewithal to deal appropriately with this talk. In other years, this would have been no special problem for me. Find something curious in James's corpus to dwell upon, perhaps spurred by some decades old marginal note in my critical editions or some scribble in the notebook I used in my failed search through the archives of Harris Manchester College, Bodleian Library, and the Oxfordshire History Center for clues as to why in god's name British philosophers showed up in such large numbers for James's Hibbert Lectures.

I tried to do this thing I am trained for, this thing that at this point in my career comes so easily. I really did. But I've found that I cannot deliver such an address. The words emerged as they always have, and they live now in a still-untitled draft essay on local reception of *A Pluralistic Universe* that may, or may not, see the light of day. (I will offer this upshot to those who are curious, or who might, like me, find themselves thinking it worthwhile to spend months combing through archives at Oxford: there's nothing much there to help with this question. I have no idea. They came, there aren't good records of who was there, and those I could track down didn't seem to have made much hay about it one way or another. James left town and they moved on.)

What *has* surfaced for me these last weeks, as today approached and as the world continued to devastate, is one of my most prized possessions, which I have to confess here was illicitly swiped from Houghton Library. I was in graduate school, and had received a small research grant that funded my pilgrimage to Cambridge to visit the James collection there. I was in the depths of dissertation avoidance, and had used that to convince myself that no matter how completely I trusted the brilliance of my friend and idol John J. McDermott, there *could* be some overlooked key among the handwritten manuscripts that would become the critical edition's *Manuscript Lectures and Notes*. I poured through page after page, first looking for words that McDermott had somehow failed to

transcribe (another failed effort), and then becoming enthralled by the feeling of James's handwriting, the contemporaneousness I experienced as my eyes flowed with the movement of his pen. By this point, the words became secondary—the point was to be with him, to float in his stream. Amid one of these thralls, I looked down and almost shrieked. Thankfully, I stopped myself because one doesn't do such things in Harvard libraries, and after all I had my scholarly career to consider. Composing myself, I confirmed with the edge of my Houghton-branded pencil that what my eyes had just barely glimpsed was indeed there, peeking out from the sewn binding of the notebook. It was an eyelash. It was *James's* eyelash. I just *knew* it. I fought with myself for at least an hour. "That's most likely *your own* damned eyelash," I argued. "Or possibly John J's." "No, it's James's. I need it to be his, so it is. QED." Then the ethical dilemmas began: do I leave it where it is? Do I notify someone, call in for archivist backup? "It's not *confirmably* James's," I argued, so has no probative value. The arguments went on and on, ending at some point with a flurry of furtive glances and some swift but carefully concealed hand movements. Then, precious eyelash folded into a spare Kleenex from my pocket, it was done: "I discovered it. It's my discovery. It's mine." It sits now in a sealed jar in my desk, having moved from state to state to state, institution to institution to institution. And, of all the things I have, it's the one I want to be buried with (assuming this confession doesn't result in its confiscation).

That eyelash, sitting in its little jar, nags at me and pulls my attention. Staring at it summons a feeling which, if I must name it, is something like a *with-ness* that is both ecstatic and mundane. But more honestly it is a warm flutter in my gut. Staring at it makes time and space spiral as I feel *with* my former selves—in Houghton, in Illinois, in San Antonio—*with* James at his desk preparing a lecture, *with* McDermott outside the Academic Building at Texas A&M as he smokes a pipe, *with* myself sobbing in an airplane seat as we taxied up to SFO, having just reflexively checked the post-landing "ping" from my phone that told me of John's death.

I linger today on this eyelash experience because (a) it's a mildly amusing story, and (b) because it brings me to something that I feel is worth saying today, in this bewildering collective moment, to this audience of fellow Jamesians: *affect is where it's at*.

I say this in affirmation of and gratitude to those who have been fleshing out affect in their work, Jamesians and otherwise, in the last two decades. Shannon Sullivan, Teresa Brennan, Richard Shusterman, Anna Munster, Clara Fisher, Sara Ahmed, Antonio Damasio, and so many others. The body of work surrounding what is sometimes called the "affective turn" is large, it's growing, and it's beautiful. I say this also to encourage the James, James-adjacent, and James-curious folks who aren't already working with his insights into affect, in the hopes that we might each in our own ways engage in this work AND that we might all listen carefully to the questions, reflections, and practices surrounding affect that are emerging in and across a huge range of fields, including growing bodies of work in media studies, ethnic studies, gender studies, psychology, neuroscience, medicine, history, and literature.

WHAT? AND WHY AFFECT?

Affect theorists, like all theorists, disagree—often passionately—in carving up their subject matter. In particular, the parsing and circumscription of Feeling, Affect, and Emotion is the topic of much debate. Frequently at issue is a concern over dualisms: mind-body, self-others. For my purposes today, I'll set aside these significant distinctions for the sake of hear-able prose, on the condition that we all agree that where you think you might hear a dualism, it isn't one. I'll use feeling and affect and emotion fairly interchangeably, following James's regular practice.

From *Principles* to *Radical Empiricism*, James sought repeatedly to correct what he took to be a longstanding error in psychology and philosophy, namely, the theoretical separation of and intractable problematization of mind and body, thought and felt object. The material flow of experience is, for James, primarily affective and secondarily cognitive, and only then when affective stimuli and affectively conditioned habits of attention surface a

portion of the affective flux to be worked upon by the body-as-thinker. The results of that thinking must ultimately pass the certifying test of affective satisfaction: the idea must establish affectively satisfactory results or face the axe. In *Principles*, James insists on the primacy of bodily affect, prefiguring his later postulation of a world of “pure experience” in which thought and acts of naming are but one type of experience: “However it may be with such strong feelings as doubt and anger, about weaker feelings, and about the *relations to each other of all feelings*, we find ourselves in continual error and uncertainty the moment we are called on to name and class, and not merely to feel.”¹ This sets the stage for later Affect theorists to postulate affective fields and affective economies like James’s energetics, e.g. Lauren Guilmette: “I find that ‘affect’ can generally be described today as an ‘energetic’ force circulated between bodies, enhancing some and draining others as an effect of given relations of power.”²

These later Affect theories and what is sometimes called the “affective turn” in various disciplines draw significantly from James, adopting and adapting his affective psychology and ontology in the service of critical work that seeks to unearth and upend the derogatory associations of feelings and bodies as “lower” forms of human experience, enacted and valued only by those “lesser” beings whose natures therefore require and justify their domination. This theoretical engagement seeks to explore and critique the political and ethical abuse and misappropriations of emotions and feelings; reconfigure the place of emotion and affect within political and political theorizing; and revalue the emotive and affective investment in social norms.³ It is an effort to assert the primary value of affect, to insist upon the care for the affective environment that constitutes all living, and to create socially just practices and institutions that create the conditions under which marginalized lives and bodies *matter*.

WHY ADDRESS THIS TO THE WILLIAM JAMES SOCIETY?

I offer that a concern with bodily primacy and the “thickness” of affect over rarefied abstract cognition is an abiding undercurrent in

James's work, a thread of interest that weaves through his work in psychology, religious experience, pragmatism, radical empiricism, pluralism, metaphysics, and ethics. If this is right, and if James studies might be thought of as a hallway not unlike that he imagines for pragmatism, then affect could be the floor runner, a path we might all tread upon, a way to link, however imperfectly, insights from one part of James's corpus to others. Might those of us who, like me, find ourselves secretly wishing that James had never written the *Will to Believe* find, at last, something in liveness taken as affect that illuminates his relational metaphysics? Even were we to tightly circumscribe our Society's interest to James's published writings and nothing more, a collective embrace of affect as a pivot concept, a hall-runner, could help us to inquire together more readily. Our Society's disciplinary inclusiveness is among its greatest strengths. Scholars of religion, psychology, history, American Studies, philosophy, and metaphysics may, we hope, find a seat at this table. We struggle, though, at realizing our ideal, in part because the philosophers did the initial organizing and because the Eastern APA meeting has always been well-timed, affordable, and with lovely weather </sarcasm>. Expansion to other disciplinary venues is, I think, something we should continue to work on; AND I offer that we should consider ways to make our cross-disciplinarity more accessible and inviting. ONE way of doing that might be gatherings and groups, intentionally multidisciplinary and perhaps thematic. Participants there could feel free to engage in "high Jamesian theory," but develop and share a cross-disciplinary glossary. ANOTHER way might be focused efforts to be more generous and transparent when we dip into our various scholarly vernaculars, offering more intentional paths in when we are together, helping the newcomers and the disciplinary outsiders to get a "hook" (as John McDermott used to say) in the conversation. These are not mutually exclusive, of course. And in any case, if I'm right about the role of affect in James's various threads of inquiry, a centering around it could prove useful—affect as theme, glossaries and bibliographies of Jamesian affect, or heightened collective attention to the *affects* of our prose and speech.

Connected to, but more important than our Society's ability to talk to itself is our Society's ability to be with, respond to, learn from, and spur reflection on the emergent problems of our world. In this time of distance, the fundamentally affective nature of reality *hits* us. Thus the affective nature of *all* real problems hits us. Eyes ache at the shift to uncountable hours of 2D LED encounters, leg muscles hesitate at each step with the still-shaky measure of two paces from others. The top portions of our live bodies are presented to themselves in simulcast Brady Bunch boxes alongside those of our students and colleagues (or, worse, "spotlighted" to make our speech acts into internal monologues made visible). The interstitial spaces between—between masked faces, between the walls of empty corridors, and in the plexiglassed chasms separating students' desks—these all become part of our collective register in newly palpable ways. Brown infants shriek in concrete warehouses, their cries and those of their mothers' rippling through acres of chain-link cages as the children are torn from Brown breasts by white hands. Black fists rise in toxic air announcing in stereo, "I can't breathe," echoing George Floyd's desperate plea for breath crushed beneath white knees. Kevlar-armored bodies in pixelated desert camouflage and bare chests clad in aryan ink and the pelts of woodland creatures fill the U.S. Capitol, stalking their prey, hoping to strip the suits and ties—and skin—from those they believe in their guts are lizard-people.

Be it because of the catastrophic scale of up-ended routines, the magnitude and ubiquity of the uncertainties, the frequency of emergence of yet new horrors, or the sudden and nearly wholesale conversion in communication, we are for a moment, in our everyday lives, collectively *noticing* affect, attending to it, puzzled by it, talking about it, worried about it. We talk about the "before-times," noticing in retrospect how orderly it all seemed, how simple. And, in the next breath, we admit that it wasn't, really. All that now-noticed affect previously lay unattended-to, our habits micro-adjusting to changes and our various privileges easing our inattentiveness to the more troublesome aspects of our affective lives.

This is the time. This is the moment where we can seize upon our personal and collective *noticing*. Before this window closes, we have a unique opportunity to (a) seek out and listen to the affect-narratives that normally don't surface—the marginalized, un-cared-for, or alien in ourselves and others; (b) explore the logic of affect, its movements, transmissions, conditions, and consequences; (c) put to the test various notions and theories of affect, feeling, and emotions; and, finally, possibly, (d) by attending to the deleterious and constructive forces at work in our affective lives, help to critique and rework the practices and structures that condition our experience. Many of us—many of you—are engaged in this work. So that I might learn, so that we might better engage it together, I'd like to use what remains of my time to hear from you what you're up to, how it's going, and how we, the William James Society, might collaborate and contribute.

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NOTES

- ¹ James, *Principles*, 190.
- ² Guilmette, "Teresa Brennan," 592.
- ³ See Athanasίου *et al.*