William James in Focus: Willing to Believe. By William J. Gavin

To pick up William James for the first time can be daunting. James asks much of his reader—not because he is unclear, but because his philosophy itself remains wild and untamed. His is a philosophy of experience, one that can never be made systematic. As a student, I recall this invitation to a radical sort of freedom to be at once invigorating and confusing: it is no small task to take pluralism seriously. William J. Gavin makes this task a bit easier in his William James in Focus: Willing to Believe. Gavin argues that much of the difficulty of reading James comes from the difficulty of drawing out a “latent” image of a wild universe in which we are risk-taking participants from the “manifest” words on James’s page. This latent message, as Gavin’s title suggests, is that we must will our beliefs and stake out our own path without assurances and live heroically. Gavin’s call for a heroic or strenuous life, and a heroic or strenuous reading of James’s corpus, is a continual theme of his work.

Gavin’s prologue takes on what he calls James’s most “infamous” claim: that we must will ourselves to believe. Instead of a traditional philosophic theory promising certainty, James demands that we rely on our “passional nature” for our most vital and important beliefs. Gavin reminds us that this is “not a onetime affair but must be continually reaffirmed in life” (xi). Gavin’s distinction between latent and manifest images requires the reader to draw out a rich but unconventional philosophy wherein any actor must become passionately involved in his or her own unfolding universe. Gavin writes:

[James’s] texts turn out to be “directive” rather than “descriptive” in nature, pointing beyond themselves back into experience. His texts are partial and unfinished interpretations rather than neutral observations. The latent image they present hold that no complete description is possible and, further, even if offered, would be rejected. (xii)

Writing an introduction to a philosophy which requires one to find such a latent image is no small undertaking. Gavin’s work meets this challenge and takes up the James’s various “manifest images,” showing the latent qualities to which readers should attend.

In the first chapter, “James’s Life: Will to Believe as Affirmation,” the importance of James’s personal decision to will belief in his own freedom and power during a dark personal crisis is emphasized. In a few pages, Gavin sums up the significance of James’s own willing to believe that life is meaningful and freedom exists as the catalyst to bring James out of his depression. This biographic chapter dove-tails well with the second, “‘The Will to Believe’: Policing versus Free-Roaming,” wherein Gavin discusses James’s early essay “The Sentiment of Rationality” and the later “The Will to Believe.” Gavin emphasizes the common theme of these two essays as clear demonstrations of James’s “latent” message that we must act in a world without guarantee. Thus, in “The Sentiment of Rationality,” James holds that we cannot “logically ‘solve’ which conceptualization of the universe is correct” and thus, because we must act, we must choose a philosophy that allows us to act (11). Similarly, the “Will to Believe” is a defense of an impassioned choosing of our beliefs. Here the theme of the book is clearest: whatever affirmations we choose to live are “to be viewed as a stance or posture toward the universe, an admission and affirmation that the universe is ‘wild, game flavored as a hawk’s wing’” (15). This
admission and affirmation is latent, but very real, Jamesean insight from which 
Gavin continues his interpretation.

In the third chapter, “The Principles of Psychology: Consciousness as a 
Constitutive Stream,” Gavin discusses the latent and manifest images in the 
Principles of Psychology. Gavin emphasizes that the “functional dualism” James 
adopts in this work for the specific domain of psychology breaks down and thus 
demonstrates the latent image of James’s thought in a rather explicit matter— 
that the stream of consciousness breaks its banks and floods into “metaphysics 
itself” (17). In emphasizing the stream of consciousness, Gavin argues that we 
discover the richness of our relationship with the universe. Consciousness is 
much more than substantive parts, existing atomistically and 
awaiting the unifying idea of an outside agent. Rather are the 
relating transitions in consciousness to be taken into account; 
these are of both a disjunctive and conjunctive nature. 
Furthermore, consciousness is temporal, and the situational 
aspect of all thoughts, the fact that we can never have the same 
thought twice, can no longer be ignored. (24)

Thus James, on Gavin’s reading, pushes himself beyond the functional dualism 
where our understanding of the world can be philosophically neutral and pushes 
us past the manifest image into the latent wild world.

Chapter four, “The Varieties of Religious Experience: Mysticism as a Vague ‘Exemplar,’” picks up on this wildness and emphasizes the central 
importance of this work to understanding James. For Gavin, in arguing that “religious experience is pervasive,” James avoids any dogmatic statements that “would have been diametrically opposed to his unfinished universe” (27). Gavin 
sees the Varieties as an important work exactly because James points to the latent image—the unsayable—in this work. James uses “language to disclose, 
ot describe, the inability of language to catch the ineffable” (34). The mystic is an exemplar because she can get into experience, into the wildness of the universe. Religious experience, especially that of mysticism, is important 
because, as Gavin will argue, it shows the depth and import of “pure experience,” a topic Gavin takes up later in the work (35).

In chapter five, “Pragmatism: Corridor as ‘Latent’ and ‘The Will to Believe,’” Gavin investigates how the manifest image of Pragmatism as a book on methodology guides the reader to a latent image emphasizing pluralism. 
James’s lectures give his take on how the pragmatist inquires and how this philosophy dissolves many traditional philosophical problems. Gavin takes 
pains to demonstrate, perhaps importantly for the Jamesian novice, that James’s 
use of terms like “workability” and “cash-value” are not mere concessions to 
mere expedience but that pragmatism is instead a legitimate method to achieve 
truth given the “plastic” nature of experience (39). The latent content of 
Pragmatism is James’s rich and well-known metaphor of the corridor in the 
pragmatic hotel—where various “rooms” house experiments and research in 
various field yet have the common connection of access through a shared 
methoodology. Each room is separate with a different view, but the corridor is 
shared (41). James, Gavin argues, uses metaphors as means to give an 
interpretation “rather than a description”; thus, the corridor metaphor is one that interprets a pluralistic universe (43). The latent image to be drawn from 
pragmatism is exactly the metaphysical pluralism that underlies the 
methoodology presented. The work shows us how the philosopher might put 
together a “thick” picture of the universe, “rather than allowing any single 
abstract account to achieve final closure” (ibid.). Gavin thus argues that
Pragmatism is not ontologically neutral; its latent image requires examination of
t metaphysics, the topic of his sixth chapter, “Metaphysics: Radical Empiricism
and Pure Experience.” In both Essays in Radical Empiricism and A Pluralistic
Universe, Gavin explains, James confronts language’s limitations in describing a
universe where “reality is broader than the know-able” (53). James must then
“espouse a relational metaphysics” in which “each moment of experience is
related” (ibid.). Thus, Gavin concludes that James points us (but cannot by
definition describe) a process metaphysics that
cannot be completely grasped by language, concepts, or
thought itself. Each passing moment is more complex than we
have realized, more vague and multidimensional than our
concepts can pick up. Not only the absolute but also every
pulse of experience possesses this common complexity, this
vagueness. (ibid.)

Gavin argues that James must remain dedicated to the use of language as a
means of communication to point to the latent image of his philosophy, even
though language always remains problematic. For this reason, James cannot
make the linguistic turn of later philosophy and remains dedicated to the
ultimate basis of meaning in pure experience.

Chapters seven and eight, “‘Pure’ Versus ‘Impure’ Experience:
Examples of Pure Experience” and “Challenges to ‘The Will to Believe,’” delve
into James’s attempts to describe pure experience and the criticisms that might
be made of a Jamesian account. Gavin gives examples from both the Principles
and Varieties to show how language remains problematic but necessary for
James. Language must point to something else, but can never say that something
else which remains in pure experience. The potential criticisms of James in the
eighth chapter rehearse the criticisms of Jamesian thought from the “right” of A.
J. Ayer and Positivists who reject the “ineffability” of pure experience and the
“left” represented by Dostoevsky and Kafka, who challenge James’s
characterization of the self. James’s individualism results in neither the
“shameful self left at the end of The Trial nor the spiteful self flailing away at
the end of Notes from the Underground” because the Jamesian self remains
strong in his or her will to believe (74). This will to believe allows for the
possibility of activity and development even in a world of ambiguity and
potential disaster. Gavin dismisses these criticisms, showing how James’s
philosophy does not fail because of these problems. Rather, Gavin’s criticisms
are given, it would seem, as rehearsals of what might be said about James in
order to situate his work within a broader philosophic discussion: it is clear that
Gavin does not endorse these critiques. For all of its strengths, it is in this
chapter, I believe, that the book could benefit from more thoroughgoing
challenges to James from other classical pragmatists, especially Peirce. Doing so
would only strengthen the value of this book to those who wish to see how
James is situated within the philosophic discourse. Those new to pragmatism
would benefit from a discussion of how James’s pragmatism diverged and took
on questions of a personal dimension that Peirce largely avoided. Furthermore, a
criticism of James from within the pragmatist camp would demonstrate not only
the diversity of pragmatists, but also where James might be moving away from
the pragmatism Peirce suggests to use as a manner to guide scientific
investigation. Furthermore, challenges from language-centered approaches in
pragmatism, such as those forwarded by the neopragmatists, are also criticisms
which deserve rehearsal. While there are some comments distinguishing James
from Dewey, a discussion would doubtlessly be helpful for the novice who is
working to navigate the nuances of the many thinkers in pragmatism. Contemporary pragmatists such as Richard Rorty have little time for discussions of pure experience. Again, a criticism of James posited from this perspective would likely allow the reader to better situate criticism and understanding of James.

In the conclusion, “Pragmatism, Death, and ‘The Will to Believe,’” Gavin takes up more latent content of Pragmatism and discusses how James comports himself with the problem of death. It is in with the comportment to the real risk of a wild universe where we must participate and also die where James’s claim that we must, at times strenuously and heroically, will ourselves to have believes becomes most palpable. This comes full circle with the beginning of the work where James’s own biography provides a great deal of the motivation for his philosophy. Thus, in the discussion of how we come to deal with the reality of death, Gavin demonstrates that what is latent in James is a philosophy of how we go about living with the vagueness and complexity of pure experience. It is a strenuous life that James demands, one that requires that we act out our belief that there is meaning.

This volume’s audience is explicitly those who are new to James, yet those who wish to return to his work and even those with some expertise will nonetheless find it edifying. Given the digestibility of the book, which is short and divided into very quick reads, one could easily use it as a reference while reading the important works of James with students. However, “brief” ought not fool one into thinking this work is without intellectual demands. Quite the contrary: it is no small feat to survey so much of James’s writings in such a coherent and evocative manner. This praiseworthy volume presents a viewpoint on James that brings the novice reader into conversation and reminds the more experienced reader of the big-picture of James, of the zest and novelty of his vision. Understanding James requires some commitment and work—and this volume is a good and workable guide. Gavin is clear that “James’s texts are meant as a ‘spur’ for us, in the same way that R. W. Emerson said that books ‘are for nothing but to inspire.’ Successful texts point beyond themselves” (91). If measured by this goal, the volume is a success as it spurs us to consider James’s work as demanding a new interpretation for each reader. Gavin, in his discussion of James, retains the zest and freshness of a philosopher who rewards the reader with her own view of a thick pluralistic universe.

Justin Bell
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
University of Houston – Victoria
Bellj1@uhv.edu