Perception as a Moral Behavior in *The Principles of Psychology* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

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This article argues that perception, like habit, for James, is both an automatic process and susceptible of formation. It considers how he defines and situates perception in relation to sensation as well as other related processes in *Principles*. It underlines the continuity between the centrality of perception in *Principles* and in *Varieties*, where an individual's habitual mode of perception, as James categorizes it, becomes the basis for a differentiation into two different religious "types." By focusing on the type distinguished by what it does *not* see—what he calls "healthy-mindedness"—we can gain insight into perception as a moral behavior and explore ways we might become better perceivers. The implications of this work are far-reaching and profound—not only for ethical formation but for advancing a politics of inclusion rather than exclusion, which, if taken seriously, could further movements toward racial and economic justice.

William James Studies • Volume 17 • Number 1 • Spring 2021 • pp. 9–33

In *The Principles of Psychology*, James describes a curious phenomenon he refers to as a 'systematized anaesthesia.'[1] The anesthesia he has in mind is not primarily an insensitivity to pain; it has, rather, to do with perception. James discusses this phenomenon in two places in *Principles*: first in "The Relations of Minds to Other Things" and then in the second-to-last chapter, "Hypnotism." The "anesthesia" James reports in these examples is induced by hypnotic suggestion and takes the form of instructed ignorance: upon receiving a suggestion to remain unaware of some particular person or object, the subject will not see, hear, or otherwise perceive the specified object. Another name for the phenomenon, which James cites from the early medical literature and is still current in some psychoanalytic circles today, is "negative hallucination."[2] If "hallucination" denotes perceiving a stimulus that is not present, then its negative case refers to *not* perceiving something that *is* present. James prefers the term "systematized anesthesia," however, to describe this phenomenon. The word "anesthesia" represents well the insensitivity to the stimulus effected by the instruction to ignore. But what does it mean for an anesthesia to be "systematized"?

To address this question, this article underlines the continuity between James's characterization of perception (and host of other related processes, such as sensation, attention, selection, and interest) in *Principles* with his use of perception to demarcate different religious attitudes or temperaments in *Varieties*, focusing on the structural similarities between his descriptions of the "healthy-minded" condition and of the anesthetic hypnotic subject. Finally, the paper explores the ethical and political ramifications of our systematized *im*perceptions in the context of James's essay "On a Certain Blindness," with special attention to issues of race and economic justice.

"INNER" AND "OUTER" PERCEPTION

Gerald Myers observes that when James wrote *Principles*, published in 1890, most texts in the fledgling discipline of psychology began

with sensation.[3] Sensation was often treated as a fundament of experience, or as a primary building block of the mind. This arrangement implied one could begin with the senses and, from there, ascend to systems of increasingly greater complexity. In ordering *Principles*, however, James takes the opposite tack. After initial chapters that position psychology as a science and discuss its methods and assumptions, he prepares the reader with chapters on habit, the "stream of thought," self-consciousness, attention, conception, discrimination and comparison, association, the perception of time, and memory before treating sensation.[4] In fact, James's chapter on sensation and the chapters on perception that follow begin the second volume, so this issue is right at the heart of his text, literally and figuratively.

When James does finally arrive at sensation, he makes the transition with the terse, energetic remark: "After inner perception, outer perception!"[5] If sensation belongs to "outer" perception, what does James mean by "inner" perception? The two chapters directly preceding "Sensation" are "The Perception of Time" and "Memory." At the beginning of the former, he explains that both chapters "deal with what is sometimes called internal perception" —a division typical of post-Kantian thinkers in the nineteenth century.[6] The "inner" sort of perception that James refers to at the beginning of the chapter on Sensation has to do with the continuity of our mental life across time. It will turn out that the inner-facing aspect of perception involves much more than time and memory, but these provide the conceptual ballast for understanding how the continuity of individual consciousness impacts the process of sensation. Taken together, these two chapters form an "inner perception" diptych preceding Sensation, which itself forms part of a triptych that James will mark out as "outer": one that "treat[s] of the processes by which we cognize at all times the present world of space and the materials things which it contains."[7] This grouping of chapters is "Sensation," "Imagination," and "The Perception of Things."

It may seem strange to modern readers that imagination is interposed between sensation and perception and grouped among

the "outer" perception chapters. However, James understands imagination as directly linked to sensation, and as, in some sense, dependent on it. Following empiricists, such as Locke, whom he quotes near the chapter's outset, James roots imagination in sensation: "Sensations, once experienced, modify the nervous organism, so that copies of them arise again in the mind after the original outward stimulus is gone."[8] These copies that arise—as distinguished from after-images, which he assigns to sensation proper—are the product of the imagination, which James understands to be "the faculty of reproducing copies of originals once felt."[9] But the reproduction is not merely mechanical; see James's distinction between the 'reproductive' vs. 'productive' imagination in the next line.[10] The imagination may recombine copies creatively in ways that produce novel stimuli that, in some cases, can even be mistaken for sensation itself.[11] These outer perception chapters follow a kind of Goldilocks pattern, then, delineating the two endpoints before turning to the process of perception itself, which falls somewhere within the shaded area between and participates in both. (Sensation and imagination are not the only two processes perception stands in relation to, but in this triptych they serve as foils to help delineate it by contrast).

By conceiving of perception as a process with both an inner and an outer aspect, James simultaneously narrows and extends the range of perception's definition. On the one hand, perception is broad enough to encompass almost all features of our mental and physical life; on the other hand, he invests "perception" with a very particular meaning, formed by its relationship to those other processes that subtend it, and from which it is experientially inseparable. When James begins his chapter on sensation, he cannot speak of sensation without immediately invoking perception. Later, in "The Perception of Things," the first chapter devoted explicitly to perception, James recalls the reader to his discussion of sensation. For him, these terms are analytical abstractions that describe a continuous process, with each end bleeding into the other. That James takes such pains to disambiguate sensation and perception terminologically is proof of how imbricated they are in practice:

> *The words Sensation and Perception* do not carry very definitely discriminated meanings in popular speech, and in Psychology also their meanings run into each other. Both of them name processes in which we cognize an objective world; both (under normal conditions) need the stimulation of incoming nerves ere they can occur; Perception always involves Sensation as a portion of itself; and Sensation in turn never takes place in adult life without Perception also being there.[12]

Thus, perception includes sensation but is not reducible to it, and sensation always already involves perception. James concludes that sensation and perception "are therefore names for different cognitive *junctions,* not for different sorts of mental *fact*."[13] In other words, they do not exist as independent entities or processes. Though he distinguishes these terms definitionally, his metaphor emphasizes points of contact: "junctions" evokes way-stations, intersections, or crossings on a journey—liminal spaces, like railway depots, that are characterized by fluidity and the mingling of inrushing and outgoing traffic. Signals travel multi-directionally, coalesce; some go no further, and others continue on their way. Perception and sensation may be useful terms to label different stations, but the point is that they are not simple or static entities; the conceptual space they occupy is marked by interchange.

Another way of stating the matter is that the analytically identified difference in kind, which causes James to assign sensation and perception as different labels, is in practice one of gradation:

> The nearer the object cognized comes to being a simple quality like 'hot,' 'cold,' 'red,' 'noise,' 'pain,' apprehended irrelatively to other things, the more the state of mind approaches pure sensation. The fuller of relations the object is, on the contrary; the more it is something classed, located, measured, compared, assigned to a function, etc., etc.; the more unreservedly do we call the state of mind a perception, and the relatively smaller is the part in it which sensation plays.[14]

The process of sensation, then, is characterized by "*the extreme simplicity of its object or content*."[15] Perception, in contrast, is that fuller process that brings the sensation into contact with our mental furnishings, our selves, our stored minds, and our bodily remembrances.[16] Crucially, though James marks out sensation as an earlier stop on the journey, his model of perception highlights the multidirectionality of the process, the signals traveling to-and-fro.

Perception's situatedness at the blurred boundary of "inner" and "outer," self and world, its central position in relation to other mental and physical processes means that, though James gives it a specific definition, it encompasses a very broad range of mental and physical operations. It is for this reason that I selected the term "perception" to focus on in this article: precisely for its usefulness as a broader generic term for the process by which our minds take in information about, shape, and are shaped by the world around us. More specifically, my argument about perception as a moral behavior focuses on the selective function of perception; that is, on the aspect of selection that determines which perceptions are admitted to consciousness and which are not. Note the double dissociation: it is not only that some stimuli are admitted and the rest are passively rejected by default, but active rejections are possible, too. Thus even more specifically, my argument concerns not what gets in, but what gets left out. It is these omissions of perception which the rest of the paper will have to consider and account for.

ON A CERTAIN PARADOX OF BLINDNESS

One of the most striking instances of these perceptual omissions occurs in the situation of hypnosis mentioned at the outset of this paper. The subject is made anesthetic to a particular stimulus. Regardless of whether there is another explanation for this behavior, James cites it at face value in his exposition both places it appears in *Principles*.[17] In the case of the instruction to ignore a particular individual, for example, he explains:

> Other things related to the person to whom one has been made blind may also be shut out of consciousness. What he says is not

> heard, his contact is not felt, objects which he takes from his pocket are not seen, etc. Objects which he screens are seen as if he were transparent. Facts about him are forgotten, his name is not recognized when pronounced. Of course there is great variety in the completeness of this systematic extension of the suggested anæsthesia, but one may say that some tendency to it always exists.[18]

James is describing here the tendency for this ignorance or non-perception to generalize, even across sensory modalities. The instruction not to see a given object is extended to other modes of noticing, too, so that the object is neither heard nor felt in addition to not being seen. Generalization occurs *within* modalities as well: note that other visual effects related to that object's position in space and movement are also excluded from the subject's awareness.

The subject finds ways to implement the hypnotic suggestion that go beyond rote application, as the subject is able to achieve the desired effect even without specific instructions as to how to perform it. Systematization results when something like a creative incorporation of the principle has occurred: the subject systematically excludes items from consciousness that conflict with the underlying theme of the instruction. On the preceding page James uses the term "systematized" to describe a process by which "the rest of consciousness is shut off, excluded, dissociated from" a suggestion that conflicts with the subject's morality.[19] All this activity occurs outside of conscious awareness. Thus systematization has to do with the extension of the perceptual blockage, or the sequestering of information from our consciousness, whereby other perceptual processes are recruited to exclude this information systematically.

But how do we know where, exactly, the perceptual blockage is occurring? James carefully tries to disambiguate the type of "blindness" induced by hypnosis from true sensory blindness. [20] He cites an experiment designed to rule out the sensory apparatus:

> The anæsthesia is not a genuine sensorial one, for if you make a real red cross (say) on a sheet of white paper invisible to an

> hypnotic subject, and yet cause him to look fixedly at a dot on the paper on or near the cross, he will, on transferring his eye to a blank sheet, see a bluish-green after-image of the cross.[21]

James concludes: “This proves that it has impressed his sensibility. He has *felt* it, but not *perceived* it. He has actively ignored it, refused to recognize it, as it were.”[22] Before the availability of neuroimaging studies, James adverts to this experiment to gather information as directly from the sensory organs of a person as possible. Though the individual denied seeing the original object, the eyes nonetheless processed the image, as evidenced by the fact that the subject *is* able to see the afterimage that is the byproduct of the sensory process. The conclusion James draws from this phenomenon, which he italicizes to emphasize its importance, is “*we must never take a person’s testimony, however sincere, that he has felt nothing, as proof positive that no feeling has been there*.”[23] To recall his language above, though the red cross was not *perceived* or consciously registered, nevertheless it was *felt*—registered by the senses.

James cites one further modification of a study that throws the paradox at the heart of this (im)perception into high relief:

> Make a stroke on paper or blackboard, and tell the subject it is not there, and he will see nothing but the clean paper or board. Next, he not looking, surround the original stroke with other strokes exactly like it, and ask him what he sees. He will point out one by one all the new strokes and omit the original one every time, no matter how numerous the new strokes may be, or in what order they are arranged.”[24]

The exercise proves that the subject is not blind to the general type of the stimulus, only the one he has specifically been instructed not to see. The paradox with regard to this particular stimulus, then, in James’s terms, is “that he must *distinguish* it first in order thus to ignore it.”[25] He explains that the subject

> is blind only to one individual stroke of that kind in a particular position on the board or paper,—that is, to a particular complex object; and, paradoxical as it may seem to say so, he must distinguish it with great accuracy from others like it, in order to remain blind to it when the others are brought near. He 'apperceives' it, as a preliminary to not seeing it at all! How to conceive of this state of mind is not easy.[26]

The paradox is that in order not to see a particular object, the subject must first recognize the object he is not going to see. In simplest form: he perceives what not to perceive. The paradox is all the more befuddling because the events James identifies have not merely a sequential but causal relationship. That is, the paradox is not merely 'he sees and then does not see,' but 'he sees *so that* he does not see.' This type of ignorance is enabled by the prior identification of what the subject must remain ignorant.

Although the scene enacted under hypnosis may be entertaining as a parlor trick, the implications of the paradox it exposes are much more far-reaching and even disturbing. James recognizes them and is fascinated by what they reveal about the organization of the self:

> We have, then, to deal in these cases neither with a blindness of the eye itself, nor with a mere failure to notice, but with something much more complex; namely, an active counting out and positive exclusion of certain objects. It is as when one 'cuts' an acquaintance, 'ignores' a claim, or 'refuses to be influenced' by a consideration. But the perceptive activity which works to this result is disconnected from the consciousness which is personal, so to speak, to the subject, and makes of the object concerning which the suggestion is made, its own private possession and prey.[27]

James is so perplexed by this phenomenon—"How to conceive of this state of mind is not easy"—that he devotes a great deal of space to handling its paradoxes. As I mentioned above, his discussion of this phenomenon appears in two places in *Principles*, with four to five paragraphs shared between the accounts and reproduced almost

verbatim.[28] With nearly one thousand pages separating the two accounts, this repetition could simply be due to editorial oversight, or James's anticipation of readerly forgetfulness. But whatever the reason for it, this double inclusion bespeaks the importance of the episode and his ongoing fascination with the "margins" of consciousness. This is not the place to perform a careful analysis of both of the contexts in which these examples appear. But note that James (re-)included the hypnosis material in his early chapter dealing with the boundaries of the self and its integration or fragmentation. In this chapter he seems to uncover consciousness in "parts" not shared with the "whole," or other parts.[29] When he introduces the material on instructed ignorance here, he does so with the bold and dramatic claim: "All these facts, taken together, form unquestionably the beginning of an inquiry which is destined to throw a new light into the very abysses of our nature."[30]

In what follows, we will turn to the psychological type James identifies whose way of being in the world instinctively has something in common with the behavior of the subject under hypnosis. Extrapolating from these hypnotic experiments, we can see that our perceptual process can be subject to influences, very strong influences, exerted outside our conscious awareness. The experiments at the level of sensory processing may turn out, as James hopes, to shed light on the ways our vision may be guided and shaped by motivations of which we may remain unaware—even if they arise from within our own selves. Elsewhere in his *Psychology* James sees that our attention and therefore our perception are guided by interest, and he sees that it is possible for these interests to remain unknown to ourselves. In his subsequent work in the psychology of religion, James describes a class of people who exhibit just such a motivated perception: the "healthy-minded."

HEALTHY-MINDED (IM)PERCEPTION

In *Varieties* James identifies an attitude he calls "healthy-mindedness," which, in view of health, sounds laudatory. [31] In fact, the term describes a particular tendency of perception that has its

problematic aspects, as well as its benefits. He develops the idea of "healthy-mindedness" in contradistinction to another type, the "sick soul." James advances these two types as different *religious* attitudes, although the basis of their differentiation has to do with perception. Here is not the place to address the religious significance of these attitudes. However, it is worth emphasizing that James evidently believes that insights from the psychology of perception apply directly to a religious context. As the subtitle of *Varieties* indicates, he sees religion not as a supernatural phenomenon set over and against nature, but as an integral feature of human experience. In the case of "healthy-mindedness" in particular, he claims: "The systematic cultivation of healthy-mindedness as a religious attitude is therefore consonant with important currents in human nature, and is anything but absurd. In fact, we all do cultivate it more or less."[32] The way that James presents it, the healthy-minded are at the extreme end of a common human tendency. He introduces the topic of healthy-mindedness by identifying something I will term the 'happiness motive' as a shorthand: "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."[33] The healthy-minded are distinguished by the degree to which they turn the acquisition and maintenance of happiness into a thoroughgoing policy—even if they are not aware of this policy, as the word "secret" in the quotation above suggests.

James uses a number of colorful metaphors to characterize the healthy-minded: they are "men who seem to have started in life with a bottle or two of champagne inscribed to their credit"; they "live habitually on the sunny side of their misery-line"; they are possessed of a "temperament which has a constitutional incapacity for prolonged suffering, and in which the tendency to see things optimistically is like a water of crystallization in which the individual's character is set."[34] Imagery like "temperament" and, even more strongly, "constitutional incapacity" and a "water of crystallization" that "set[s]" a character suggests that this trait is a stable tendency that persists across time and situations. In this regard, it functions similarly to the concept of a disposition in virtue

theory.[35] James likens the healthy-minded mode of perception to a habitual mode of being.

If we examine his language closely, however, we notice that the metaphors are mixed in a certain regard. Some of his descriptions of the healthy-minded temperament suggest a quality bestowed at birth (like champagne); others characterize it akin to a habit that is formed (like water that is crystallized). This distinction turns out to be quite important, because the confusion on this point reflected at the level of language is endemic to the concept itself.

James notices the tension and tries to solve it by dividing healthy-mindedness into two further sub-types: voluntary and involuntary. As the name of the classification announces, this distinction turns on the will. The two subtypes are already hinted at from the beginning of the chapter on healthy-mindedness, expanding on the happiness motive:

> In many persons, happiness is congenital and irreclaimable…. I speak not only of those who are animally happy. I mean those who, when unhappiness is offered or proposed to them, positively refuse to feel it, as if it were something mean and wrong.[36]

Already we see two types, the naturally or "animally" happy and the rejectors of unhappiness. The happiness of both types seems to be "congenital and irreclaimable." This adjective pair presents happiness as a birthright, a graceful endowment that persists despite threatening events. However, when one investigates the nature of this irreclaimability, the manner by which the happiness persists, the different subtypes begin to emerge. My analysis will focus on the voluntary sub-type in particular, because it is the type that most closely corresponds to the paradox of (im)perception that James identifies in *Principles*.

In his exposition of the "healthy-mindedness" chapters, James recognizes the need for such a distinction as he considers the example of Walt Whitman. That is, his discussion of Whitman is the context in which the subdivision is first formally introduced. James adverts to Whitman after a short litany of other American men of

letters, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edward Everett Hale. He writes: "One can but recognize in such writers as these the presence of a temperament organically weighted on the side of cheer and fatally forbidden to linger…over the darker aspects of the universe."[37] We are familiar with the language of temperament; "organically weighted" and "fatally forbidden" add heft to the "congenital," given-at-birth side of the scale, as opposed to the slow accretion model of habit-formation and crystallization.[38] (The two models, despite James's careful subdivision, will turn out not to be so opposed after all.) He continues: "The capacity for even a transient sadness or a momentary humility seems cut off from them as by a kind of congenital anaesthesia."[39] The next sentence, beginning a new paragraph, brings Whitman to the fore: "The supreme contemporary example of such an inability to feel evil is of course Walt Whitman."[40]

This imagery should be strikingly familiar. Because James's discussion of systematized anaesthesia takes up a comparatively small amount of pages (though he includes it twice) in *Principles*, an otherwise bulky work, it is easy to overlook. In fact, before I paid such close attention to the language he employs to describe each condition, I had noticed the remarkable conceptual similarity between the two conditions. It was only later, returning to *Varieties* once again after a careful study of *Principles*, that I noticed James used exactly the same vocabulary in both texts.

In describing this type of healthy-mindedness, James employs not one, but two of the most distinctive descriptors of the instructed ignorance condition: anesthesia and systematic. He compares healthy-mindedness to an "anaesthesia" in the Whitman example and several other places, highlighting its "inability to feel" aspect, its sense that there is something present and detectable, but for which the reception has been blunted. But even more tellingly, he repeatedly uses the language of "systematic" or "systematization" to describe the dynamics of healthy-mindedness, suggesting that it, too, is prone to generalize. Whether or not this overlap in vocabulary was a conscious choice on James's part, it is extremely revealing of the similarity between the two conditions.

Witness how he describes the motivated perception underlying healthy-mindedness: “And thus our resolution not to indulge in misery, beginning at a comparatively small point within ourselves, may not stop until it has brought the entire frame of reality under a *systematic* conception optimistic enough to be congenial with its needs.”[41] Our perception of the very structure of reality itself may be seeded by the tiniest of impulses, the happiness motive expanding outward and exerting its influence on our perception. To what degree James thinks the healthy-minded are conscious of their fundamental “resolution not to indulge in misery,” and to what extent the systematization occurs outside conscious awareness is unclear. But the parallel with the creative implementation of the hypnotic suggestion in the cases of systematized anesthesia he cites is suggestive.

Elsewhere James claims Whitman’s distinctive brand of systematized healthy-mindedness made not only the man, but the poet: “Walt Whitman owes his importance in literature to the *systematic expulsion* from his writings of all contractile elements.”[42] Though there are many further pairings of “systematic” with healthy-mindedness in the text of *Varieties*, this latter usage is slightly chilling, to my mind. The phrasing implies not merely the application of a perspectival filter but an active rejection of some element that has already gained entrance and must be expelled. In this context James is describing Whitman’s *writing*, but a few pages later he goes on to describe the psychological dynamics of the healthy-minded as containing an impulse to “hush [evil] up.” He continues: “But more than this: the hushing of it up may, in a perfectly candid and honest mind, grow into a deliberate religious policy, or *parti pris*.”[43] It is difficult to reconcile how an element can be excluded or hushed up in a candid mind, yet James contends that

> Systematic healthy-mindedness, conceiving good as the essential and universal aspect of being, deliberately excludes evil from its field of vision; and although, when thus nakedly stated, this might seem a difficult feat to perform for one who is intellectually

> sincere with himself and honest about facts, a little reflection shows that the situation is too complex to lie open to so simple a criticism.[44]

This complexity involves the role of the will in perception. If, as I have suggested, it is possible for healthy-minded systematization to occur outside the subject's awareness, in accordance with the underlying happiness motive, how does James account for cases of *deliberate* exclusion?

James Pawelski notices a similar tension in James's early work when he asks: "Is perception or is volition the more central faculty of the Jamesian self?"[45] This way of putting the question is important, because it highlights that there seems to be a tradeoff or uneasy coexistence of these processes in moving from *Principles* to *Varieties*. Pawelski notes that "James's move toward integration in the last years of his life eventually takes him beyond this question. But at this stage of his thinking….Strong arguments could be made for the priority both of perception and of volition."[46] He suggests that both *Principles* and *Will to Believe* seem to cut one way, and *Varieties* another. My own interpretation tries to resolve this tension between perception and volition by stressing their complex interrelation.

In the case of healthy-minded perception, James insists there is a "voluntary" sub-type. Significantly, he offers "systematic" as an *alternate name* for this subtype. James distinguishes between what he calls the "involuntary" and the "more voluntary or systematic way of being healthy-minded."[47] In this latter case, the terminology of the will is paired with what, in *Principles*, represented the tendency for the hypnotic instruction to generalize outside the subject's conscious awareness. Though James tries to maintain a distinction between the voluntary and involuntary forms, it does not seem to hold in practice. This primary, or constitutive, tension around the role of the will causes his account of healthy-mindedness to sound unsettlingly confused. Pawelski finds "that the number of contradictions in his description of [healthy-mindedness] is unusually high, even for James"![48] How can Whitman, exemplar of

the voluntary/systematic subtype, be both insensible, anesthetic to evil, *and also*, as James alleges: "aware enough of sin for a swagger to be present in his indifference towards it, a conscious pride in his freedom from flexions and contractions"?[49] And James attributes quite a lot of self-consciousness to Whitman's swagger: "His optimism is too voluntary and defiant; his gospel has a touch of bravado and an affected twist."[50] So how can Whitman be both insensible and anesthetic to evil *and* aware and conscious of it?

I propose that we can begin to make sense of the contradictions of James's account of healthy-mindedness if we consider this phenomenon in relation to the parallel paradox of (im)perception he described in *Principles*, locating the will in continuity with wider conscious and unconscious processes of perception. If I read James rightly, healthy-minded subjects would not necessarily be able to articulate or thematize their motivation, just as the instructions to the hypnotized subject were not consciously available: they see what they see, and do *not* to see what they do not see. And yet, in both cases, there is an underlying directive force exerting a pressure on selection, whether it be the happiness motive or the motive to implement systematically a hypnotic instruction. If we replace the confusion around the role of the will in perception that healthy-mindedness brings to a head in the context of James's chapter on the will in *Principles*, we see the same tension appear in various guises, not only in James's account of perception under hypnosis, but in the role of attention and interest in shaping our perception in ordinary situations.[51] The ethical ramifications of the will's imbrication with perception are many, but in the final section I will extend insights that James himself begins to develop in his discussion of attention and volition by applying the logic of habit to the practice of cultivating our perception.

MORAL IMPLICATIONS

Toward the end of *Principles*, James devotes a large chapter to the will. (For comparison, it is more than twice as large as his famous account of "The Emotions" that precedes it, and which hovers near

the average chapter-length). Not coincidentally, this chapter directly precedes the penultimate chapter, the one on hypnotism. Even in the arrangement of James's volume, the two topics are related. He begins the chapter on the will by sharply distinguishing voluntary movements from "automatic and reflex" actions.[52] Soon, James moves to the "law of parsimony" that characterizes his account of habit: "consciousness deserts all processes where it can no longer be of use."[53] This is the process by which habitual actions, repeated often enough, become automatized, or second nature: "*we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can*," handing them "over to the effortless custody of automatism."[54] Already we see automaticity not in competition with the will, but rather the fruit of intentional cultivation, harnessed to push us further in the direction we have marked out to tread.

Thus, James positions habits as covering the broad territory of both instincts *and* acquired or learned responses: "The habits to which there is an innate tendency are called instincts; some of those due to education would by most persons be called acts of reason."[55] Between these two points, ranging from bodily or physiological responses to acts of reason, lies the territory of habit. On the one hand, we are dealing with "the fundamental properties of matter"; on the other hand, with humans' ability to originate something new, offer an unconstrained response to stimuli.[56] In the case of habit, the resulting automaticity is not antithetical to, but rather the result of our consciously performed activities. James's account of the will's effect on attention, which he explicitly moralizes or interprets as ethically relevant, suggests that perception, too, may be susceptible of intentional formation.[57]

Though James often prioritizes action, in the chapter on will he reduces volition not to motor activity but to mental activity, in simplest form: "attention with effort is all that any case of volition implies. *The essential achievement of the will, in short, when it is most 'voluntary,' is to* attend *to a difficult object and hold it fast before the mind*."[58]

At base, James considers, our will at its most will-like, finds its outlet in a form of mental activity, "attention with effort." As Colin

Koopman explains: "The process of willing is not that of choosing, or selecting, or preferring, but is rather that of attending. Will just is voluntary attention to one of a conflicting set of ideas available to our attention."[59] Thus James writes: "*Effort of attention is thus the essential phenomenon of will*."[60] He goes still further and explicitly moralizes this connection of will and attention: "*To sustain a representation, to think,* is, in short, the only moral act."[61] Our ability, then, to direct our perception, to hold something fast in our attention and keep it before our awareness is a paradigmatic moral deployment of the will, according to James. But then the ethically relevant question becomes, what kind of representations should we sustain?

In two pieces first delivered as talks and subsequently included in *Talks to Teachers*, James tried to extrapolate an ethics and a politics from the notion that we all suffer from defects or deficiencies of perception in relation to our moral lives. In "On a Certain Blindness" and its companion piece, "What Makes a Life Significant?," he attempts to offer an account of our foreshortened sympathies and argue for the cultivation of a larger, more compassionate perception. James explains: "Now the blindness in human beings, of which this discourse will treat, is the blindness with which we are all afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves."[62] Though noble in principle, in its specific articulation his analysis falls short. Even as he urges a politics of tolerance, as he attempts to broaden the reader's gaze, James's own suffers from significant shortsightedness in matters of race and class, to name several key issues.

As early as 1943, M.C. Otto had pointed out several flaws in James's own treatment of other people's blindnesses (surely a hazardous enough task to embark on, beams and motes notwithstanding). Otto frames his critique as inspired by James's sister, Alice. He cites an entry in her diary in which she evinces an attention to, and sympathy with, the labor movement, both of which Otto suggests her brother lacked. Concerning William, Otto asks:

> Did he underestimate the depressing, degrading effects of having to exist in poverty, day in and day out, in an atmosphere of economic insecurity, subject to being thrown on the scrap heap of unemployment when no longer wanted? Was he morally unimpressed by the militant union of workers to improve their lot and by class-conscious movements to reconstruct society radically from the bottom up?[63]

Both questions Otto answers in the affirmative. He contrasts some of James's formulations in "What Makes a Life Significant?" regarding the labor question with presentations by some of James's reformer contemporaries to show that the deficiency in his grasp of the socioeconomic problems besetting society was not explicable solely by time period.

However, Otto presents a sympathetic critique and rightly highlights that James "was almost abnormally sensitive to distress and impulsively sympathetic. He was compassionate, abhorred cruelty, and could be counted upon always and instantly to take sides with the underdog in a struggle."[64] Thus he rules out "the explanation…that James was indifferent to human suffering or frustration."[65] An alternative explanation Otto proposes points back to James's emphasis on individuality. He suggests that James may have believed "social institutions endangered the purity of individuality. Even organizations formed to combat economic injustice" may have constituted cases of the cure being worse than the disease.[66] James's habit of selecting to focus on individuals to the near exclusion of social factors and institutions may mean there is something to this point.

In a second explanation, Otto additionally points to James's "aptness for catching the luster of a life wherever and however it was lived" and finds it "an admirable bias, considered solely in itself" but "correlative of a tendency to slight the environmental circumstances in response to which, or in spite of which, the better potentialities of human beings are realized, or, because of which—as happens, alas, too often—they are thwarted, twisted, or entirely crushed out."[67] Otto remarks on James's misguided attempt to rehabilitate the *vision* of the worker's condition without

ameliorating the condition itself, which opens him up to the danger of romanticizing poverty. For example, passing through the mountains of North Carolina, James sees the "unmitigated squalor" of the surroundings and proclaims: "No modern person ought to be willing to live a day in such a state of rudimentariness and denudation."[68] However, a conversation with his mountaineer driver opens his eyes to the "inward significance" of what James had hitherto only been able to perceive as blot and blight: "to me the clearings spoke of naught but denudation….But when *they* looked on the hideous stumps, what they thought of was personal victory. The chips, the girdled trees and the vile split rails spoke of honest sweat, persistent toil and final reward."[69]

James continues, trying to draw a gracious comparison of even exchange: "I had been as blind to the peculiar ideality of their conditions as they certainly would also have been to the ideality of mine, had they had a peep at my strange indoor academic ways of life at Cambridge."[70] Except with one very significant, overlooked difference: their conditions were *not* ideal. Though his genuine goodwill might go some way in correcting condescension, a healthy-minded attempt to redescribe evidence of dire straits as signifying virtuous struggle does not advance equity in society. Re-visionings, such as the one suggested here, would even undercut it. From a moral standpoint, it would behoove us to actively work against any consciously or unconsciously operating happiness motive that would lead us to ignore or interpret away pressing problems that might demand our attention. (In addition to Otto's critique of class, "On a Certain Blindness" demands one on the subject of race, because some passages, particularly toward the beginning, exhibit troubling attitudes).

In a way, James's own failures in "On a Certain Blindness" prove his point that we may be very adept at not seeing what we do not want to see—and, in a vicious cycle, not noticing that we have not noticed in the first place. We do not often enjoy looking at things that would stake claim to our resources, that would take effort to address, or even really attend to. We instinctively avoid perceptions that inconvenience us, that make us uncomfortable, that would spur

us to relinquish cherished privileges we had, in some cases, not even allowed ourselves to acknowledge we had. We may not be able to eradicate our instinctive drive for happiness and self-preservation (nor should we, perhaps); but, we may yet be able to widen the scope of our perception. One remedy James's writings might offer derives from his study of habit and its potential to create new automaticity. We must practice our powers of attention, developing and strengthening the ability to attend to sights or realizations—even, and especially, when they are painful to perceive. This cultivated practice of attention, which involves seeing, hearing, and experiencing what is outside, apart from, and other than the self, not only assists us in moral formation as individuals but also in maintaining a democracy and creating a more just society. James's plea for tolerance at the conclusion of "On a Certain Blindness" and his celebration of the irreducible plurality of human perspective suggests that at bottom, the scope of his perception was very wide, indeed.

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NOTES

[1] James, *Principles*, 208.

[2] James, 1206.

[3] Myers, *William James*, 81.

[4] In *Briefer Course*, following criticism of *Principles*' allegedly "planless" structure, James reverts to the traditional ordering, beginning with sensation. However, in its Preface he offers a defensive rationale for

his arrangement in *Principles* that highlights its pedagogical purpose (James, *Briefer Course*, 1–2).

[5] James, *Principles*, 651.

[6] James, 570.

[7] James, 651.

[8] James, 690. In his handbook to *Principles*, David Leary notes that the term "copy" is to be preferred to "image," which connotes only visual sensation, because this duplication can result from any modality of sensory experience (Leary, *Routledge Guidebook*, 129).

[9] James, *Principles*, 690.

[10] James, 690.

[11] James explains the possibility for their confusion with the belief that these two systems rely on overlapping cortical territory (James, 712 and 718). He also emphasizes individual differences in imagination, to the extent that he suggests referring to "imaginations" in the plural (James, 696).

[12] James, 651.

[13] James, 651.

[14] James, 651.

[15] James, 652.

[16] I follow James's own logic in preferring the term "perception" to "apperception" (see James, *Talks to Teachers*, chapter 14).

[17] For a classic text that considers the history of hypnosis in relation to the unconscious, see Ellenberger, *Discovery of the Unconscious*, especially 110–81. See also the more recent Mayer, *Sites of the Unconscious*.

[18] James, *Principles*, 1206.

[19] James, 1205.

[20] I have adopted James's use of "blindness" in both its literal and metaphorical senses, but I hope that my use of the term in this essay can be read in such a way as to resist, not reinforce, ableist interpretation.

[21] James, 1206.

[22] James, 1206.

[23] James, 208.

[24] James, 1207.

[25] James, 1207.

[26] James, 1207.

[27] James, 1207–8.

[28] See James, 208–9, and 1206–8.

[29] For further treatment of this topic, see James's 1890 essay, "The Hidden Self." See also his 1896 Lowell Lectures, which cover related material (Taylor, *William James*). In the secondary literature, see Klein, *Unconscious,* 38–90.

[30] James, *Principles*, 208.

[31] Jacques Barzun's chapter, "Beyond the Conscious Mind" in *Stroll with William James* helpfully situates *Varieties* in relation to the Lowell Lectures and the Freudian unconscious.

[32] James, *Varieties*, 80.

[33] James, 71.

[34] James, 115, 115, and 109.

[35] For a cogent discussion of dispositions as distinguished from habits and propensities, see Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas*, 107–9.

[36] James, *Varieties*, 72.

[37] James, 75.

[38] Note that in James's descriptive psychology, these souls are doubly predisposed: toward pursuing the positive *and* avoiding the negative.

[39] James, 75.

[40] James, 75.

[41] James, 80. Emphasis added.

[42] James, 76. Emphasis added.

[43] James, 79.

[44] James, 79.

[45] Pawelski, *Dynamic Individualism*, 66.

[46] Pawelski, 66.

[47] James, *Varieties*, 78.

[48] Pawelski, *Dynamic Individualism*, 76.

[49] James, *Varieties*, 77.

[50] James, 78.

[51] The will's role in conversion is another place James must face this tension, following directly on and developing out of the chapters devoted to "healthy-mindedness" and the "sick soul." Because there is not space to address the matter here, I refer interested readers to Henry Samuel Levinson's excellent treatment of conversion's relationship to

subconscious or ultra-marginal life (Levinson, *Religious Investigations*, 111–18).

[52] James, *Principles*, 1099.

[53] James, 1107.

[54] James, 126. Renee Tursi helpfully highlights the physical, bodily basis of habit for James (Tursi, "James's Narrative of Habit," 70).

[55] James, *Principles*, 109.

[56] James, 109.

[57] For a fuller account of the ethical implications of habit for self-cultivation in James, see Marchetti, "Unfamiliar Habits."

[58]James, *Principles*, 1166. James Deese helpfully clarifies the will's relation to thought and act: "Although will properly remains purely ideational and does not spill over into the motor act itself, it has the special characteristic of demanding something—most probably a motor act" (Deese, "James on the Will," 302). See also Leary's excellent chapters on "Habit and Thought" and "Attention and Will" (Leary, *Routledge Guidebook*, 73–93 and 205–27).

[59] Koopman, "The Will," 498.

[60] James, *Principles*, 1167.

[61] James, 1170.

[62] James, *Talks to Teachers*, 259.

[63] Otto, "Certain Blindness," 185.

[64] Otto, 189.

[65] Otto, 189.

[66] Otto, 189.

[67] Otto, 187.

[68] James, *Talks to Teachers,* 133–34.

[69] James, 134.

[70] James, 134.