

**WILLIAM JAMES SOCIETY:
PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS**

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This talk is in multiple parts, and it is not entirely clear to me that they hang together as a coherent whole. In trying to develop something for this session I was struck by multiple, maybe even competing, interests. I struggled with trying to reconcile them, but could not. So, rather than pick one interest over the others or creatively weaving those interests together, I simply will speak briefly about each in turn.

I stand before you because I was honored with the election to the Vice Presidency of the William James Society back in 2010. And while I would have eventually become President (per the Society's constitution), I inhabit this role at this time because Ellen Suckiel was unable to complete her term of office for familial reasons. Thus, this presentation should rightfully be Ellen's, and I want to begin by acknowledging this fact. You, as the audience, are the poorer for having to listen to me than to her. But heck, it is not very often (unless you are John McDermott) that a guy gets a chance to give an address like this. I'll take my liberties as I find them.

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So, I said this is in multiple parts: the first part is professionally "biographical," the second, "scholarly," and the third, I shall call "Societal"—for lack of better terms.

Biographically, I was introduced to James while an undergrad at Pomona College but paid little attention (I hate to read—wasn't forced to read—so I didn't read). I took a detour from academia after graduation by going into musical instrument retail and Microsoft technical support. After making the ridiculous decision to leave the potential millionaire lifestyle of Microsoft behind, I went into vast amounts of debt to go to graduate school, and it was there, at Vanderbilt, that I truly became acquainted with William James. Between Michael Hodges's course in American Philosophy and John Lachs's seminar in pragmatism and independent readings course on James, I learned to appreciate James's sensitivity to the "blooming buzzing confusion" that is human existence—a life where experience "grows by its edges"; where relations—not simply discrete impressions—are part-and-parcel of that experience.

However, as it is for many, Dewey's appeal was (initially) greater. Dewey had a more comprehensive story to tell—as dryly as he does, but I liked the thoroughness...and the dryness. Further, I appreciated Dewey's acknowledgement of the socially situated character of individuality; and I appreciated having a "theory of inquiry" available when times get rough. (As an aside, I have always found Peirce too dense for me to read—or, more precisely, I'm too dense to read it.) But when it came time to write as a professional, my thoughts kept turning to James more so than Dewey—in fact, my 2010 book,

End-of-Life Care and Pragmatic Decision Making (Cambridge University Press), relies almost entirely on James for philosophical support.

To be frank, though, I have no right to be as enamored by James as I am. While James waxes eloquent, I have no literary soul. Though James cut his teeth thinking about the mind, I find psychology unexciting. And even though James turns time and again to religious considerations, I detest religion and spirituality on principle. So, what, then, compels me to confront James time and again?

Well, though his account of “pure experience” leads many to confusion, his direction is insightfully on target. *Whatever* we mean by the concept, we cannot get outside *experience*. This insight leads James, rightly I think, to undermine any foundational role for “consciousness” (a truly radical idea), but it goes further—it demands of us that we take all and only experience seriously. This is the essence of James’s *Weltanschauung*—his “radical empiricism,” and I resonate with this...I just do. I’m not saying I consistently follow this in my own personal or professional endeavors, but I’d like to. I think it would make a positive difference in our moral considerations.

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OK, having gotten that off my chest, I am led to the scholarly part of my talk: I first want to take a short aside to note that good work continues to be done in James scholarship—it is coming from philosophy, from religion, from psychology, from American studies, and more. You will, I expect, hear examples of this good work in the panel that follows this address.

My own interests have been in moral philosophy and radical empiricism. I have found James’s work in these areas to be compatible with each other and with the kinds of work I do in medical ethics. Further, I think he gives us important moral insights that do not necessarily fall prey to concerns over a lack of “common moral normativity”—contra those fools, Talisse/Aikin (2008)—an argument for another time. However, *I’m* not foolish enough to argue that James’s work in ethics is without problems. It suffers in several areas—lacks a clear sense of communal interests and an account of moral inquiry, among other things. But the pragmatic review of the place of “sentiment”/“passional nature” in the development of moral obligations out of (not prior to) experience, and, as I said earlier, his concern for the importance of all experience are invaluable to the moral enterprise.

But there is an aspect of James’s sentimentalism and moral thought that I want to talk about. *Nothing* I say here will be earth-shattering—in fact, it is not really novel. However, I want to say it (remember, I’ll take my liberties). What I want to focus on is a tension that makes its way often into his scholarly texts.

James is a fan of setting up contrasts, developing dichotomies, pointing out tensions. And then he will attempt to (depending on whom you talk to) dissolve the tension, eliminate the dichotomy, steer through the resulting crevasse, take the mid-path (and so on). In the case I’m about to discuss, I believe James actually goads us into accepting a tension that he himself *feels* but cannot philosophically *express* (that is, his own account of the tension undermines itself). It is the tension between religiosity itself (in fact, I’d say James’s personal religiosity) and the role that religion can/should play in the moral life. This tension may be characterized in various ways—between promises of religion and the limitations of morality, between the scope of religious experience and that of moral experience, even between spirituality and naturalism. In James’s own words: Religious experience “suggests that our natural experience, our strictly moralistic and prudential experience, may be only a fragment of real human experience” (WJ11 1982 [1905], 128). And that

the religious “makes [our reactions] in large part unlike what they might be on a purely naturalistic scheme of belief” (WJ6 1979 [1896], 32n4).

Recently, John Shook has indirectly suggested resolving this tension by arguing that for James “ethics can only be completed by religion” where “religion deals with ultimate reality and destiny” (2011, 38 & 39). This way of formulating James’s moral project is a mistake. If anything, I will argue, what we mean by the religious simply is morally motivated behavior. I will discuss briefly why...and why it matters.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than at the end of two very important essays about morality and moral beliefs, where James turns to discussions of the role of religious concepts. You all know well, I’m sure, the religious allusions to which I refer, but I will take a moment to remind us. In his 1891 essay, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James runs through three “questions” of morality: the psychological, the metaphysical, and the casuistic. This essay, I have suggested elsewhere (see Hester 2010), manifests implications of Jamesian radical empiricism on moral matters. The importance of this point will, hopefully, come clear later, but for now what I want to remind the audience of is that after James argues that

- a. desires are the basis of the good,
- b. desires act as demands which create in so far forth corresponding (*pro tanto*) obligations,
- c. that the only possible injunction is to satisfy demand,
- d. in the finite universe demands/claims compete, thus creating competing obligations,
- e. the “path of peace” is paved when you “*invent some manner of realizing your own ideals which will also satisfy alien demands,—that and that only is the path of peace!*” (WJ6 1979 [1891], 155)

He goes on to suggest that the moral “attitude” is one of striving—it comes from the so-called “strenuous mood”—which is motivated by “god.” As James says, “in a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal stimulating power.... When...we believe that a God is there..., the infinite perspective opens out. [However,] our postulation of him...serves only to let loose in us the strenuous mood” (WJ6 1979 [1891], 160 & 161). The concept of “God,” then, looks both useful and necessary—at least, it is if you want maximal moral effort.

A similar turn seems to occur in James’s most famous essay, “The Will to Believe.” As you will recall, in that essay James argues that while some beliefs require strong, “scientific,” even “certain” evidence, there are a host of beliefs that do not. Now, this, you might say, is no problem if those beliefs are simply pointless to begin with, even when those beliefs are truly “live” beliefs. However, James argues that some beliefs that do not lend themselves to the kinds of grounding evidence we so crave are still (in his words) not only *live* but also *forced*, and at times even *momentous*. The kinds of beliefs James has in mind are of two kinds (though there are others): (1) Moral beliefs, and (2) Religious beliefs. James argues that these kinds of beliefs may use “sentiment”/“passion” as evidence in a pragmatic consideration of consequences for holding such beliefs.

In the end, then, he puts his theory to the test by analyzing belief in what he calls the “religious hypothesis”—a hypothesis that, for those who find religion to be a live option, must be taken as both momentous and forced. The religious hypothesis, I remind you, is in two parts:

1. the best things are the more eternal things, and
2. we are better off even now if we believe #1 (WJ6 1979 [1897], 29 & 30)

James in this essay does not speak so much of “God” as of “religion,” but even here he says “The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having personal form...no longer a mere *It...*, but a *Thou*” (31). Through our belief in religion, in god, then, “We are supposed to gain, even now...a certain vital good... [And w]e cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve” (30).

Surely, James sees something vital in all this, and as such we may be tempted to take James as arguing, per Shook, that “ethics can only be completed by religion.” But here, I argue, James (and Shook) fall prey to their own personal sensibilities contra the philosophy. What do I mean?

First, I should acknowledge that James says through his correspondence and quite directly, “I cannot call myself a Christian, and [am] not...able to tolerate the notion of...God himself as anything ultimate” (Corr 8:122—to Rankin), but he never eschews “God”—even if, as he says, the “God I patronize...is so largely [only] an ideal possibility” (Corr 11:343—to Strong). However, following Linda Simon (cf. 1998, xviii), I believe that James the person wants to believe in “God”—that is, he *wants* a world in which the eternal and infinite perspective truly opens up. I think this was deeply constitutional for him. This desire, though, competes with what James the radically empirical philosopher knows—namely, that he cannot produce an argument for such a “God”—at least, not one that is not “merely” pragmatic. Here’s what I mean:

The other week I decided I wanted to find out what, if any, philosophical works were available through my iPad’s *AudioBooks* app. Lo-and-behold I found a reading of James’s *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Now, reading philosophy is boring enough, but having it read to you by a monotone voice is positively excruciating. Anyway, I started the recording with the first essay, “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” and within minutes was struck by an interesting insight.

You will recall, I’m sure, that James argues in this essay that consciousness “is the name of a nonentity, and has no right to a place among first principles” (WJ3 1976 [1904], 3). And it is in the second paragraph of the work that he says the following:

During the past year, I have read a number of articles whose authors seemed just on the point of abandoning the notion of consciousness.... But they were not quite radical enough, not quite daring enough in their negations. (WJ3 1976 [1904], 4)

And these sentences became a moment for me as a thought struck me dead on—namely, James’s notions of god and religion are “not quite radical enough, not quite daring enough...”

For example, let’s take a closer look at his use of language in “The Will to Believe” regarding religion and the religious—it is a language that betrays James’s attempt at developing a contrast—he fudges and weasels. Starting with the “religious hypothesis,” we should be struck immediately by his description of “best things” as “*more* eternal.” You and I know, as surely did James, that concept of “eternity” does not admit of degrees (any more than the terms “everlasting” and “infinite” and “perfect” can be qualified). What then could he mean?

One obvious answer is that he simply means “eternal,” full stop. That is, he could be saying that the religious hypothesis is that the best things are eternal things. Best things are infinite, perfect, ongoing, world-without-end, amen. But then why not say that? Why not go the “full monty”? I think it is because he knows that he has no warrant for such an assertion. In fact, as has been argued by others, James holds a *finite* theory of “God” (cf. Robert Vanden Burt’s book, *The Religious Philosophy of William James* 1981, ch. 4; why the author insists on capitalizing “God,” I cannot fathom). I’ll take this as is, for now, and say that as such, I believe James’s use of a “qualified” eternity is purposeful. That is, the phrase as used in “The Will to Believe” is a term of hyperbole—it is not about the “eternal” at all. It is, in fact, a moral—even ontological claim—about power and longevity: namely, the more powerful and sustainable, the better.

To put a different spin on this, allow me an extended paraphrase of James from the “Consciousness” (1976 [1904]) essay:

I believe that the concept of “god,” when once it has evaporated to this estate of pure diaphaneity, is on the point of disappearing altogether. It is the name of a nonentity, and has no right to a place among first principles.... Let me then immediately explain that I mean only to deny that the word stands for an entity, but to insist most emphatically that it does stand for a function. There is, I mean, no aboriginal stuff or quality of being, contrasted with that of which material objects are made, out of which comes our ultimate reality or makes possible our very being, but there is a function in experience which religiousness/spirituality performs, and for the performance of which this quality of being is invoked. It is the function of connectedness with something larger than ourselves. (paraphrased from page 3)

As I will note below, James himself gives warrant for such an argument, and yet seems incapable of the courage necessary to draw the conclusion.

Now, maybe you are a scholar who is too sensitive and sophisticated to fall prey to casting James in some narrowly religious light. You say that James already resolved this tension in his *Pragmatism* lectures in favor of “meliorism,” and Hester is simply pointing out a problem that James solved long ago. Or maybe you accept a more, shall we say, “traditionally religious” reading of James, and disagreeing with me from the get-go, you see no reason to be troubled by reading James as simply working within, not reconstructing, the American protestant tradition. Those in the former camp, I fear, are overly dismissive, and those in the latter camp are dangerously exclusive.

On the one hand, the risk for the former group is the risk of underestimating the incredibly powerful cultural narrative that is religion, Christian religion (specifically), in America. James is, after all, an *American* philosopher—celebrated not only for his thoughts but his country of origin. It is within this context that his “reconstruction” (if that is what we should call it) occurs. But the concepts of “god” and “religion,” like that of “experience,” carry weighty baggage, and do not easily yield to conceptual pressures. Recall that even Dewey’s starkly anti-religion text, *A Common Faith*, was met with confusions about a possible hidden or latent theism. Thus, even in the throes of philosophical arguments against transcendent gods, any hint of religiosity is met with hope that a transcendent “God” resides therein. James, unlike Dewey, never personally denounces such a god, and thus, all the more reason to take him to be in support of such a god, no?

On the other hand, the latter group is clearly unable to take radical empiricism seriously. Whatever his personal foibles, James *qua* philosopher is nothing if not striving for inclusion. Radical empiricism takes seriously any and all *experience*. But to take James's turn to the religious too narrowly is to exclude the wide range of possibilities for so-called religious experience itself. James the philosopher does not, nor should we. As Wes Cooper has said, James should not be taken as attempting to "homogenise religious belief" (2003, 420).

Of course, you may simply say that I have given a false dichotomy: James is neither an inclusive, a-religionist nor an exclusive theist. To my mind, this is correct. In fact, it is clear that in both his personal life and in his professional writings, James is trying to get at something religiously inclusive. His most famous treatise on the topic is *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (VRE), not Varieties of Religions—the language is important. But I am decidedly pushing the point that the philosopher James strays farther from our commonly accepted sense of the "religious" than we may think.

If my take on James is correct, can we accept a "god" and "religion" that are merely *more* powerful and sustainable *functions* of experience? If so, the religious hypothesis becomes the claim that the best things are the *more* powerful and sustainable *functions* of experience, and such a conception of the religious hypothesis lends itself to connections with both natural and supernatural tendencies and beliefs. Again, for those of you who have already taken James as arguing for this kind of "mid-path" religiosity, you may not be moved by my comments at all, but we still need to consider what the implications for morality are. If this *only more* powerful, sustainable—but not eternal, infinite, and perfect—functional experience is to be postulated, then what do we make of James's motivation for the strenuous mood—a motivation he himself purports to follow from the "*infinite* perspective"? Can the strenuous mood be motivated by something less than the infinite but more than ourselves?

At the end of his great, selective survey of religious experiences, James concludes the following in the "Postscript":

The only thing that [religious experience] testifies to is that we can experience union with something larger than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace.... [Our needs are] met by the belief that beyond each man and in a fashion continuous with him there exists a larger power which is friendly to him and to his ideals. All that the facts require is that the power should be both other and larger than our conscious selves. Anything larger will do, if only it be large enough to trust for the next step. It need not be infinite, it need not be solitary. It might conceivable even be only a larger and more godlike self... (WJ15 1985 [1902], 413)

Experience, taken religiously, speaks to something larger than ourselves. Natural, social, transcendental—the source is not always known, just *something larger*.

The religious function of experience, then, speaks only but directly to this "something larger." This insight from James, then, implicates not only the scope of religious experience, but also the meaning of the religious hypothesis, and the motivation for the strenuous mood. His great "discovery" regarding religious experiences allows for resonance with each of us—the polytheist, pantheist, the deist, the theist, and even the atheist. In fact, I think we can flip James's causal account on its head. Whereas James's suggests that it is the positing of "religion" and "god" that motivates the "strenuous mood," instead, we might say more radically, that what we call "religious motivation" simply *is* the function of the "strenuous mood" in moral behavior—that is, it is the

exercise of each us as moral philosophers, striving for complete ethical narrative where none can be garnered until the last person has had his/her say—each of us pursuing something larger than ourselves, and in that, may we find at least the path to our greatest peace.

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OK, I do not know that I have made a coherent account of my scholarly concerns, but enough of that. As I intimated earlier, this is a Presidential address to the members of WJS and others who have come to sit amongst us. And I want to turn in this last section to issues regarding the Society itself.

The William James Society was officially formed in May of 2001—under the leadership of John J. McDermott as the Society’s first President. Subsequently, many great James scholars have led this Society. I do not include myself among their scholarly successes, but I have been long associated with WJS as the inaugural Secretary-Treasurer, and I am sure that it is that work which made me a pseudo-legitimate choice for President.

I mention this because I have long been in a position with WJS to concern myself with its well-being. I want this Society to exist, to expand, to succeed. And yet, I fear it has not fulfilled even the modest potential that an 11-year-old Society might fulfill. Membership is low, product is minimal, outreach is rare, participation is weak, and identity is nebulous. Of course, all of that is hyperbole to some degree, and yet it is a rhetorical flourish that strikes at some aspects of the truth.

Thus, when I say that membership is low, I mean something like the following: while we do not know how many scholars there are who identify professionally with William James, our current membership “in good standing” is under 100 people. Surely, given the wide range of academic interests that James touches, 100 members is paltry. When I say that our “product” is minimal, what I do *not* mean to do is to disparage the good work of Mark Moller and Linda Simon with the Society’s journal, *William James Studies*. And yet, Linda and Mark will be the first to tell you that there are too few submissions, too low a readership, and too little respect for the journal. And finally, when I say that outreach is rare, participation is weak, and identity is nebulous, I realize that these are the fault of the leaders—the finger points at me.

Thus, though this comes at the end of my term, rather than at the beginning, I want to discuss some of what I would like to see for WJS going forward.

My first (though not my most prized) desire is to see the membership of the Society grow at its core—a “foundation” of members who are committed to the Society. This core might be just over 100 people, I suspect, but it would be persistent, and it would be functional and cooperative.

My second desire is to see the Society begin to provide its members with real and experienced goods. I truly believe that the Society’s journal, *William James Studies*, is such a good, but it is not enough as it stands nor in itself. It needs to develop a unique niche in the publishing landscape—a venue that provides a place for important scholarship on issues related to the thoughts and life of William James, but do so in a way not already covered by the *Transactions* or by the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* or *The Pluralist* or... I think its online character should be taken as a jewel to prized rather than treated with suspicion. I think its technological character should be expanded to take advantage of how to communicate through the Web, rather than just simply making e-prints of traditional journal articles.

Beyond this, however, the Society needs to extend its reach into new ways of providing such “goods.” To that end, the Executive Committee has developed 3 awards to be handed out occasionally in order to stimulate

scholarship and praise the good work of our members. (Details are available today during the business meeting and will be sent to the membership and distributed to philosophy departments in 2013.) Further, we also need to do a better job of sponsoring conferences and conferences sessions across the country and, especially, across academic disciplines.

And lastly, I want the members of the Society to be invested in what the Society is and does. We have at our disposal an incredible resource of people—scholars of all types and stripes—and we have yet to take advantage of this fact. Or maybe I should say that differently: *they* have so far failed to take advantage of the Society...both...really. We, all of us, are busy—we have our priorities; we work as isolated academics with teaching and scholarship all our own. Let us stop this habit—or at least arrest it long enough to work together—for the good of teaching, for the good of scholarship, for the good of WJS, as well.

Professional societies in academia are seemingly a dime-a-dozen. Just look at the APA program to see how many groups—on Jaspers, on “field being,” even on American philosophy—hold sessions here. If they perform a useful function, let them continue, and if not, I say, cut them loose. Which shall we do with WJS? *My* hope for the Society is that it can perform a function—a “religious” and moral function, if you like: that through it we can experience union with ideals, with projects, and with others—that is, a union with something larger than ourselves and in that union find some professional and personal peace.

Thank you for your time today and for allowing me to serve for almost two years in this role as President of the William James Society.

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REFERENCES

All references to the Harvard Critical Editions of William James.