



WILLIAM JAMES STUDIES

SPRING 2021 • VOLUME 17 • NUMBER 1



Mission Statement

William James Studies (ISSN: 1933-8295) is a bi-annual, interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal dedicated to publishing high quality, scholarly articles related to the life, work and influence of William James. *William James Studies* is an open-access journal so as to ensure that all who have an interest in William James have access to its contents. The journal is published online by the [William James Society](#).

William James Studies is indexed and abstracted in EBSCO, JSTOR, MLA International Bibliography, and The Philosopher's Index.

Editors

General Editor: [Ermine Algaier](#), Monmouth College
Managing Editor: [Kyle Bromhall](#), Sheridan College
Book Editor: [Alexis Dianda](#), Xavier University
Periodicals Editor: [James Medd](#), Freelance Librarian

Manuscript Submission Information

The journal accepts only completed manuscripts and only those that are not concurrently under review by another journal or other publication. All submissions must be suitable for an interdisciplinary audience. As such, they must be clear and jargon free while retaining their academic rigor. All submissions must be sent electronically. Papers must be Microsoft Word documents and attached to an email sent to submissions@williamjamesstudies.org. Persons unable to submit manuscripts electronically should contact Ermine Algaier, General Editor, WJS, Monmouth College, 700 E. Broadway, Monmouth, Illinois, 61462. Manuscripts should be double spaced and no longer than 8,000 words, including references. On questions of style and documentation, each manuscript must be consistent with *The Chicago Manual of Style*, Notes and Bibliography. All manuscripts must be accompanied by an abstract, no longer than 150 words. Because unsolicited manuscripts are blind reviewed, each must include a separate title page listing the title of the paper, the author's name, institutional affiliation, word count, and current contact information (mailing address, email address, and phone number). There should also be no references in the paper, footnotes or endnotes that compromise the anonymity of the author. Although we try to provide a quick turnaround, authors can expect a decision regarding their submission within four months.

Book Review Submission Information

WJS will consider unsolicited book reviews of 800-1000 words on topics consistent with the journal's Mission Statement. In addition, we welcome short reviews (400-500 words) that offer a concise, cogent overview and evaluation of the book under consideration. All reviews should be submitted not more than three months after receipt of the book. The Editors welcome suggestions of books for review; prospective reviewers should indicate their interest in being considered for review assignments. For more information, please contact [Alexis Dianda](#), Book Review Editor.

Contact Information

All inquiries should be directed to the Managing Editor, Kyle Bromhall, at editor@williamjamesstudies.org.

WILLIAM JAMES STUDIES
SPRING 2021 • VOLUME 17 • NUMBER 1

CONTENT

Front Matter

ARTICLES AND NOTES

2021 WILLIAM JAMES SOCIETY PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 1
Megan Mustain

Perception as a Moral Behavior in *The Principles of Psychology* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* 9
2020 YOUNG SCHOLAR PRIZE WINNER
Justina Torrance

“Certainly Vague”: William James, Radical Empiricism, and the “Complete Description” of Mental Life 34
Maude Emerson

William James’s Use of Temperaments and Types 62
RESEARCH NOTE
David E. Leary

BOOK REVIEWS

Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life, by John Kaag 80
Review by Myron Moses Jackson

Pragmatist Egalitarianism, by David Rondel 92
Review by Bonnie Sheehey

PERIODICALS

Related Scholarly Publications: October 2020 to May 2021 100

2021 WILLIAM JAMES SOCIETY PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Megan Mustain
Trinity University
mmustain@trinity.edu



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.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Athanasίου, Athena, Pothiti Hantzaroula, and Kostas Yannakopoulos. "Towards a New Epistemology: The 'Affective Turn.'" *Historein* 8 (2008): 5–16.
- James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. 3 Vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Guilmette, Lauren. "Teresa Brennan, William James, and the Energetic Demands of Ethics." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 33, no. 4 (2019): 590–609.

NOTES

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

PERCEPTION AS A MORAL BEHAVIOR IN *THE PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGY* AND *THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE*

Justina Torrance
Harvard University
jtorrance@mail.harvard.edu

2020 YOUNG SCHOLAR PRIZE WINNER



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.



In *The Principles of Psychology*, James describes a curious phenomenon he refers to as a ‘systematized anaesthesia.’¹ The anaesthesia 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 “anaesthesia” 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 anaesthesia,” however, to describe this phenomenon. The word “anaesthesia” represents well the insensitivity to the stimulus effected by the instruction to ignore. But what does it mean for an anaesthesia 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 *imperceptions* 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.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barzun, Jacques. *A Stroll with William James*. New York: Harper and Row, 1983.
- Deese, James. "James on the Will." In *Reflections on The Principles of Psychology: William James after a Century*, edited by Michael G. Johnson and Tracy B. Henley, 295-310. Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1990.
- Ellenberger, Henri F. *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*. New York: Basic Books, 1970.
- James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- . *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- . *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

- Klein, David Ballin. *The Unconscious: Invention or Discovery? A Historico-Critical Inquiry*. Santa Monica: Goodyear, 1977.
- Koopman, Colin. "The Will, the Will to Believe, and William James: An Ethics of Freedom as Self-Transformation." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 55, no. 2 (2017): 491–512.
- Leary, David E. *The Routledge Guidebook to James's Principles of Psychology*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Levinson, Henry Samuel. *The Religious Investigations of William James*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981.
- Marchetti, Sarin. "Unfamiliar Habits: James and the Ethics and Politics of Self-Experimentation." *William James Studies* 11 (2015): 102–13.
- Mayer, Andreas. *Sites of the Unconscious: Hypnosis and the Emergence of the Psychoanalytic Setting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Myers, Gerald E. *William James: His Life and Thought*. New Haven: Yale, 1986.
- Otto, M. C. "On a Certain Blindness in William James." *Ethics* 53, no. 2 (Apr. 1943): 184–91.
- Pawelski, James O. *The Dynamic Individualism of William James*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007.
- Taylor, Eugene. *William James on Exceptional Mental States: The 1896 Lowell Lectures*. New York: Scribner, 1983.
- Tursi, Renee. "William James's Narrative of Habit." *Style* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 67–87.
- Yearley, Lee H. *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990.

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 “imagination” 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.

“CERTAINLY VAGUE”:
WILLIAM JAMES, RADICAL EMPIRICISM, AND THE “COMPLETE
DESCRIPTION” OF MENTAL LIFE

Maude Emerson
Skidmore College
maude.emerson@gmail.com



Since the first publication of *The Principles of Psychology*, readers have troubled over James’s assertion that the task of psychology is to “[ascertain] the empirical correlation of the various sorts of thought or feeling with definite conditions of the brain.” This program for psychology appears to conflict with the general tenor of James’s thought, as well as his particular philosophy of radical empiricism and his actual accomplishments in *Principles*, which might be better summarized by the line “the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life.” Looking closely at James’s engagement with cerebral psychology in the opening chapters of *Principles*, I argue both that vagueness operates in concert, not in conflict, with the premise of psychology “as a natural science,” and that that premise is more central to James’s broader intellectual project than scholars have allowed.



Reflecting during her 1934-35 American lecture tour on her development as a writer, Gertrude Stein summarized the influence of her college studies with William James as follows: “When I was working with William James, I completely learned one thing, that science is continuously busy with the complete description of something, with ultimately the complete description of anything with ultimately the complete description of everything.”¹ James’s 1400-page *The Principles of Psychology*, along with many of his subsequent writings, might well be understood as contributions toward “the complete description of everything.” His pages are filled with assiduous descriptions of the subtlest motions of mental life, from notes on his own experiences of light and color to the first-hand accounts of spiritual ecstasy by saints and mystics collected in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. But there is another, more contentious sense in which *Principles*, in particular, participates in a project of “complete description.” In the preface to *Principles*, James announces his intention to treat psychology “as a natural science.”² As such, its task is to “[ascertain] the empirical correlation of the various sorts of thought or feeling with definite conditions of the brain”—to achieve, that is, a complete description of mental life in terms of the physical body.³

Stein’s comments bring into focus a problem in the interpretation of James. To generations of readers, his program for psychology “as a natural science” has appeared eccentric, if not downright contrary, to the prevailing current of his thought. Indeed, when readers recall the mission of James’s psychology, they often invoke a phrase that seems diametrically opposed to the project of “complete description”: “the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life.”⁴ Within *Principles*, he devotes less attention to “definite conditions of the brain” than to feelings so constitutively hazy that to examine them is like “trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks.”⁵ Looking beyond *Principles*, scholars have adopted “the vague” as a metonym for an entire range of James’s career-long commitments: to the fluxional quality of psychic life, to the mysteries of religious

experience, to the pragmatic conception of truth continually “in the making,” and to the dissolution, in his philosophy of radical empiricism, of the binary between known object and knowing subject.⁶ All of these commitments seem to suggest an orientation at odds with the “strictly positivistic point of view” announced in the preface to *Principles*.⁷

In this essay, I argue that the hypothesis of “complete description”—that mental life might be exhaustively described in terms of the physical body—plays a more lasting and consequential role in James’s thought than his interpreters have allowed. Far from abandoning that hypothesis in the course of *Principles* and his subsequent writings, James takes pains to preserve it. And far from conflicting with his radical empiricism or his insistence on the primacy of felt experience, including religious experience, James’s preservation of the hypothesis of “complete description” actually strengthens them. To definitively assert that mental and spiritual events are exhaustively conditioned by physical ones would be to espouse “a metaphysics of physics,” as one early reviewer of *Principles* accused James of doing.⁸ But to rigorously maintain that they *might* be is to adhere to the species of empiricism that James labelled “radical.”

In order to demonstrate how James’s science of “complete description” works together with his apparently antithetical psychological and philosophical investments, I must correct a common misunderstanding of what he means by “vagueness.” Some recent discussions of James in literary studies, for instance, leave the impression that vagueness exceeds not only linguistic description, but also material determination. I correct this error, first, by highlighting a crucial difference between James’s thought and that of his admired correspondent, Henri Bergson: whereas Bergson’s vitalism emphasizes the limit of material determination, James’s “vague” marks his refusal to posit such a limit. This function of vagueness abounds in *Principles*—especially in those chapters that adhere most directly to the scientific program enunciated in the preface. Looking closely at “The Scope of Psychology” and “The Functions of the Brain,” I demonstrate that vagueness complicates

without ever contravening the project of obtaining “a complete diagram of the mind’s and the brain’s relations.”⁹ Oftentimes in *Principles*, vagueness attests to the extraordinary complexity of physical processes. This vagueness goes hand in hand with a willful vagueness on questions of ultimate nature: rather than proclaim the universe thoroughly mechanistic or definitively spiritual, James comes to rest on provisional positions that are “vague and elastic enough to receive any number of future discoveries of detail.”¹⁰ In this sense, I argue, the incipient radical empiricism of *Principles* lies not in its departures from the premises of psychology as a natural science, as many have suggested, but in the tenacity with which it hews to them. At the end of the essay, I turn to a further consequence of James’s patience for the positivistic hypothesis. His 1902 treatise *Varieties* is devoted to states of consciousness and belief that both challenge and are challenged by the assumptions of natural science. Even here, however, James upholds those assumptions—and, by doing so, indemnifies religious experience against further attacks from the corner of science.

THE NATURAL-SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE OF *THE PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGY*

Perhaps no passage in James’s writings has generated so much commentary as the preface to *Principles*, which briefly states the purview and presuppositions of psychology conceived of “as a natural science.” To call psychology a science at all was provocative in 1890, when, Ralph Barton Perry reminds us, “[p]sychology as . . . taught in the United States was indistinguishable from the philosophy of the soul, embracing a brief account of the senses and of association, but devoted mainly to the higher moral and logical processes.”¹¹ From the very beginning, however, controversy over the preface has focused less on James’s dismissal of the soul than on his statement of the assumptions from which the science of psychology must proceed. According to James, the elementary data that psychology assumes are “(1) *thoughts and feelings*, and (2) *a physical world* in time and space with which they coexist and which (3) *they know*.”¹² He continues, “these data themselves are

discussable, but the discussion of them (as of other elements) is called metaphysics and falls outside the province of this book.”¹³ Leaving to philosophy, or perhaps to future science, the question of *how* “thoughts and feelings” relate to the “physical world” in the first place, psychology takes up the task of determining “the empirical correlation of the various sorts of thought or feeling with definite conditions of the brain.”¹⁴

The reason why this passage elicits so much commentary is that it seems so patently inconsistent with James’s views and practices. To many, it bespeaks a reductive materialism of the kind that James denounces elsewhere in his writings. To some experimental psychologists, it is an unfulfilled promise, belied by the introspective approach that he actually takes in *Principles*.¹⁵ Others, like John Dewey, point to the absolute discrepancy between the dualistic assumptions allowed in this passage and James’s anti-dualistic philosophy of radical empiricism.¹⁶ Scholars tend to account for these discrepancies in one of two ways. Some argue that James ultimately repudiated the position that he articulates in the preface to *Principles*, having become convinced in the twelve-year course of writing the book that his initial formulation of the task of psychology was untenable.¹⁷ Others follow Perry in maintaining that the “strictly positivistic” assumptions of *Principles* are methodological, rather than metaphysical, and therefore neither reflect James’s ultimate worldview nor conflict with his other intellectual commitments, like his metaphysics of radical empiricism.¹⁸ My analysis supports the latter interpretation, but I argue that it doesn’t go far enough: it understates both the rigor with which James sustains the positivistic hypothesis throughout his career, and the intimacy of the relationship between the scientific attitude of *Principles* and the more radical dimensions of James’s thought.

I choose the word “hypothesis” carefully, because James was almost maddeningly circumspect on questions that he felt “must some day be more thoroughly thought out.”¹⁹ He felt this way, for example, about the question of exactly how the mind relates to the body, entertaining “parallelistic, epiphenomenalistic, and

interactionistic” explanations in turn.²⁰ James was never quite convinced by the epiphenomenalistic position that held consciousness to be an inefficacious byproduct of events in the physical body.²¹ Nonetheless, there are moments within and beyond *Principles* that nudge the hypothesis of “complete description” toward the status of a theory: for example, in the chapter “The Consciousness of Self,” where he suggests that “*our entire feeling of spiritual activity, or what commonly passes by that name, is really a feeling of bodily activities whose exact nature is by most men overlooked*”—a suggestion that James repeats more assertively in the 1904 essay “Does Consciousness Exist?”—and in his theory of emotion, which holds that “moods, affections, and passions ... are in very truth constituted by, and made up of, those bodily changes which we ordinarily call their expression or consequence.”²² The response to James’s theory of emotion illustrates the way that readers have perceived these “physicalist” positions as outliers within his larger body of work. In his 1929 *A History of Experimental Psychology*, Edwin Boring makes the remarkable claim that “[t]here was only one specific psychological theory of James’ that ever became famous and led to extended discussion and research, and that was his theory of emotion.”²³ Meanwhile, from the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum, Henri Bergson singles out the same theory as the point at which he and James diverge:

We shall not go so far as to maintain, with Professor James, that the emotion of rage is reducible to the sum of these organic sensations: there will always be an irreducible psychic element in anger, if this be only the idea of striking or fighting, of which Darwin speaks, and which gives a common direction to so many diverse movements.²⁴

In this passage from *Time and Free Will*, Bergson presents his disagreement with James as a minor quibble, but in fact, his assertion of an “irreducible psychic element” amounts to a consequential difference, which I elaborate in the following pages.

BERGSON'S VITALISM AND JAMES'S "VAGUE"

James and Bergson are usually thought of—indeed, they thought of themselves—as intellectual allies. The terms of their alliance help to clarify why James's assertion of "a strictly positivistic point of view" strikes so many readers as incongruous. Both men were learned in the natural sciences and deeply influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution, but they publicly and vociferously opposed the interpretation of Darwinism as authorizing a Godless, mechanistic worldview. According to historian T. J. Jackson Lears, James "spent his entire career wrestling with the determinist Minotaur"—a creature who manifested most prominently, at the time, in the figure of Herbert Spencer.²⁵ Bergson, too, forged his philosophy in opposition to Spencer's "pervasive cosmic materialism," as well as to the French positivist tradition exemplified by "Comte, Taine, and Renan, [who] advanced a thoroughly naturalistic understanding of the universe" and "anticipated the day when the methods of modern science would provide a definitive explanation not only of the physical world, but also of human experience and activity."²⁶ Sanford Schwartz writes that "Bergson's reaction to Spencer was one expression of a major 'revolt against positivism' near the end of the nineteenth century"—a revolt to which James's various researches unquestionably also belonged.²⁷

It is easy to see, in this context, how James's "vague" might be taken as a general figure of resistance to materialism and scientific rationality. The most famous formulation of the Jamesian "vague"—"It is, in short, the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention"—does, in fact, mark the most profound conjunction of James's and Bergson's philosophies.²⁸ That formulation has to be understood, however, in the specific context in which it appears: that of James's criticism of associationist psychology. The model of mind assumed by most psychologists at the end of the nineteenth century was a version of the Lockean doctrine of "simple ideas," which holds that mental life is composed of discrete and unchanging units of thought that are linked by association and compounded into complex mental states. One of James's major contributions to

modern psychology was his argument that the elementary unit of consciousness is not an atomic idea, but the entire, integral, shifting panorama of thought, which he describes using the metaphor of a river or stream. “[T]he definite images of traditional psychology,” he contends,

form but the very smallest part of our minds as they actually live. The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and the pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists resolutely overlook. Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it.²⁹

According to James, the greatest part of our mental lives consists of feelings of tendency, transition, and relation—feelings that are difficult to isolate and name. A discrete sensation may be abstracted from the stream of thought, but *within* the stream, it arrives fused together with “the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead.”³⁰ Furthermore, that stream is Heraclitean: the same thought cannot recur twice, because each instant of the stream bears the difference of its context, including the accrued difference made by past repetitions. Bergson arrived independently at an identical critique of associationist psychology in *Time and Free Will*.³¹ For both thinkers, this theory of mind extends to a philosophical conviction that nature always exceeds conceptualization: because concepts, by definition, indicate *the same again*, they cannot be applied to nature without leaving a remainder. It is not wrong to think of James’s “vague” as a figure for that remainder: the blurred and transitional states of experience that the structure of conceptual thought conditions us to overlook.³²

This is how James’s “vague” is often understood within literary studies—naturally, given that the argument applies as readily to language as to conceptual thought, and that he relied heavily on

linguistic metaphors to illustrate his conception of “the stream of thought.” Dora Zhang and Megan Quigley situate James’s sense of “the vague” within the matrix of language theories expressed in early-twentieth century philosophy and Modernist fiction. In “Naming the Indescribable: Woolf, Russell, James, and the Limits of Description,” Zhang traces a connection between Virginia Woolf’s experiments with linguistic vagueness and James’s theorization of a mode of direct, particular experience—what he calls “knowledge by acquaintance”—that by definition cannot be verbalized, because words, like concepts, capture only what is shared and generalizable. Zhang’s interpretation of James’s “vague” is consistent with the specific sense of the term as it relates to his refutation of associationist psychology. The trouble arises when “the limits of description” are exported beyond the context of a particular theory of language, and taken more generally to stand for the limits of the knowable or the materially determined.³³ Quigley invites this misunderstanding of James when she invokes a distinction from contemporary language theory between a conception of vagueness as “*epistemic*,” according to which the “boundaries of vague terms are not actually blurry but ‘our failure to detect a sharp transition’ is ‘merely a defect in our knowledge,’” and of vagueness as “*semantic*,” meaning that it “might demonstrate ‘some real indeterminacy in the non-linguistic world itself.’”³⁴ Quigley identifies James’s “vague” as the latter variety, which she sometimes calls “ontological vagueness.”³⁵ And without going so far as to assert that James believed in “some real indeterminacy” on a physical level, she does suggest that this variety of vagueness “dovetails with early twentieth-century discoveries in quantum physics, which ... put both objective observation and the ‘indeterminacy’ of the matter to study under intense scrutiny.”³⁶

The reason why this suggestion is dangerous is that Bergson *does* assert a limit to material determination, whereas James does not. The nub of Bergson’s “revolt against positivism” is the position, shared with other vitalist thinkers, that “[m]anifestations of ‘life’ are not reducible to mechanical explanation.”³⁷ Not only does nature exceed conceptualization, but life—its essential distillation, which

Bergson designates *élan vital*—exceeds its material conditions, in the same way that “the emotion of rage,” in his view, contains “an irreducible psychic element” above and beyond “the sum of [the] organic sensations” that accompany it.³⁸ At first glance, James’s image of “the vague” that slips and pools between the gaps of associationism’s “brickbat plan of construction” bears an awfully close resemblance to a vital principle that “is born in the negative spaces of the machine model of nature, in the ‘gaps’ in the ‘chain of strictly physico-chemical or mechanical events.’”³⁹ But there is a difference between repudiating an overly mechanical model of the mind itself (associationist psychology) and positing gaps in the correlation between (phenomenal) mind and (material) brain. Whereas the latter implies that matter is finite and simple as compared to the novelty and agility of the mind, James’s writings reflect a sense of the extraordinary dynamism of the physical body, as well as a profound awareness of how little science yet understands of its workings. In fact, James cites the unrepeatability of physical brain states *as a reason* for the unrepeatability of mental states:

For an identical sensation to recur it would have to occur the second time *in an unmodified brain*. But as this, strictly speaking, is a physiological impossibility, so is an unmodified feeling an impossibility; for to every brain-modification, however small, must correspond a change of equal amount in the feeling which the brain subserves.⁴⁰

For James, the complexity of the material keeps exact pace with the complexity of the mental. I will return to this difference between James and Bergson later in the essay when I address James’s treatment of the ability of brain tissues to regenerate after an injury—a phenomenon that is also an important reference point for Bergson’s vitalism.

In light of this comparison between James and Bergson, I propose to emend Quigley’s characterization of the Jamesian “vague.” Quigley defines James’s attitude toward vagueness in opposition to that of C. S. Peirce, who held that vague language is useful in a pragmatic sense, but that the reality that it aims to

describe is definite and clear, and so the ultimate goal of philosophy is “to refine vagueness out of existence.”⁴¹ In contrast to this epistemic position, Quigley argues that both William James and his brother Henry, in his novels, depict a world that is itself irreducibly vague. I propose, to the contrary, that James’s vagueness is not exactly “epistemic” or “semantic.” Instead, one of its primary functions is to forestall any claims at all about ultimate clarity or indeterminacy. Sometimes, James describes as “vague” phenomena that he expects science to eventually describe more precisely, and sometimes he uses vagueness to “[soften] down” the pictures that scientists have drawn with premature precision.⁴² But in all of these cases, vagueness marks James’s reluctance to overstep the empirical evidence in either direction, either by proclaiming that an instance of vagueness within the empirical field is merely an imperfect view of a definite reality, or, to the contrary, that no amount of investigation will resolve it into clarity.

VAGUENESS IN *THE PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGY*

Along with the functions and phenomena of mental life, *Principles* inventories multiple varieties of vagueness. There is the ontological vagueness of conscious experience itself, which James describes using images of “fringe” and “penumbra” as well as the liquid language of the “stream,” and the epistemic vagueness of a science in its infancy, as yet possessed of only the sketchiest knowledge of neural and cerebral processes.⁴³ The book also endorses a salutary methodological vagueness, most explicitly in chapter one, “The Scope of Psychology.” The first sentence of the chapter is straightforward—“Psychology is the Science of Mental Life, both of its phenomena and their conditions”—but the second is almost ostentatiously vague: “The phenomena are such things as we call feelings, desires, cognitions, reasonings, decisions, and the like.”⁴⁴ James is perfectly definite that these phenomena *are* the subjects of psychology, but his list enacts both the indefiniteness of the boundaries on either side of the subject (“such things,” “and the like”) and the inevitably confusing interaction between the experience of mental life and the conventions of language (“such

things *as we call feelings*,” etc.). The “conditions,” similarly, are easy to identify, but it is difficult to decide where the relevant conditioning ends or begins. “[T]he brain is the one immediate bodily condition of the mental operations,” and therefore “a certain amount of brain-physiology must be presupposed or included in Psychology,” but “[i]n still another way, the psychologist is forced to be something of a nerve-physiologist,” because the brain events upon which mental life depends depend themselves on communications from the extended nervous system.⁴⁵ Midway through the chapter, James makes a memorable assertion: “The boundary-line of the mental is certainly vague.”⁴⁶

“The boundary-line of the mental” is vague because the life of the mind is not distinctly divisible from the life of the body, but also because mentality is a pragmatic designation for a range of related phenomena, rather than a clearly identifiable phenomenon itself. As James attempts to specify the scope of his science, he subjects mentality to a kind of Wittgensteinian interrogation that yields no one property common to “feelings, desires, cognitions, reasonings, decisions, and the like,” but rather a set of family resemblances.⁴⁷ The concept of “Mental Life,” then, is “certainly vague,” as opposed to vaguely certain: it can be more sharply refined, but only in relation to a specific purpose or context. For the purpose at hand, James settles on “[t]he pursuance of future ends and the choice of means for their attainment” as a workable “*mark and criterion of the presence of mentality*.”⁴⁸ Workable, but not perfect; it forces him, for instance, to accept as “intelligent” the actions of a decapitated frog.⁴⁹ But James defends his adoption of provisional definitions, writing,

[i]t is better not to be pedantic, but to let the science be as vague as its subject, and include such phenomena ... if by so doing we can throw any light on the main business in hand. It will ere long be seen, I trust, that we can; and that we gain much more by a broad than by a narrow conception of our subject.⁵⁰

The ultimate goal of psychology as a natural science will be precise and definite knowledge about the phenomena and conditions of mental life, but at this early stage, “a degree of vagueness is what best consists with fertility.”⁵¹

The pragmatic vagueness that James recommends in “The Scope of Psychology” should not be mistaken for a rebuke to scientific precision. To the contrary, it creates the context within which the work of psychology as a natural science can begin. That work begins in earnest in chapter two, “The Functions of the Brain.” In other chapters, James draws heavily on data derived from introspection and the experiences of clinicians, but the empiricism of “The Functions of the Brain” is that of the laboratory. Most of the chapter is devoted to the specific branch of experimental inquiry known as cerebral localization. Advocates of cerebral localization viewed the cerebral cortex as “the surface of projection for every muscle and every sensitive point of the body.”⁵² Each of “the various elementary sorts of idea”—the “elementary sorts” presumed to be motor and sensory ideas—is represented by a particular region of the brain, and the researcher’s task is to determine, via techniques such as cortical irritation, targeted excision, and the examination of pathological lesions, which regions correspond to which ideas.⁵³ James calls “the *localization-question*” “the most stirring controversy in nerve-physiology which the present generation has seen” and treats it with his typical circumspection, entertaining a range of alternatives, criticisms, and qualifications.⁵⁴ He ultimately concludes, however, that it “is on the whole most satisfactorily corroborated by ... objective research.”⁵⁵

“Cerebral localization” refers specifically to the correspondence between “motor and sensory ideas” and points or regions of the cerebral cortex. But in a looser sense, “localization” describes the entire project of psychology as a natural science: that is, correlating the phenomena of mind to events that can be located in space and described in material terms. James’s assertion in chapter one “that the brain is the one immediate bodily condition of the mental operations” is an example of localization in its broadest sense.⁵⁶ In chapter two, he introduces the schematic division of the central

nervous system proposed by Austrian neuroanatomist Theodor Meynert. James will propose major corrections to “the Meynert scheme,” but accepts as a rough sketch Meynert’s attribution of automatic functions to the lower centers of the central nervous system and spontaneous and intellectual functions to the hemispheres of the brain. One might say that “localization” proceeds from the broadest correlation between a mental life and a central nervous system, to the general connection between hearing and the temporal lobe, to links as specific as that between auditory aphasia and lesions “limited to the first and second temporal convolutions in their posterior two thirds.”⁵⁷

James prefaces his discussion of cerebral localization with a brief section on phrenology. He presents phrenology as a discredited discipline, and its place in the chapter is largely historical. Still, its inclusion hints at a continuity between the phrenologist’s desire to find visible organs of invisible faculties and the psychologist’s project of assigning the various mental functions to particular regions of the hemispheres. Both phrenology and cerebral localization follow a logic of representation—the mind represented in the body—which in turn invites representation in the spatial form of a table or diagram.⁵⁸ James gives special emphasis to this representative logic—“[t]he muscles and the sensitive points are *represented* each by a cortical point, and the brain is nothing but the sum of all these cortical points, to which, on the mental side, as many ideas correspond”—and even pokes fun at the “diagram of little dots, circles, or triangles joined by lines” by which “Modern Science” “symbolizes ... the cerebral and mental processes.”⁵⁹ But in the case of cerebral processes, at least, he accepts that tabular logic, which the structure of the chapter goes on to exemplify. James classifies brain activity into motor and sensory functions and considers the five senses in turn, each accompanied by diagrams highlighting the most relevant regions of the brain. For each function, he proceeds through a taxonomy of experimental subjects, ranked from the least to the most developed nervous system: frog, pigeon, dog, monkey, human. Implicit in the structuring principle of the table is the imperative to complete it. And while James will

propose major complications of the diagrams drawn by contemporary physiologists, he accepts that completion is theoretically possible: "If ... we grant that motor and sensory ideas variously associated are the materials of the mind," James writes, "all we need do to get a complete diagram of the mind's and the brain's relations should be to ascertain which sensory idea corresponds to which sensational surface of projection, and which motor idea to which muscular surface of projection."⁶⁰

If anything threatens to undermine the possibility of the "complete diagram," it is the fact that it fails to include any of the phenomena that James names as most central to mental life: "desires, cognitions, reasonings, decisions, and the like."⁶¹ In "The Functions of the Brain," no brain regions corresponding to these types of feelings are ever proposed, beyond Meynert's vague attribution of higher functions to the hemispheres. Rather than proving fatal to the paradigm of cerebral localization, however, this omission highlights the lack of fundamental discord between that paradigm and James's views. The neuroanatomists and physiologists, he explains, had inherited their understanding of mind from associationist psychology, which holds that complex mental states are merely compounds of simple ones. To the associationist, "[i]deas of sensation, ideas of motion, are ... the elementary factors out of which the mind is built up."⁶² Surprisingly, although James thoroughly repudiates the associationists' conception of mind, his theory of emotions comports with their conception of brain. In the chapter on "The Emotions," James considers whether there are "special brain-centres for emotion" and concludes that there are not.⁶³ His reason for this conclusion is not that the emotions belong to an immaterial, unlocalizable stratum of mental life, but that he defines emotions as the apprehension in experience of certain constellations of physiological response. Rather than being activated by a fear-specific region of the brain, in James's view, the feeling of fear correlates to the activation of a particular pattern of motor and sensory centers corresponding to a rapid heartbeat, constricted blood vessels, shivering muscles, etc. Instead of seeking opportunities to combat the thorough physiologism that holds every pulse of mental

activity to correlate to a bodily change, James demonstrates that his own views are compatible with that perspective. The impression gained from reading the page after page of experimental results that James presents in “The Functions of the Brain” is that *all* of mental life is ultimately mappable, and that science is indeed progressing towards “a complete diagram of the mind’s and the brain’s relations.”⁶⁴

In other words, the complications of that proposition that arise in the chapter ultimately testify to its strength. While experimental findings are filling in points on the “complete diagram,” other findings threaten to erode the strictures of one-to-one correspondence between region and function. A precise view of the brain-regions themselves, James reports, reveals vaguer boundaries than some physiologists had been willing to see, while some functions correspond to cerebral activities more holistic than uniquely local. “Munk’s way of mapping out the cortex into absolute areas within which only one movement or sensation is represented is surely false,” James writes:

The truth seems to be rather that, although there is a correspondence of certain regions of the brain to certain regions of the body, yet the several *parts* within each bodily region are represented throughout the *whole* of the corresponding brain-region like pepper and salt sprinkled from the same caster.... The various brain-regions merge into each other in the same mixed way. As Mr. Horsley says: “There are border centres, and the area of representation of the face merges into that for the representation of the upper limb. If there was a focal lesion at that point, you would have the movements of these two parts starting together.”⁶⁵

The language of “merging” and “mixing” proliferates in the passage in a way that seems counterproductive to work of localization, which, in theory, ought to progress toward greater isolation and precision. For James, however, this is the language that scientific precision in fact requires. Vagueness emerges in this passage within the empirical field and through the experimental method, rather than as a pressure on empirical science from without. It is scientific

evidence, carefully considered, that leads him to replace an atomistic diagram of the cortex with a more holistic conception (“throughout the *whole* of the corresponding brain-region”). Likewise, James’s simile of “pepper and salt sprinkled from the same caster” is motivated by an effort to accurately represent what the evidence reveals. While the image suggests both a figurative license and a quality of disorder less proper to science than the discrete regions drawn by Hermann Munk, James’s text furnishes a subtle reminder that Munk’s map is itself, of course, a figure.

The boundaries of brain regions are not only vague, but also elastic. James devotes one section of “The Functions of the Brain” to the “restitution of function” after injury, studied primarily in dogs subjected to a series of neural cuts and excisions.⁶⁶ He advances two possible explanations for the recovery of brain function. One is the eventual “passing off of inhibitions” temporarily effected by the trauma of injury; the other is “the formation of entirely new paths in the remaining centres, by which they become ‘educated’ to duties which they did not originally possess.”⁶⁷ In the former case, injured pathways resume their former function after a period of time. In the latter, their function is transferred to vicarious centers, suggesting that the brain has qualities of spontaneity and plasticity that challenge the tabular logic of the “complete diagram.”

The ability of living tissues to adopt new functions in response to injury features in Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* as one piece of evidence for the existence of a life force that transcends mechanical behavior and defies the ateleological mechanism of Darwinian biology. Bergson marvels at the fact that different parts of a salamander’s eye are equally capable of regenerating the same injured tissue:

If the crystalline lens of a Triton be removed, it is regenerated by the iris. Now, the original lens was built out of the ectoderm, while the iris is of mesodermic origin. What is more, in the *Salamandra maculata*, if the lens be removed and the iris left, the regeneration of the lens takes place at the upper part of the iris; but if this upper part of the iris itself be taken away, the regeneration takes place in the inner or retinal layer of the remaining region.⁶⁸

“Whether we will or no,” Bergson concludes, “we must appeal to some inner directing principle in order to account for this convergence of effects.”⁶⁹ The essence of that vital principle, Bergson argues, is “to insert some *indetermination* into matter. Indeterminate, *i.e.* unforeseeable, are the forms [that life] creates in the course of its evolution.”⁷⁰ Indeterminacy, in other words, is the engine of novelty at both the phylogenetic and ontogenetic levels, allowing matter to evolve and develop in ways at once teleological and unpredictable.

James uses language identical to Bergson’s to describe how the instability of a highly developed nervous system like a human’s allows its possessor to act in unpredictable and minutely responsive ways: “The cerebral hemispheres are the characteristically ‘high’ nerve-centres, and we saw how indeterminate and unforeseeable their performances were in comparison with those of the basal ganglia and the cord.”⁷¹ “[T]his very vagueness,” James explains, “constitutes their advantage. They allow their possessor to adapt his conduct to the minutest alterations in the environing circumstances, any one of which may be for him a sign, suggesting distant motives more powerful than any present solicitations of sense.”⁷² There is a key difference, however, between what Bergson intends by the words “indeterminate” and “unforeseeable” and what James intends by them. As the passage continues, James replaces “indeterminate” with “accidental”:

An organ swayed by slight impressions is an organ whose natural state is one of unstable equilibrium.... [W]hat discharge a given small impression will produce may be called *accidental*, in the sense in which we say it is a matter of accident whether a rain-drop falling on a mountain ridge descend the eastern or the western slope. It is in this sense that we may call it a matter of accident whether a child be a boy or a girl. The ovum is so unstable a body that certain causes too minute for our apprehension may at a certain moment tip it one way or the other.⁷³

“Indeterminate,” for James, does not mean *in excess of* determining causes; it means determined by “causes too minute for our

apprehension.” Whereas Bergson posits a gap between determining causes and determined effects, James is too impressed by the numerousness and subtlety of material influences to claim to see their limit. For a writer whose sense of the material is as vibrant as James’s—who offers as a metaphor for the physical brain an “aurora borealis [whose] whole internal equilibrium shifts with every pulse of change”—there is little impetus to “insert some *indetermination* into matter.”⁷⁴ Its complexity alone is enough to account for the unforeseeable.

Concomitant to matter’s complexity, too, is James’s refusal to make final claims about what lies beyond the limits of his knowledge. I have argued that his science subscribes to a spatial logic exemplified by the “complete diagram of the mind’s and the brain’s relations.” But James also instills a sense that the diagram exists *in process*, and that the limits of “our apprehension” are constantly changing. “[C]auses too minute” for detection by current instruments may, or may not, be detectable by the instruments of the future. Here he differs from both the vitalists and the reckless materialists whose penchant, Eugene Taylor writes, was “to treat the world and everything in it as objects, all knowable and under the control of the rational mind.”⁷⁵ James’s version of the “strictly positivistic point of view,” in contrast, is an empiricism too unwavering to draw positive conclusions about the extent of the knowable. His circumspect conclusion to the discussion of the restitution of brain function is that “both the vicarious theory and the inhibition theory are true in their measure. But as for determining that measure, or saying which centres are vicarious, and to what extent they can learn new tricks, that is impossible at present.”⁷⁶ “Impossible at present” is a position James regularly stakes out, owing to his refusal to totalize either determinability or indeterminability.

There is one further point to make about James’s discussion of restitution. He often translates the vagueness that arises within the empirical field, signaling the intricacy of matter and the incompleteness of scientific understanding, into a deliberate vagueness in his own formulations. The open-endedness of James’s

conclusion that both “both the vicarious theory and the inhibition theory are true in their measure” is like that of our highly developed, unstable nervous systems, in that its vagueness constitutes its advantage, allowing it to adapt to a constantly developing body of research and understanding. In “The Functions of the Brain,” he matches the blurred outlines of brain regions by blurring the distinctions proposed by his colleagues in the sciences. James applies this blurring most prominently to the “Meynert scheme,” which held that automatic functions are carried out by the spinal cord and the lower centers of the brain, while the hemispheres are responsible for intelligent thought. “This sharp conception will have didactic advantages,” James writes, but ultimately it “will have to be softened down somewhat by the results of more careful experimentation both on frogs and birds, and by those of the most recent observations on dogs, monkeys, and man.”⁷⁷ Returning to the scheme at the end of the chapter, he concludes, “Wider and completer observations show us both that the lower centres are more spontaneous, and that the hemispheres are more automatic, than the Meynert scheme allows.”⁷⁸ Once again, the blurring of distinctions is yielded *by* the scientific method—by “wider and completer observations” and “more careful experimentation”—and not against it. In his modification of the Meynert scheme, James is able to balance “pepper and salt” holism with the atomistic mode of cerebral localization because he sees neither of them as absolute: as James will later write of his philosophy of radical empiricism, his approach “is fair to both the unity and the disconnection. It finds no reason for treating either as illusory.”⁷⁹ Radical empiricism is the attitude that allows him to assert without contradiction that “[t]he entire brain, more or less, is at work in a man who uses language” and at the same time to point to “[t]he subjoined diagram, from Ross,” that “shows the four parts most critically concerned.”⁸⁰

CONCLUSION: FROM *PRINCIPLES* TO *VARIETIES*

As we have seen, James refrains from making claims about the limits of the knowable, the calculable, or the materially conditioned. There are instances in his writings, like his theory of emotion, that

tend, to paraphrase the title of Dewey's famous assessment of James's psychology, to make the subject vanish—that is, that conduce toward the metaphysical postulation of unlimited material determination. At other moments, when James steps outside the bounds of science, he leans toward a spiritualist metaphysics, going so far in *Principles* as to confess his preference for the hypothesis of “some sort of an *anima mundi* thinking in all of us”—a hypothesis he will repeat at the conclusion of his Gifford Lectures.⁸¹ There, he suggests that what we know *from within* as our individual conscious life may be continuous, through the doorway of the subconscious, with a wider, transpersonal consciousness. This hypothesis, he insists, is no less consistent with the existing empirical data than a mechanistic theory in which consciousness is both epiphenomenal and entirely contained within individual minds.

The mark of the strength of James's empiricist commitment, however, is that he allows nothing to rest on this hypothesis. *Varieties* is first and foremost a descriptive book. (James Edie has called it James's “great attempt at ... a true phenomenology” *avant la lettre*.⁸²) But it is also, if not an implicit argument for the value and validity of religious experience, an explicit defense of the *possibility* of its value and validity against any attitude that denies it on a rational or intellectual basis. The most pressing assault of this kind comes from the attitude James calls “medical materialism.” “Medical materialism,” he writes, “finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa as an hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate,” and so on.⁸³ In response to this argument, James might have been tempted to introduce his theory that religious feelings flow into the mind from a region of transmarginal consciousness, and are therefore incorporeal in origin, independent of material determination. Instead, he returns to the central postulate of *Principles*: “Modern psychology, finding definite psycho-physical connections to hold good, assumes as a convenient hypothesis that the dependence of mental states upon bodily conditions must be thoroughgoing and complete.”⁸⁴ If this is the case, James contends,

then *every* feeling is corporeally grounded. The organic conditions of St. Paul's visions have no bearing on their spiritual authenticity because *all* thoughts and feelings flow from organic conditions, and it would be absurd to think that we know which of those conditions are the most favorable for "truths to germinate and sprout in."⁸⁵

Claiming not to judge religious experience but only to clear away prejudices so that his addressees might judge for themselves, James creates the conditions for a more radical defense of religious experience than one that locates its value, as Bergson locates the special character of life, in an element that escapes material determination. Whatever his own suspicions as to the limits of psychology's psycho-physical hypothesis, James has seen that for the vast majority of experience, it holds good, and his empiricism is too robust for him to discount the possibility that it holds indefinitely—that mental life might someday be mapped in its entirety. Because James takes seriously the possibility that science could theoretically, given enough time and more sensitive instruments, trace every nuance of St. Paul's revelations to the firing of a particular disordered neuron, he is driven to defend St. Paul's experience not on the grounds of an element that escapes the map, but on grounds of what the map might contain—which is to say, on grounds apart from the map altogether.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allport, Gordon. Introduction to *Psychology: The Briefer Course*, by William James, xiii–xxiv. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998.
- . *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001.
- Boring, Edwin. *A History of Experimental Psychology*. 2d ed. New York: The Century Co., 1929.

- Čapek, Milič. "Microphysical Indeterminacy and Freedom: Bergson and Peirce." In *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*, edited by Frederick Berwick and Paul Douglass, 171–89. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Dewey, John. "The Vanishing Subject in the Psychology of James." *The Journal of Philosophy* 37, no. 22 (1940): 589–99.
- Eddie, James. *William James and Phenomenology*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Gavin, William Joseph. *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992.
- Goodman, Russell. *Wittgenstein and William James*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- James, William. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.
- . *The Principles of Psychology*. 2 vols. New York: Dover, 1950.
- . *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Edited by Martin E. Marty. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.
- Jones, Donna V. *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Ladd, George Trumbull. "Psychology as So-Called 'Natural Science.'" *Philosophical Review* 1, no. 1 (1892): 24–53.
- Lamberth, David. *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Lears, T. J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Meyer, Steven. *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Perry, Ralph Barton. *The Thought and Character of William James*. 2 vols. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1935.

- Quigley, Megan. *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form, and Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Quirk, Tom. *Bergson and American Culture: The Worlds of Willa Cather and Wallace Stevens*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990.
- Schwartz, Sanford. "Bergson and the Politics of Vitalism." In *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*, edited by Frederick Berwick and Paul Douglass, 277–305. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Skrupskelis, Ignas. "James's Conception of Psychology as a Natural Science." *History of the Human Sciences* 8, no. 1 (1995): 73–90.
- Stein, Gertrude. "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans." In *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1932–1946*, edited by Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman, 270–86. New York: The Library of America, 1998.
- Taylor, Eugene. *William James on Consciousness Beyond the Margin*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- . "William James on the Demise of Positivism in American Psychology." In *Psychology: Theoretical-Historical Perspectives*, 2nd ed., edited by Robert W. Rieber and Kurt D. Salzinger, 101–132. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1998.
- Zhang, Dora. "Naming the Indescribable: Woolf, Russell, James, and the Limits of Description." *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 51–70.

NOTES

- ¹ Stein, "Gradual Making," 283.
- ² James, *Principles*, 1:vi.
- ³ James, 1:vi.
- ⁴ James, 1:254.
- ⁵ James, 1:244.
- ⁶ See, for example, Gavin, *William James*.
- ⁷ James, *Principles*, 1:vi.

⁸ Ladd, "Psychology as So-Called," 29.

⁹ James, *Principles*, 1:30.

¹⁰ James, 1:78.

¹¹ Perry, *Thought and Character*, 2:12.

¹² James, *Principles*, 1:v.

¹³ James, 1:vi.

¹⁴ James, 1:vi.

¹⁵ On the reception of *Principles* by experimental psychologists, see Taylor, "Demise of Positivism."

¹⁶ Dewey, "The Vanishing Subject."

¹⁷ See Dewey, "The Vanishing Subject." David Lamberth advances a more extended version of this argument in *Metaphysics of Experience*.

¹⁸ See Perry, *Thought and Character*, 2:72. Ignas Skrupskelis lays out a convincing argument for this position: see Skrupskelis, "James's Conception of Psychology."

¹⁹ James, *Principles*, 1:182.

²⁰ Allport, "Introduction," xx.

²¹ Indeed, the way that James frames his objection to the epiphenomenal theory lends strength to the argument of this essay. He bases his objection not on an *a priori* attachment to the freedom of the will but on empirical evidence and evolutionary logic, arguing that a theory of consciousness as causally efficacious comports better with both (James, *Principles*, 1:138–44).

²² James, *Principles*, 1:301–02; 2:452.

²³ Boring, *History of Experimental Psychology*, 502.

²⁴ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 29.

²⁵ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 5, 39.

²⁶ Quirk, *Bergson and American Culture*, 17; Schwartz, "Politics of Vitalism," 279.

²⁷ Schwartz, "Politics of Vitalism," 280. For the relationship of James's fascination with occult experiences to Bergson's rejection of positivism, see Jones, *Racial Discourses*, 73.

²⁸ James, *Principles*, 1:254.

²⁹ James, 1:255.

³⁰ James, 1:255.

³¹ See Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 155–65.

³² At the same time, for James, no aspect of nature is *essentially* unconceptualizable; rather, the remainder changes according to the concept being applied. A piece of paper, for example, is alternately “a combustible, a writing surface, a thin thing, a hydrocarbonaceous thing, a thing eight inches one way and ten another, a thing just one furlong east of a certain stone in my neighbor’s field, an American thing, etc., etc., *ad infinitum*. Whichever one of these aspects of its being I temporarily class it under, makes me unjust to the other aspects. But as I always am classing it under one aspect or another, I am always unjust, always partial, always exclusive” (James, *Principles*, 2:333). The existence of a remainder is a function of James’s relational ontology: there is no one perspective from which *all* that an object is can be grasped, and by the same token, the object *is* all that it is in the context of each of its virtually infinite relationships. This aspect of James’s philosophy—already laid out here in *Principles*—helps to clarify how he complicates the positivistic presumption of complete knowability without asserting its opposite, a positive unknowability.

³³ See Zhang, “Naming the Indescribable.”

³⁴ Quigley, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness*, 18–19.

³⁵ For example, Quigley, 73, 88, 100.

³⁶ Quigley, 19.

³⁷ Schwartz, “Politics of Vitalism,” 281.

³⁸ It can and should be debated whether Bergson’s vitalism can subsist within a thoroughly materialist framework, or whether it necessarily entails a dualistic distinction between matter and something beyond it. Milič Čapek makes the exact argument that Quigley suggests, but about Bergson, not James: that his philosophy “dovetails with early twentieth-century discoveries in quantum physics” regarding indeterminacy on a microphysical level. (Quigley, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness*, 19) From this perspective, the indeterminacy that Bergson emphasizes is part of the fabric of the material universe itself (Čapek, “Microphysical Indeterminacy and Freedom,” 286–87). Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, turns to Bergson and his vitalist contemporary Hans Driesch in her attempt to articulate a mode of materialism that does justice to the dynamism and agency of matter. She acknowledges the difficulty of enlisting Bergson and Driesch as materialists, however, conceding that they themselves “could not imagine

a *materialism* adequate to the vitality they discerned in natural processes” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 63). Whether or not it is possible to reconcile Bergson’s vitalism with a thoroughgoing materialism, my analysis suggests that James comes a good deal closer to the species of materialism that Bennett imagines.

³⁹ James, *Principles*, 1:196 ; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 70.

⁴⁰ James, *Principles*, 1:232–3.

⁴¹ Quigley, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness*, 16.

⁴² James, *Principles*, 1:15.

⁴³ James, 1:245–6.

⁴⁴ James, 1:1.

⁴⁵ James, 1:4–5.

⁴⁶ James, 1:6.

⁴⁷ Goodman, *Wittgenstein and William James*, 53. Wittgenstein’s concept of “family resemblance” may itself derive from his reading of James’s *Varieties*, while *Principles* “was an intellectual companion for Wittgenstein”—a book that he grappled with both directly and indirectly in his writings over decades (Goodman, 61).

⁴⁸ James, *Principles*, 1:8.

⁴⁹ James, 1:9.

⁵⁰ James, 1:6.

⁵¹ James, 1:6.

⁵² James, 1:30.

⁵³ James, 1:30.

⁵⁴ James, 1:4.

⁵⁵ James, 1:64.

⁵⁶ James, 1:4.

⁵⁷ James, 1:54.

⁵⁸ My claim here echoes Steven Meyer’s discussion of James’s influence on Gertrude Stein’s graduate work in neuroanatomy. Meyer, however, sees the spatial emphasis of James’s science as a limitation. He argues that because Stein’s neuroanatomical sketches incorporate the temporal dimension of *development*, they point the way toward the twentieth century’s more processual understanding of science. I complicate this characterization of James’s science below, where I suggest that his conception of the “complete diagram” does incorporate an understanding of process—not in terms of embryological development,

but in terms of the shifting boundaries of knowledge. See Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*, 83–99; 111–13.

⁵⁹ James, *Principles*, 1:30.

⁶⁰ In fact, James does not “grant that motor and sensory ideas variously associated are the materials of the mind,” but he gets around the problem without departing from materialist terms by maintaining that *whole mental states* correlate with *whole brain states*: “Our own formula escapes the unintelligibility of psychic atoms by *taking the entire thought* (even of a complex object) *as the minimum with which it deals on the mental side*” (James, *Principles*, 1:177).

⁶¹ James, 1:1.

⁶² James, 1:30.

⁶³ James, 2:472.

⁶⁴ James, 1:30.

⁶⁵ James, 1:64.

⁶⁶ James, 1:67–72.

⁶⁷ James, 1:67.

⁶⁸ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 75.

⁶⁹ Bergson, 76.

⁷⁰ Bergson, 126.

⁷¹ James, *Principles*, 1:139.

⁷² James, 1:139.

⁷³ James, 1:139. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁴ James, *Principles*, 1:234.

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Consciousness Beyond the Margin*, 112.

⁷⁶ James, *Principles*, 1:72.

⁷⁷ James, 1:14–5.

⁷⁸ James, 1:72.

⁷⁹ James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 47.

⁸⁰ James, *Principles*, 1:56.

⁸¹ James, 1:346; James, *Varieties*, 508–518.

⁸² Edie, *William James and Phenomenology*, viii.

⁸³ James, *Varieties*, 13.

⁸⁴ James, 13.

⁸⁵ James, 15.

WILLIAM JAMES'S USE OF TEMPERAMENTS AND TYPES

RESEARCH NOTE

David E. Leary
University of Richmond
dleary@richmond.edu



What did William James mean when he claimed that the history of philosophy is “to a great extent” a “clash of human temperaments”? Did this mean that philosophers, in his estimation, are bound to represent one or the other type, or orientation, associated with various generalized philosophical positions? Did it mean that philosophers were necessarily, in his terminology, either “tender-minded” or “tough-minded”? And if philosophical arguments are, in fact, expressions of physiological factors, through what means do these factors achieve expression? What, in sum, did James mean to imply when he invoked the concept of “temperament” and used the related notion of categorical “type”? How are we to understand and apply whatever insights he had to offer?



In the opening chapter of *Pragmatism*, William James famously argued that the history of philosophy is “to a great extent” a “clash of human temperaments.”¹ Although philosophers like to offer “impersonal reasons” for their conclusions, he said, in fact their temperament “loads the evidence . . . one way or the other, making for a more sentimental or a more hard-hearted view of the universe.”² Every philosopher, James observed, “trusts his temperament” and wants “a universe” that suits it.³ This should not be surprising. The same clash of temperaments, he noted, can be seen in many areas of human life. While it is manifested within philosophy in the conflict between “your [empiricistic] lover of facts in all their crude variety,” on the one hand, and “your [rationalistic] devotee to abstract and eternal principles,” on the other, parallel differences are apparent in the realm of manners between “formalists and free-and-easy persons”; in government, between “authoritarians and anarchists”; in literature, between “purists or academics, and realists”; and in art, between “classics and romantics.”⁴ And all of these differences *make* a difference, inciting antipathy between these temperamentally diverse groups. Thus, after compiling a list of characteristics associated with “tender-minded” rationalists and “tough-minded” empiricists, James underscored how “the tough think of the tender as sentimentalists or soft-heads” and “the tender feel the tough to be unrefined, callous, or brutal,” their mutual apprehension being akin to the way “Bostonian tourists” and “a population like that of Cripple Creek” think and feel about one another.⁵

In light of James’s frequent use of contrasting pairs like the ones above—in *Pragmatism*, for example, between intellectualists and sensationalists, idealists and materialists, optimists and pessimists, religious and non-religious, free-willists and fatalists, monists and pluralists, and dogmatists and skeptics—it is important to emphasize that he did not intend to suggest any metaphysical or essential dualities.⁶ Rather, James used what we might call conceptual or methodological dualities in a purely descriptive way, largely as rhetorical devices, contrasting rarely if ever encountered extremes (idealized representatives) of opposing points of view and opposing

behavioral tendencies, to make his arguments clearer and more persuasive. Even in the midst of his discussion of “tender-minded” and “tough-minded” philosophers, for instance, James explicitly indicated that he was talking about a spectrum of philosophical mentalities, a continuum ranging from the most rationalistic, at one end, to the most empiricistic, at the other. Only a relatively few historical figures, individuals like Plato, Locke, Hegel, and Spencer, have exhibited sufficiently “radical idiosyncrasy” to “set their stamp and likeness on philosophy,” thus coming to signify something like a pure type.⁷ Indeed, “most of us have ... no very definite intellectual temperament,” James acknowledged; “we are a mixture of opposite ingredients, each one present very moderately.”⁸ And the same caveat applied to his other dualistic distinctions—in psychology, for instance, between explosive and obstructed will, and in his study of religious experiences, between the “once-born” healthy-minded and the “twice-born” sick-minded.⁹

Nevertheless, in these and many other instances, this kind of typological thinking helped James elucidate and advance his argument. And it is worth pointing out that in many instances of dualistic thinking James indicated that extreme cases have their own limitations as well as benefits. Meanwhile, “most of us,” he admitted, “have a hankering for the good things on both sides of the line.”¹⁰ And, in fact, after so famously distinguishing “tender-minded” and “tough-minded” philosophers, James explicitly went on to invite his readers to integrate qualities from both empiricism and rationalism. Indeed, he offered “the oddly-named thing pragmatism as a philosophy” precisely because it “can satisfy both kinds of demand.”¹¹ And even though he actually proposed pragmatism as an epistemological *method* rather than a fully-constituted philosophical *metaphysics*, James did go on to fulfill crucial demands of both empiricism and idealism in his own metaphysical system (i.e., radical empiricism) by extending the empirical so far that it incorporated the subjective dimensions of experience.¹²

In sum, types for James were convenient conceptual or methodological tools, intended to facilitate understanding without introducing new essences into the various continua of experience.

But how about his use of temperament, which seems to have a specific biological point of reference? Is it a methodological or rhetorical device of the same kind, or did James want us to take it literally as a genetic, physiological, or neurological *cause* of how we tend to perceive, think, feel, and act? If not quite either, is there some intermediate way of understanding his use of this term? To answer these questions, we must consider what James said about psychological terminology and then consult his actual use of the term over the full extent of his writing.

Throughout his *Principles*, James cautioned readers against conferring narrowly exclusive meaning to psychological terms. We do not yet know enough, he repeated over and over, to assume that *any* of our terms has a specific or univocal reference, much less adequate definition. Indeed, one of the principal sources of error in psychology, James asserted, is “the misleading influence of speech.”¹³ In particular, he criticized the assumption that then-extant terms in the psychological lexicon had clear or singular referents, while also emphasizing that the absence of terms need not indicate the non-existence of still-unnamed phenomena. Psychology was at far too early a stage to warrant any strict standardization or regulation of its language. For this reason, in *Principles*, James used “consciousness” and “thinking,” “thought” and “feeling,” even “attention” and “will” interchangeably at times.¹⁴ And if his caution extended even to these commonly used terms, it applied all the more to terms like “temperament,” which were variously defined, variously explained, and variously attributed to different phenomena in contemporary thought.¹⁵ In 1880, for instance, Henry Maudsley, in a book that James used as a seminar text in 1896-97, wrote that “temperament” and “idiosyncrasy” are “big words” that

are at present little better than cloaks of ignorance; they are symbols representing unknown quantities rather than words denoting definite conditions; and no more useful work could be undertaken in psychology than a patient and systematic study of individuals—the scientific and accurate dissection and classification of the minds and characters of *particular* men in correlation with their features and habits of body.¹⁶

And eleven years later, Théodule Ribot, in another book with which James was very familiar, expressed the same view, that

the doctrine of the temperaments, as old as medical science itself, ever criticised and ever remodelled, is the vague and uncertain expression of the principal types of the physical personality, as furnished by observation, with the principal psychical traits that spring from them.... If the determination of temperaments could be rendered scientific, the question of personality would be greatly simplified.¹⁷

But the determination was obviously *not yet* scientific in 1891, nor even in the early 1900s, when temperament was defined in a very brief entry of the authoritative *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* as the “characteristic difference in congenital constitution of individuals, manifested, e.g., by differences in their emotional susceptibilities, in the rapidity of their mental processes, in the fixity of their conations.”¹⁸ Following this seemingly unambiguous definition, the ante-scientific status of the term was implicitly acknowledged when the authors then divided temperament into the same categories—sanguine, melancholic, choleric, and phlegmatic—used by ancient Galenic medicine, and succinctly described what was “supposed” about each. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that temperament and its types were defined in a scientifically reliable way and empirically validated as relevant variables in developmental and personality studies, as James and others had essentially hypothesized that they would be.¹⁹

It is not surprising, then, that James himself avoided any technical or substantive use of temperament, and in fact the word does not appear, as one might expect it would, in the index of his biologically grounded *Principles*. Indeed, the only extensive use of temperament, in all of James’s works, is in *Varieties*, where it serves an analogous role to the one it fulfills in *Pragmatism*: as the key to one’s susceptibility or openness to this or that type of perception, thought, or feeling, albeit this time of a religious rather than philosophical nature. As he put it, one must be “temperamentally

qualified” for a given type of faith.²⁰ But here, too, no further specification of any biological factors is provided.

This leads the present author to conclude that temperament, in and of itself, was not a crucial variable for James, but rather—in *Pragmatism* and elsewhere—it served as a stand-in for various biologically grounded (and pragmatically equivalent) *psychological* processes about which he had written in many other places, but which were not yet linked in any detail or with any certitude to particular physiological, neurological, or genetic aspects of temperament.²¹ Even though the word suggested that (unspecified) biological processes were associated with a person’s psychological constitution, it was that psychological constitution and the related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral inclinations that mattered. This could put an end to the matter, *except that* it should be acknowledged (before concluding) that James did go on to say, in *Pragmatism*, that “the picture I have given [of the temperamental differences between different types of philosophers] is, however coarse and sketch, *literally* true. Temperaments with their cravings and refusals do determine men in their philosophies, and always will.”²² Although this was adamantly stated, it was similarly unaccompanied by any stipulation of what precise biological foundations accounted for these traits.²³

The solution to the riddle, then, seems to lie in two statements of fact: (1) James assumed and sometimes stated that *all* psychological traits, like all psychological phenomena, have neurological or physiological foundations. (2) What he was concerned about was never temperament per se, but *the psychological traits associated with them*. Thus, it is not “tender-bodied” or “tough-bodied” but “tender-minded” and “tough-minded” characteristics that lead to different philosophical orientations. And although James could not offer any specific account of the genetic, physiological, or neurological states underlying these characteristics, he could and did offer accounts of the *psychological* factors that are involved: the needs, desires, and demands stemming from each individual’s *personal interests*, whether intellectual or practical, aesthetic or moral. However these

might be theoretically undergirded by physiological states, they lead to selective perception, selective conception, indeed, to selection all the way up and down the hierarchy of psychological processes, according to James, extending from sensation and perception at the one end to volition and action on the other.²⁴ And it is always the *practical consequences* rather than *theoretical origins* that matter in James's considerations. It is how one *reacts* to what he or she has experienced that makes a difference. The *effects* of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and actions, not their physical *stimuli* or biological *sources*, are what James ultimately cared about. Whatever their biological foundations, what was important to him were the psychological phenomena and processes whose existence he assumed to be so grounded. It was *these*, not any hypothesized underlying temperamental factor per se, that made the crucial difference for James.²⁵

For these reasons, any discussion of James's thesis about the temperamental foundations of philosophical attitudes (other than discussions that seek to update his position with evidence from twenty-first-century research) should focus on psychological rather than temperamental phenomena—on the personal characteristics, experiences, and concerns—that underlie his psychological as well as philosophical thinking.²⁶ This focus is consistent with James's later discussion of "The Types of Philosophic Thinking" (in the first chapter of *A Pluralistic Universe*), in which he underscores that "individuality outruns all classification" and directs his readers to the manifest phenomena of attention and selection rather than any underlying temperament as the crucial source of the "sketch" that each philosopher offers of the universe.²⁷ "A philosophy is the experience of a man's intimate character," James said there, "and all definitions of the universe are but the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it."²⁸ It is by "feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life, forced on one by one's total character and experience," he argued in 1909, that one achieves "one's best working attitude."²⁹ This is true for all philosophers, James argued: their working attitudes, revolving around their personal characteristics, experiences, and concerns, which is to say, their

personal interests and their resulting selective attention and reactions, shape their thought about themselves and their approach to the world around them. This was no less true of himself...and he wanted it no other way.³⁰

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bates, John E., and Theodore D. Wachs, eds. *Temperament: Individual Differences at the Interface of Biology and Behavior*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1994.
- Bordogna, Francesca. "The Psychology and Physiology of Temperament: Pragmatism in Context." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 3–25.
- Buss, Arnold, and Robert Plomin. *Temperament: Early Developing Personality Traits*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1984.
- James, William. "Brute and Human Intellect." In *Essays in Psychology*, 1-37. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983. (Original publication 1878)
- . "Diary [1] (1868-1873)." In *William James Papers*, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- . *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976. (Original publication 1912)
- . "The Gospel of Relaxation." In *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, 117–31. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983. (Original publication 1899)
- . "Herbert Spencer Dead." In *Essays in Philosophy*, 96–101. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. (Original publication 1903)
- . "James on Tausch." In *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 189-90. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987. (Original publication 1909)
- . "Letter to Charles Augustus Strong (April 9, 1907)." In *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 11, 342–43. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2003.

- . “Letter to Hugo Münsterberg (June 28, 1906).” In *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 11, 241–42. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2003.
- . *The Meaning of Truth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975. (Original publication 1909)
- . “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 141–62. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979. (Original publication 1891, reprinted 1897)
- . “Notes for Philosophy 20C: Metaphysical Seminary (1903-1904).” In *Manuscript Lectures*, 319–27. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- . *A Pluralistic Universe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977. (Original publication 1909)
- . *Pragmatism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975. (Original publication 1907)
- . *The Principles of Psychology*, 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981. (Original publication 1890)
- . “Rationality, Activity and Faith.” *Princeton Review* 2 (July-December 1882): 58–86.
- . “Reflex Action and Theism.” In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 90–113. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979. (Original publication 1881, reprinted 1897)
- . “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence.” In *Essays in Philosophy*, 7–22. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. (Original publication 1878)
- . “Review of *The Functions of the Brain*, by David Ferrier; *The Physiology of Mind*, by Henry Maudsley; and *Le Cerveau et ses fonctions*, by Jules Luys (1877).” In *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 332–37. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- . “Review of *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie*, by Wilhelm Wundt (1875).” In *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 296–303. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.

- . “Review of *Unüberwindliche Mächte*, by Herman Grimm (1867).” In *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 209–213. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- . “The Sentiment of Rationality.” In *Essays in Philosophy*, 32–64. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. (Original publication 1879)
- . “The Sentiment of Rationality.” In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 57–89. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979. (Original publication of this version 1897)
- . *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983. (Original publication 1899)
- . *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985. (Original publication 1902)
- . *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979. (Original publication 1897)
- Jastrow, Joseph, and James Mark Baldwin. “Temperament.” In *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, edited by James Mark Baldwin, Vol. 2, 672. New York: Macmillan, 1902.
- Kagan, Jerome. *Galen's Prophecy: Temperament in Human Nature*. New York: Basic, 1994.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, translated and edited by Robert B. Loudon. London: Cambridge University Press, 2006. (Original publication 1798)
- Leary, David E. “New Insights into William James's Personal Crisis in the Early 1870s: Part I. Arthur Schopenhauer and the Origins & Nature of the Crisis.” *William James Studies* 11 (2015): 1–27.
- . “The Psychological Roots of William James's Thought.” In *The Jamesian Mind*, edited by Sarin Marchetti. London: Routledge, forthcoming.
- . *The Routledge Guidebook to James's Principles of Psychology*. New York: Routledge. 2018.

- . “Visions and Values: Ethical Reflections in a Jamesian Key.” *The Journal of Mind and Behavior* 30, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 121–38.
- Maudsley, Henry. *The Pathology of Mind, Being the Third Edition of the Second Part of The “Physiology and Pathology of Mind,” Recast, Enlarged, and Rewritten*. New York: Appleton, 1880.
- Ribot, Théodule. *Diseases of Personality*. Translation of the 4th rev. ed. Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1906. (Original publication 1891)
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Essays and Aphorisms*. Translated and edited by R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin, 2004. (Original publication 1851)
- . *The World as Will and Representation*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. Translated by E. F. J. Payne, New York: Dover, 1966. (Original 3d ed. publication 1859)
- Thomas, Alexander, and Stella Chess. *Temperament and Development*. Oxford: Brunner/Mazel, 1977.

NOTES

This paper, despite the number and length of its footnotes, was conceived as a narrowly focused “note” rather than full-blown “article.” It touches on a topic covered exceptionally well, with greater sweep and detail, yet differently, in Francesca Bordogna’s “The Psychology and Physiology of Temperament.” The distinction around which this paper pivots, providing its *raison d’être*, is the actual pragmatic use of “temperament” and “type” in James’s thought, a use that emphasized the *psychological consequences* (formulated here as “personal characteristics, experiences, and concerns”) of what James took to be their broadly physiological underpinnings. These consequences are what mattered in his work, both when he did and when he did not specifically cite “temperament” or “type” as a factor. Bordogna is no doubt correct in claiming that James believed in the ultimate biological foundation of psychology, and hence of philosophy, but in actual practice it was (for him) the more proximate psychological consequences of temperament and type that motivated psychological and philosophical, as well as artistic, religious, and moral creations. It is not surprising, therefore, that he designated psychology, not physiology, as “the antechamber of metaphysics” (James, “Review of *Grundzüge*,” 296),

nor was it inconsistent that after accepting Johannes Müller's dictum, *nemo psychologus nisi physiologus*, James hastened to add that it was "doubly true" (emphasis added) that, "so far as the nerve-centres go, *nemo physiologus nisi psychologus*" (James, "Review of *The Functions*," 336). One cannot do nerve-physiology of any extensive sort without prior awareness of the psychological phenomena to be explained.

¹ James, *Pragmatism*, 11.

² James, 11.

³ James, 11.

⁴ James, 12.

⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 13–14. James's claim about the temperamental foundations of philosophy was not a late-career invention. Twenty-eight years earlier, he had described one of his first substantive publications as "the first chapter of a psychological work on the motives which lead men to philosophize" (James, "Sentiment of Rationality," 64). In that article, James wrote that "a man's philosophic attitude is determined by the balance in him of ... two cravings," namely, a craving for "ease" and "simplicity" and a craving for "clearness" and "distinction": in short, between an inclination toward rational unity and a partiality for empirical multiplicity (James, 38). Further, he argued that any philosophy necessarily achieves its "monstrous abridgment" of "the fulness of the truth" by the "casting out of real matter", with each remaining concept reflecting "a particular interest in the conceiver" (James, 55-6). (He had explicated the interest-based selectivity of the mind in even earlier publications: his "Review of *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie*" and his articles on "Brute and Human Intellect" and "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence.") James built upon these three articles several years later in "Rationality, Activity and Faith," where he noted that his earlier article on "The Sentiment of Rationality" had exhibited "the failure of the purely logical function in philosophizing" as it argued that, "for a philosophy to succeed," it must "define the future *congruously with our spontaneous powers*" (James, "Rationality, Activity and Faith," 58, 64). In other words, "personal temperament... will make itself felt" in one's preference for this or that philosophy. Fifteen years later, James combined the original "Sentiment" with portions of "Rationality, Activity and Faith" to create the chapter on "The Sentiment of Rationality" in *The Will to Believe*. Much of what he

said in these articles regarding the psychological motives of philosophizing was prompted by his reading of Arthur Schopenhauer, as reflected in James's statement that "the whole man within us is at work when we form our philosophical opinions" (James, *Will to Believe*, 77); see Leary, "New Insights," 12 and especially the appendix; also see Schopenhauer, *The World*, 2:160–87, and *Essays and Aphorisms*, 118–19). Perhaps it is worth noting that Immanuel Kant had treated "temperament" as well as "character" (even "character as the way of thinking"), but was as far as possible from recognizing psychological bias in philosophical thinking (Kant, *Anthropology*, 186–95).

⁶ James, *Pragmatism*, 13.

⁷ James, 11.

⁸ James, 11.

⁹ See James, *Principles*, 2:1144–56, noting the comment on 1144 that the quality of willful action "is always due to the *ratio* between the obstructive and explosive forces which are present." Also see James, *Varieties*, chs. 4–7, noting the comment on 140 that "the radical extremes are somewhat ideal abstractions, and the concrete human beings whom we oftenest meet are intermediate varieties and mixtures."

¹⁰ James, *Pragmatism*, 14.

¹¹ James, 23.

¹² See, e.g., James, *Radical Empiricism*, 21–44 and 97–104.

¹³ James, *Principles*, 1:193, capitals and italics deleted.

¹⁴ For explications and assessments of James's use of relational, overlapping, tentative, and far from exclusionary psychological terminology, see Leary, *Routledge Guidebook*.

¹⁵ Bordogna, "Psychology and Physiology," provides an excellent survey of the wide variety of descriptions, explanations, and attributions offered for temperament in the late nineteenth century. These explications provided different *names*, *typologies*, *descriptions*, and *claims* but no scientific *specifications* of supposed biologically determinative factors. And note that even "brain," for James, was "a fiction of popular speech" (James, *Principles*, 1:178–9).

¹⁶ Maudsley, *Pathology of Mind*, 236.

¹⁷ Ribot, *Diseases of Personality*, 25.

¹⁸ Jastrow and Baldwin, "Temperament," 672.

¹⁹ For foundational scientific studies in a now-large and ever-expanding literature, see Thomas and Chess, *Temperament and Development*, Buss and Plomin, *Temperament*, Kagan, *Galen's Prophecy*, and Bates and Wachs, *Temperament*.

²⁰ James, *Varieties*, 169. There is a striking similarity in the ways that James talks about philosophy and religion. Both provide a "vision" of "the universe" and/or of "life": a *Weltanschauung* (or worldview), as he sometimes expressed it. But while traditional philosophy provides a "summary sketch" or "picture of the world in abridgment" (James, *Pluralistic Universe*, 9), religion represents "a man's total reaction upon life," including (among other things) both the emotions and the actions that life calls forth (James, *Varieties*, 36). Still, James implicitly leaves open the possibility that these two approaches to our lived reality might come closer and even overlap, *provided that* philosophy were to represent the response of the *complete* person, emotions and all, to "the world's presence" (James, 37; this is, in fact, precisely what James called for. See the final sentences of this article). This would require that one "reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious" (James, 37). This "sense of the world's presence," which appeals to "our peculiar individual temperament," makes us either "strenuous or careless, devout or blasphemous, gloomy or exultant, about life at large," and this reaction on our part "is the completest of all our answers to the question, 'What is the character [or "temperament"] of this universe in which we dwell?'" (James, 36–37). What would keep this more inclusive, expanded kind of philosophy, reaching beyond mere rational inquiry, from becoming even more equivalent to religion, traditionally defined, would be the absence of a notion of "the divine," whatever that might be for any particular person (James, 34). But in flirting with philosophical pantheism at the end of his life, James allowed that "the place of the divine in the world" could be reimagined, just as the nature of matter could be, in a more "organic" way, resulting in "a more intimate *weltanschauung*" that provides a "vision of God as the indwelling divine rather than the external creator, of human life as part and parcel of that deep reality" (James, *Pluralistic Universe*, 18–19). The concept of "reaction" in the foregoing discussion, as in one's "reaction upon life," is an important notion in James's thought, as discussed in note 25. (Clear echoes of Emerson here!) Bordogna makes a

similar assessment of the relation between James's discussions of philosophy and art (Bordogna, "Psychology and Physiology," 18–21). The additional relation of morality to temperamental responsiveness is touched upon at the end of note 25.

²¹ In essence, in arguing for pragmatism, James used "temperament" and "type" pragmatically, providing a good example of the pragmatic method of focusing on the sensory (empirically evident) effects of a presumed (hypothesized) underlying reality. See James, *Meaning of Truth*, 31; James, *Principles*, 2:929; and James, *Pragmatism*, 28.

²² James, *Pragmatism*, 24. Italics added.

²³ It should also be noted that James never used more precise designations of temperaments themselves than vague references to "psychopathic temperament," "insane temperament," and the like. "Psychopathic temperament" was a particular favorite, especially in his *Varieties* (see, e.g., James, *Varieties*, 28, 132, and 142); but it was no more precisely defined there than "insane" or "neurotic temperament" (James, 27 and 29). The common-language implications of the individual adjectives rather than any empirically verified theory were expected to do all the work, as in his references to "sanguine" and "melancholy" temperaments (James, 115), "sympathetic" and "cynical" temperaments (James, *Pluralistic Universe*, 15–16), and "artistic" and "aristocratic" temperaments (James, "Review of *Unüberwindliche Mächte*," 212). Elsewhere he spoke of "bottled-lightning" vs. "phlegmatic" temperaments (James, "Gospel of Relaxation," 122) and referred to his own "impatient" temperament (James, "James on Tausch," 190). Clearly, James used temperament-related language in a very elastic way, as when he referred to Spencer's temperament as "the atmosphere" of his mind, which was "so fatally lacking in geniality, humor, picturesqueness, and poetry, and so explicit, so mechanical, so flat in the panorama which it gives of life" (James, "Herbert Spencer Dead," 97). Of course, we get what James means descriptively, even without the provision of any physiological explanations. The elasticity of his use of "temperament" can also be seen in his attribution, however tentative, of "different temperaments" to "different races of men" (James, *Talks to Teachers*, 106). For example, "Southern races are commonly accounted more impulsive and precipitate" while "the English race, especially our New England branch of it, is supposed to be all sicklied over with repressive forms of self-

consciousness" (James, 106). Finally, with even greater metaphorical license, he extended the concept to nature and the universe, speaking in various places of "the temperament [or sometimes "the character"] of Nature itself" (e.g., James, "Notes for Philosophy 20C," 326). This use of the term was meant to indicate that we have a *personal* relationship with our world, that we *see and think about it* in particular ways, and that we *respond to it* accordingly, depending upon (e.g.) whether we see it or want it to be wild and unpredictable or tame and orderly (James, 326–327). Some of us, James pointed out, feel more at home in unfettered, chaotic reality whereas others would prefer to live in a nicely groomed, artificial garden (James, "Letter to Hugo Münsterberg," 241).

²⁴ Interests were absolutely fundamental for James. How they affect the actual process of selection was still a mystery, he admitted, but "possibly a minuter insight into the laws of neural action will some day clear the matter up," though it was also possible that "neural laws will not suffice, and we shall need to invoke a dynamic reaction of the form of consciousness upon its content" (James *Principles*, 1:546–47; regarding the hierarchy of selectivity across the psychological spectrum, see James, 1:1, 273–78).

²⁵ The concept of "reaction" deserves special mention here. Ever since James declared that modern evolutionary theory had made the reflex arc essential to modern psychology, the concept of behavioral response had become central to psychology. "Any mind, constructed on the triadic-reflex pattern," he wrote, "must first get its impression from the object which it confronts; then define what that object is, and decide what active measures its presence demands; and finally react" (James, "Reflex Action and Theism," 98). "The conception of *all* action as conforming to this type is the fundamental conception of modern nerve-physiology" (James, *Principles*, 1:35). The world is as it is, but how we *react* or *respond* to it, is crucial for James. And our responses are aesthetic and emotional, as well as intellectual and moral (see James, 1:273–77, 2:1058–59, and 2:1164–82). The point is that we humans are not—and should not be—*passive* beings, suffering input from our environment; we have response-ability, we can react, and our responsiveness can lead to "action which to a great extent transforms the world" (James, "Remarks on Spencer's," 21). Our task, to put it broadly and philosophically, is, first, the "ascertainment of the character of Being" or Reality, and, second, if we find that it falls

short of what seems ideal, to change it, “no less!” (James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 111, and James, “Letter to Charles Augustus Strong,” 342). Of course, what seems ideal will vary from person to person, so a philosophy is always “the expression of a [particular] man’s intimate character,” and “all definitions of the universe” are no more and no less than “the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it” (James, *Pluralistic Universe*, 14). “Will you or won’t you have it so?” is “the most probing question we are ever asked” by the universe or by life, a question to which we respond “by *consents or non-consents* and not by words” (James, *Principles*, 2:1182). And our “dumb responses”—hopefully including action that will facilitate what is more ideal—are “our deepest organs of communication with the nature of things,” “the measure of our worth as men,” and “the one strictly underived and original contribution which we make to the world!” (James, *Principles*, 2:1182). This insight goes way back to James’s personal commitment, in April 1870, to resist the pressures of the world toward what he believed to be inappropriate “fields of action” (James, “Diary [1]”), and it foreshadows his later statement that “we crave alike to feel more truly at home” in this universe and “to contribute our mite to its amelioration” (James, *Pluralistic Universe*, 11). In the end, “behavior,” which is to say, some response to our situation, “is the aim and end of every sound philosophy” (James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 111). Interestingly, contemporary research on temperament, with its focus on “the large number of chemicals that monitor excitation and inhibition in the central nervous system,” has explored the impact that systematic individual differences in modes of reactivity—i.e., innate tendencies toward greater or lesser excitation or inhibition—have upon an infant’s disposition, ability to learn, and tendency to develop this or that style (or type) of emotional and behavioral responsiveness (see Kagan, *Galen’s Prophecy*, 51; also see ch. 2, 5, 7, and 8). And though their proposed etiologies differ (Kagan’s being based on up-to-date scientific neurochemistry while James simply hypothesized varying degrees of “neural inertia”), Kagan’s excitatory vs. inhibitory types bear an uncanny resemblance to James’s explosive vs. obstructive forms of voluntary action, and both of their schemes emphasize the long-term consequences of habituation. (On James’s speculation regarding neural inertia, see James, *Principles*, 2:1142.) Finally, James discusses moral philosophy as ultimately drawn from one’s *responses* to the world,

including “the cries of the wounded” (James, “The Moral Philosopher,” 158). On his “visualizing” and then “resisting, risking, and changing the ways things are,” see Leary, “Visions and Values.”

²⁶ Among the personal experiences that matter, as attested by James's own life and work, are experiences with sickness and health, and how one responds to them, which become part of one's personal make-up. Another kind of experience involves habit and habit-formation. One of this journal's reviewers asked whether the cognitive and behavioral tendencies associated with this or that temperamental type could be undercut by the establishment of habits, for which James was such a vociferous advocate. James's response would seem to be that, yes, some modification of temperamental expression is possible, but it is constrained by the range of interests (associated with temperament) that motivate a person's selective attention and action. (See Bordogna, “Psychology and Physiology,” 15-18, for a consonant discussion of individual freedom and intelligence in light of temperament.) As regards the plasticity of both physiology and personality, James was clear that some flexibility and enhanced individuation are both possible and desirable, but any fluctuations or deviations will fall within the parameters (however broad or narrow) of one's basic constitution, or so he clearly implies. (His discussion of “the law of inhibition of instincts by habits” is relevant here; see James, *Principles*, 2:1014-15.) In short, there are limits to the apparent and actual plasticity of individual natures.

²⁷ James, *Pluralistic Universe*, 7, 9–10.

²⁸ James, 14.

²⁹ James, 14–15.

³⁰ I apply the lessons of this article in “The Psychological Roots of William James's Thought,” which will appear in *The Jamesian Mind*, edited by Sarin Marchetti.

Review of *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life*. By John Kaag. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. 210 pp. ISBN 9780691192161. US\$22.95.

From Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* to Nadia Owusu's *Aftershocks*, telling one's story is popular and mandatory these days. After all, what can be more radically empirical than telling and retelling our experiences? John Kaag has become a master in this popular genre. His latest work is more than another Harvard romance like *American Philosophy*. Kaag is to be commended for reinvigorating the practice of philosophical autobiography. But, before we chastise the author for being too personal and clinical in the overall analysis, it is important to consider how transparent and candid he is with *intimate* details. Sure, one may quip that Kaag is deceptively manipulating the facts—that is for the author and readers to decide for themselves. But there is nothing wrong with a philosopher who opens up and forgets they are writing for the general public. If philosophers were more honest, they would have to admit the ways in which they imitate their intellectual heroes, or those they look up to for philosophical insight and guidance. There is no shame in following this method, but Kaag is one of the rare philosophers to demonstrate this affinity for biographical candor and openness.

Kaag is a faithful reader of his philosophical heroes. In the case of Nietzsche, he even adventured along the same peripatetic paths. There is a promising exuberance for life in James's personality and philosophy that can be a "lifesaver" to many. Kaag reports,

I think William James's philosophy saved my life. Or, more accurately, it encouraged me not to be afraid of life. This is not to say it will work for everyone. Hell, it's not even to say that it will work for me tomorrow. Or that it works all the time. But it did happen, at least once, and that is enough to make me eternally grateful and more than a little hopeful about the prospects of this book.¹

The great American writer Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens), whom James met while vacationing in Italy in 1892, would find pride in such a confession.

James confesses that reality and life can sometimes be harsh and tragically unrelenting. Our ability to confront this practically warrants the "live hypothesis"—the power to act "*as if* the world is a welcoming and tender place occasionally has the effect of making it so."² Throughout nature, and especially in the animal world out of which humans evolve, we have come to observe and seek forms of pamperedness and comfort.

We have come to develop expectations that anticipate finding means for sheltering tenderness. There is a good deal of psychological and existential encouragement in James's philosophy, similar to the self-help guides popular today. Popularization of philosophy has become fashionable as a type of self-help spiritual therapy or devolved in a self-absorbed genre of philosophical autobiography. This is a trend that points to a cultural climate that is highly anti-intellectual. Kaag attempts to make philosophy come alive in a nonchalant mood. What can easily be dismissed as narcissistic analysis may also be glimpsed as an openness that goes back to Socrates in the *Apology*, Pascal's *Pensées*, Montaigne's *Essays*, Pierre Hadot's work, and others. What screams through the pages of *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds* is that Kaag's James is more existential—one might say, Nietzschean—than readers of the American philosopher might be willing to accept. There is some truth in this comparison. Both Nietzsche and James think within the monstrosity of our times. And, according to the final chapter of Sloterdijk's *After God*: "If we were to interpret Nietzsche's interpretation of the monstrous in one word, that word could be

‘height.’ In James, it would undoubtedly be ‘variety.’”³ James and Nietzsche are both philosophers and preeminent psychologists of the nineteenth century, representing the rude awakening of individuals in the midst of widespread cultural decadence. But the danger of reading philosophy as a neo-religious asceticism is that it lends to the narcissistic illusion that one does not need community for self-transformation.

From Kaag’s divorce, to his daily five o’clock beer, to a litany of regrets, he reflects: “In hindsight, I think my mother was encouraging something a little different, something like ‘fake it till you make it’: will yourself to act in a certain manner, and your volition may alter, in positive ways, the state of affairs.”⁴ The book can read like updated therapy sessions. Perhaps this is a disclaimer for philosophizing autobiographically. Readers may find solace in the author’s incessant focus on his life, but I encourage you to consider how this may be an exercise enacting the *raison d’être* of James’s philosophy of *intimacy*. Kaag makes special note that James was not only close to his Harvard pupils but that

his students, unsurprisingly, loved the intellectual and emotional intimacy that his classes provided. James encouraged young adults to cultivate their own powers, and he regularly criticized colleagues who seemed more intent on gathering acolytes or perfect replicas of themselves than fostering the unique talents of each student.⁵

In a recent conflict with Harvard’s decision to deny him tenure, Cornel West cited Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James’s address “The True Harvard,” as examples of the “best of Harvard.” African-American philosopher William Ferris, who studied under James at Harvard, remarked in his 1913 masterpiece *The African Abroad* how James’s intellect brought a fresh kind of originality and greatness into philosophy. Ferris observes that in

New England transcendentalism and the anti-slavery movement we see this rugged strength blossoming into the fruit and flower of Christian kindness. But I do not believe the Anglo-Saxon

intellect has the versatility of the Greek mind, and except occasionally in a Professor William James, the scintillating brilliancy of the French mind, or the speculative depth of the German mind.⁶

Can James's philosophy be a life saver? What a burden! This sounds like a hyperbolic question, but it is reasonable on two fronts. First, I take James to be a consigliere of American philosophy—a guide of sorts, who can help us with our baggage. One of the impressive aspects of James's pragmatism and radical empiricism is his appeal to the traveler in us all—the James family was notoriously well-traveled. An important key to self-discovery lies in finding reliable guides for anchoring or giving orientation in one's life. Second, James helps navigate our journeys of self-care while encouraging us to enlarge our sense of empathy (intimacy!) for new places and people. James gives us antidotes intended to shield us from the emptiness of mass culture, including its consumeristic focus and directionless orientation.

One thing that marks Jamesian philosophy as American that comes through most clearly in Kaag's book is its obsessive desire to turn and look inward—to stir about over the agony of the self. The other aspect of James's philosophy we should take seriously is how our morals and beliefs depend so much on context. As life changes, so will our convictions and beliefs. There will always be a need to discern the difference between living and dead choices when it comes to our moral actions. Given that our beliefs and convictions will come and go, we retain value and meaning in our ability to sustain a willingness to live, and to keep on believing. In having the tenacity of will-to-believe we take pride in one's struggles and life battles. This is the mark of the life worth living. To be open to the possibilities of living in this way means to reject abandoning any desire or unwillingness to live. As Sloterdijk puts it, what is valuable about James's philosophy is how

Early on, he warned about an AIDS of convictionlessness. James made himself useful and won great renown by making the theoretical surpluses of his self-therapeutic experiments known.

He did so as an author and, even more, as a speaker. (This transmission of knowledge about self-healing has, by the way, remained an important mechanism in the modern market society for the formation of community and of a public, at least since the Protestant conversion literature of the seventeenth century.) And thus a not merely academic public get to know William James as the teacher of the right to life from an assisted élan and as the advocate of the ‘will to believe.’”⁷

Should Kaag consider revising the title to *Healthy Souls, Sick Minds*? The underlying narrative of the book is the tragic suicide of Steven Rose, and speculating how, perhaps, James could have saved his life. But Kaag is adamant that it would be wise to leave the questions at a “maybe.” This is not a satisfying answer to the mind. It has to decide and take either this way or that. Cognition is not in the habit of taking on “James’s ‘maybe’—the open question of life’s worth.”⁸ The reader will be pressed to ask: Does meaning come from the soul or mind? It would be false to assume that Kaag is simply conjuring up an old dichotomy. Rather, it is in soul that encompasses “a reality that exceeds all measure” or “adjusts” itself to an “unseen order.”⁹ James’s philosophy embodies a strong connection between soul and mind without doing injustice to either. But I think he has more to add related to the issues of soul and spirit, which might explain why the latter part of his career turned to ghost-hunting, spookery, and other paranormal research. There is a sense in which one can easily dismiss this period in James’s legacy as insignificant, or when he really went off the deep end. But that would be a hasty generalization and overly dismissive of the impact and influence these factors had on focusing and shaping James’s philosophical attention. As Kaag writes,

Exposure to wild country, like the far reaches of the White Mountains, can *bewilder* us, but perhaps this feeling of thoroughgoing puzzlement also makes us better students of experience and attunes us to the faintest surprises. Experience isn’t static. It is never monotonous, monochromatic, monovalent, or monolithic. It only seems that way when we fail to notice what

is happening at its borders and in its flux. James wrote that their house in Chocorua had “fourteen doors, all opening outwards.” Outwards—that is where James’s study of consciousness was directed.¹⁰

But in this rendition, Jamesian outwardness seems abstract and insufficient given our need to address how institutions and communal relations shape and mold any personal efforts at self-transformation. It still does not address the key matter of how much “saving my life” depends upon others, including rituals and practices through shared goals and identities. Is this go-it-alone attitude, along with a scathing disdain for collective efforts, a healthy recipe, either for the soul or mind? I find James’s indebtedness in this regard to be highly negligible and inexcusable. The question for me is how can tormented individuals get beyond their own mind or head and engage the soul of community?

If you are looking for a book that speaks to the social stigmas and obstacles of race, sex, gender, and identity, then one will be seriously disappointed. Kaag opens his inquiry with the philosopher’s *façon de parler* on such matters:

One’s race, sex, socioeconomic condition, and health are factors that are largely accidental. We are, in the words of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, “thrown” into the world, set adrift, and, through much of adolescence, live at the mercy of forces beyond our control.¹¹

But is it not the case that “belief flourishes best when it can get acclimatized”?¹² Our moods, attitudes, and instinctual actions are largely conditioned by our environments, including how racial and sexual factors play salient roles in determining our social conditions. For example, the engines of identity politics are driven by swelling socioeconomic divides and drastic inequalities accelerating before our eyes. But at the same time, and more importantly, identities can be constructive in telling us who we are while shaping our sense of belonging and expectations in the world with others. Can a book that

focuses on self-care afford to be so dismissive of the role that identity plays in our self-attention?

Kaag relies upon insights in the existentialist vein of heroic individuals dependent upon romantic flareups. The danger of skipping over sexual, gender, and racial floating signifiers within our cultural “thrownness” has less to do with the resulting limitations of analysis. It may be more urgent for us to question whether this approach serves as an implicit acceptance of a chauvinism of thought that can afford to be blind to the movements social justice change, in which the struggles for freedom play out. Clearly, Kaag’s take falls under the shadow of that Kierkegaardian vein that is skeptical of the “crowd,” or in the very least, takes the individual as a vital check on a passionless age upholding the publicity of the masses. Does James’s power to “save lives” mean that we should accept the status quo as “circumstances beyond our control”?¹³

Invoking Whitehead, a “bold humility” is needed to see beyond one’s own self-initiatives, to meaningfully engage the world.¹⁴ As Bob Neville writes of James’s take on moral goodness: “If we sit on our depression and feelings of hopelessness, we make ourselves unfree, but we should instead create ourselves, by the exercise of our free will and grit, to be moral agents.”¹⁵ Life crisis philosophy falls for the trap of seeking a deeper or higher self. Such are the yearnings of manic depression. Byung-Chul Han famously defined depression in his book *The Burnout Society* as “the sickness of a society that suffers from excessive positivity. It reflects a humanity waging war on itself.”¹⁶ Depression is a central theme of Kaag’s narrative precisely because he gives excessive attention to the self. It is like a vulture that hovers above or continually circles its prey—only a false otherness of the other comes from this self-infatuation. It is less concerned with transformative engagement with others and more about heroic resistance to the angst in the face of mortality. Does a resignation toward the world motivate Kaag’s reading of James? In all fairness, Kaag does mention that “privilege, comfort, and leisure” provide a context for depression.¹⁷ But complete self-absorption is not a healthy alternative in the face of what James calls

“Bigness” which involves institutional and theoretical threats to individual freedom.¹⁸ Even if one sides with James’s critique of “Bigness” as imperialistic and expansionist, he is light on confronting the tensions boiling throughout cultural and political relations.

The underlying short-coming of Kaag’s insightful book is its appeal to the cults of authenticity. It encourages a culture of intense narcissistic self-reference. Kaag is in danger of becoming that artist who Franz Kafka described as living under the

construct of self-indulgence. He mourns *himself*, he crowns *himself* with a wreath. With sweet tears he nourishes his corpse: The writer “dies (or rather he does not live) and continually mourns himself.” Instead of inhabiting the world, he inhabits *himself*. Self-centeredness, pathological clinging to the self, makes life impossible.¹⁹

In my view, Kaag does not adequately account for James’s naïve individualist philosophical orientation in which, as James Campbell rightly notes,

there is no recognition in James that individualism itself could lead to social problems. For him, human atavisms arise in groups, as his discussions of lynching and imperialism indicate. When individuals become part of something external to themselves . . . their ideality is abandoned. Their individual blindness becomes social blindness. When individuals choose their values in an intelligent and responsible fashion, however, and shape their lives around these vibrant values, social good results.²⁰

Eric Voegelin attempted to give James the benefit of the doubt in his first published book, *On the Form of the American Mind*. He identifies James’s philosophy of open selves as exhibiting a tenderness through pragmatism that converses with life and the world of others. Voegelin observes how James “likes nothing better than to replace rational concepts of monism and pluralism with the emotional ones of alienness and intimacy, thus opening perspectives

on social and political institutions. James attempts to solidify attention on the cultivation of a ‘warm landscape.’”²¹ Kaag only locates intimacy within James’s interactions with his students without mentioning how this concept is central to James’s radically empirical philosophy.

Let me close with a pet peeve connected to the criticism that the message of this book will attract authenticity cults. Kaag employs the term *zest* for “meaningful experience.”²² This is an unfortunate rendering of *zest*, and Alfred N. Whitehead’s usage of the term is more useful. For Whitehead, *zest* is the *intensity* of an experience—its enjoyment, not its meaning—that speaks to a wider range of adventure, making it difficult to bottle up or package into meanings.²³ Not only is the project of constant meaning-making exhausting, but it often comes too late, if not at all. Making sense out of our experiences is a messy and tricky business once life intervenes—that is the gist of James’s philosophy. Intense experience entails radical transitions or thresholds of possibilities. *Zest* has more to do with encountering the otherness of the other, on the other side of threshold experiences without any precondition for grasping meanings. In other words, *zest* is a qualitative *satisfaction* that lets oneself go. No overarching meanings or imperatives exist. Without this caveat, Kaag is in danger of using James to give a false hope and vanity through philosophy that claims that reasons can be given for why we endure the tragic hardships of life. I think this is a stretch and misses the crucial point: our experiences of the tragic compel and persuade us to look for the permanence of the possible in the tragic, regardless of what we claim it all adds up to in the end. Whatever justification or history that can be appropriated, it will most likely defy our minds and only appeal to our hearts. There is a power of soul behind the force of habit that our minds will doubt and struggle to accept, similar to Kaag’s admission that we have to be perpetually “sold on life’s value.”²⁴ In a certain sense, one can see how both Nietzsche and James advanced philosophies having overwhelming marketing power within our own time, and Kaag has collected the check. Even if one is prone to reject finding a paramilitary mission to rescue one’s life unrealistic, it is certainly

fashionable and popular. If we take Kaag at his word, and assume that philosophy can be a life-saving force, the question remains: does that in itself produce a false sense of security and comfort? His Jamesian answer resounds throughout the book: “maybe”! Such a proclamation is the best one can honestly do.

Myron Moses Jackson
 Xavier University
jacksonm31@xavier.edu

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Campbell, James. “Habits in a World of Change.” In *Pragmatism Applied: William James and the Challenges of Contemporary Life*, edited by Clifford S. Stagoll and Michael P. Levine, 237-56. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019.
- Ferris, William H. *The Philosophical Treatise of William H. Ferris: Selected Readings from The African Abroad or, His Evolution in Western Civilization*. Edited by Tommy Curry. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016.
- Han, Byung-Chul. *The Burnout Society*. Translated by Erik Butler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015.
- . *Good Entertainment: A Deconstruction of the Western Passion Narrative*. Translated by Adrian Nathan West. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019.
- James, William. *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Boston: Longmans, Green and Company, 1916.
- . *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy. Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine*. Both books bound as one. New York: Dover, 1956.
- . *A Pluralistic Universe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977.
- Kaag, John. *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.

- Knausgaard, Karl Ove. *In the Land of the Cyclops: Essays*. Translated by Martin Aitken. Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2021.
- Neville, Robert Cummings. *Metaphysics of Goodness: Harmony and Form, Beauty and Art, Obligation and Personhood, Flourishing and Civilization*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2019.
- Rowe, Stephen C. *The Vision of James*. Rockport: Element Books, 1996.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. *After God*. Translated by Ian Alexander Moore. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020.
- Voegelin, Eric. *On the Form of the American Mind*. Vol. 1 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Translated by Ruth Hein, Jürgen Gebhardt, and Barry Cooper. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. *Adventures of Ideas*. New York: Free Press, 1967.
- . *Process and Reality, Corrected Edition*. Edited by David Ray Griffen and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: Free Press, 1978.

NOTES

- ¹ Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 5.
- ² Kaag, 62.
- ³ Sloterdijk, *After God*, 218.
- ⁴ Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 64.
- ⁵ Kaag, 148–9.
- ⁶ Ferris, *Philosophical Treatise*, 192.
- ⁷ Sloterdijk, *After God*, 220.
- ⁸ Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 176–7. See James, *Varieties*, 44.
- ⁹ Kaag, 174.
- ¹⁰ Kaag, 121–2.
- ¹¹ Kaag, 11.
- ¹² Sloterdijk, *After God*, 180.
- ¹³ See Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 2, 1–2, 20, 25–6.
- ¹⁴ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 17.
- ¹⁵ Neville, *Metaphysics of Goodness*, 210.

- ¹⁶ Han, *The Burnout Society*, 11.
¹⁷ Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 5, 18.
¹⁸ Kaag, 155.
¹⁹ Han, *Good Entertainment*, 90.
²⁰ Campbell, "Habits in a World," 246–7.
²¹ Voegelin, *Form of the American Mind*, 59–60.
²² Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 153-58.
²³ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 273-83.
²⁴ Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 171.

Review of *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, by David Rondel.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 221 pp.
ISBN 9780190680688. \$85.

David Rondel's *Pragmatist Egalitarianism* contributes to a surge of recent scholarship showcasing the relevance of pragmatism for contemporary debates and problems in political theory and practice. Where scholars like Alexander Livingston and Melvin Rogers have highlighted the political thought of traditional pragmatist figures like William James and John Dewey, respectively, Rondel demonstrates the productive application of pragmatism—through the work of James, Dewey, and Richard Rorty—to reconcile a longstanding disagreement among egalitarians. The dispute consists in two seemingly conflicting ways of understanding the ideal of equality. Shall equality be understood as a fundamentally *distributive* ideal, concerning the distribution of rights and resources, whose achievement depends on institutional design and obligations of the state? Or, shall equality be understood as a fundamentally *relational* ideal, where people are understood as standing to one another as equals, and whose realization depends on the *ethos* and transformation (in situations of inequality) of a culture? As the title of Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth's 2003 exchange puts it, shall equality be understood as a matter of redistribution or recognition?

Following the reconciliatory lead of pragmatists like James, Rondel questions the false dilemma posed by the debate and the question upon which it hangs, and advances a pluralistic, pragmatist conception of egalitarianism. His negative argument, advanced in Part One of the book, is that both distributive and relational egalitarians commit to a kind of reductionism and foundationalism about equality. The question at the heart of the dispute, "which egalitarian ideal is the fundamental one," presupposes, Rondel argues, "that, insofar as we prize equality, there must be some

fundamental ideal that we are prizing. But why must there be some such fundamental ideal?"¹ This presumption of fundamentality has resulted in overly reductive accounts of equality and inequality by either side. Distributive, or "vertical" egalitarianism, as Rondel prefers to call it, reduces equality and inequality to a matter of distributive duties belonging to a state.² This form of egalitarianism is championed specifically by those working in the liberal tradition of political theory, such as John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin. For vertical egalitarians, equality fundamentally pertains to the relationship between the state and the governed, that is, those upon whom the state has a legitimate claim to exercise its coercive power. The problem with such a conception is that it tends to overemphasize the causal influence of institutions in matters of equality and inequality at the expense of other factors, like the cultural or individual. Under this picture, the relational aspect of equality "is conspicuously omitted."³ Conversely, relational or "horizontal" egalitarianism, to use Rondel's term, reduces equality and inequality to a matter of equal standing "between and among the people of a society," thus envisioning a society "in which people do not humiliate, dominate, oppress, or subordinate others."⁴ Rondel maps this type of egalitarianism onto Marxists and socialists, but also to the cultural turn among members of the intellectual Left in the late twentieth century. For horizontal egalitarians, inequality fundamentally pertains to relations found in civil society, "between people in everyday social and productive interactions."⁵ These egalitarians commit the inverse mistake of liberal egalitarians in overemphasizing the causal force of cultural valuations in matters of equality and inequality at the expense of institutional factors.

Rondel advances his positive argument in Part Two of the book where he outlines the reconciliatory position of pragmatist egalitarianism by drawing on the insights of James, Dewey, and Rorty. These thinkers are uniquely positioned to aid in overcoming the impasse between vertical and horizontal egalitarianism given their "unique predilection for mediation and reconciliation."⁶ Here Rondel follows a range of intellectual historians and commentators of pragmatism, like James T. Kloppenberg and Richard J. Bernstein,

in emphasizing pragmatism's signature proclivity for the "*via media*," to use Kloppenberg's phrase.⁷ Reconciliation, on this view, does not consist in the dialectical synthesis of two opposing terms into a higher third; rather, Rondel deploys a Rortyan strategy of *redescription*, recasting the variables of equality in terms of "three interrelated and mutually reinforcing variables."⁸ These irreducible yet interconnected variables—the "institutional," the "personal," and the "cultural"—are exemplified in the respective pragmatisms of Dewey, James, and Rorty. Rondel clarifies that in turning to Dewey, James, and Rorty, his claim is not that these thinkers are alone in emphasizing one of these factors, or even that only one of these variables can be found in their work. Rather, he reads them "as *exemplars* of the 'institutional,' 'personal,' and 'cultural,' respectively."⁹ The benefit of this pragmatist egalitarianism is that it is *pluralistic* insofar as it takes all three variables seriously for the diagnosis and rectification of inequality.

One promising line of inquiry forwarded in the book is the *realist* orientation of pragmatist political thinking and theorizing. Rondel positions pragmatism squarely on the realist side of a recent debate between ideal and non-ideal, or, more specifically, realist political theorizing. He frames this realism through pragmatism's prioritization of problems as the loci of political and ethical inquiry and struggle. In contrast to ideal theories which theorize the ideal conditions of equality, pragmatism's "problem-centric" approach grants priority to "questions about how inequality is actually experienced, reinforced, and struggled for in the real world, and to questions about the specific problems (political, moral, cultural, economic) to which this gives rise."¹⁰ Additionally, where ideal theory tends to draw on timeless *a priori* principles for theorizing about equality, pragmatism adopts an experimental perspective toward the problems that need to be solved. As James observed in the context of moral philosophy, this entails that there can be no political theory of equality "dogmatically made up in advance."¹¹ What we have, rather, is a messy and complex world of struggles for equality that involve the tripartite convergence of institutions, individuals, and culture.

Rondel draws on Dewey's democratic egalitarianism as an exemplar for thinking about the role of institutions in struggles for equality. Dewey's conception of institutions is productive insofar as it regards institutions as experimental instruments or "a set of tools with which to tackle specific problems."¹² On this view, institutions are normatively judged in terms of their utility for solving concrete moral, social, and political problems, rather than in terms of their conformity with abstract liberal norms of individual liberty or restricted government. As Rondel contends, for Dewey, institutions are not valuable in themselves (an assumption associated with vertical egalitarianism), but only for the people they serve. He explains, "We cannot evaluate institutions apart from their effects on individual citizens. Institutions exist for people, not the other way around."¹³ Institutions thus function as crucial tools for creating a flourishing democratic, egalitarian society, but they need supplementation by the individual and cultural.

In his chapter on James's contribution to a pragmatist egalitarianism, Rondel follows the lead of commentators like George Kateb and Stephen S. Bush in highlighting James's individualism. This feature of James's pragmatism is an oft-contested site of critique and defense among James scholars and Rondel navigates perspicuously between both positions, defending the egalitarian dimensions of James's democratic individualism and denouncing James's overdrawn suspicion of institutions, social structures, and other representatives of "bigness."¹⁴ James's individualism is egalitarian insofar as it holds that "we are all fundamentally equal *as individuals*, in being possessors of a unique inward view, and we are to be treated as equals—by other people and by political institutions—in light of this fact."¹⁵ This entails, Rondel argues, not only a commitment to tolerate the views, perspectives, and unique inwardness of others, but to examine one's own "moral blind spots" or the extent to which "one might be oblivious to, and complicit in, the frustration of others' individuality."¹⁶ James gives us a way of rectifying such blind spots through the effort of willful attention and revision of our intolerant, inequalitarian habits. Here Rondel's reading of James resonates with

the work of Shannon Sullivan in underscoring the malleability of habit for disruption and refashioning through the exercise of the will.¹⁷

If James is the exemplar of the individual, then it is perhaps no surprise that Rondel draws on Rorty to flesh out the role and import of the cultural for egalitarian struggles. Rorty famously described philosophy in terms of “cultural politics,” contributing to the liberal utopian task of imaginatively transforming cultural formations through practices of redescription.¹⁸ While his work is often framed as detrimentally negative and deflationary, Rondel emphasizes the positive agenda behind Rorty’s theoretical interventions and inventive readings and couplings of a motley crew of philosophers (such as Jacques Derrida, John Dewey, and Wilfred Sellars). He frames this positive agenda through the anti-authoritarian and meliorist implications that follow from Rorty’s embrace of Darwinism. I find Rondel’s Darwinian reading of Rorty productive for pushing contemporary pragmatism beyond the oppositional confines of traditional, “experience-centric” pragmatism and neo, “linguistic” pragmatism insofar as it underscores the Darwinian continuity between these two positions. Rorty’s attentiveness to language brings to the fore an important tool for the transformation of culture and social meaning. This can be witnessed, for instance, in strategies of redescription that reconfigure the social meaning of a term like “queer,” or those strategies of redescription that name previously un-identified harms and create legal policies around such harms, thus “inducing” (but not guaranteeing) changes in social practices, as in the case of sexual harassment.¹⁹

In his conclusion, Rondel puts pragmatist egalitarianism to work on a contemporary problem: the struggle for racial equality in the context of the United States. Rondel’s deployment of pragmatist egalitarianism is more diagnostic than robustly normative in his treatment of racial inequality, exploring “how the institutional, personal, and cultural variables work together to cause and maintain it.”²⁰ This pluralist approach has the benefit of avoiding reductionist accounts that construe the problem of racial inequality solely in either structural/institutional terms or in terms of individual bias and

prejudice. Instead, Rondel argues that “social, legal, and political institutions play a role in reinforcing and deepening racist cultural biases..., and that such cultural biases covertly fold back into the institutional realm.”²¹ Such biases enfold the individual and the cultural insofar as they represent culturally encoded meanings that can be held and perpetuated by individual persons.

Rondel’s discussion of racial inequality left me with many questions about the pluralism at the heart of his pragmatist egalitarianism. Is this pluralism understood to be exhausted by the vectors of the institutional, individual, and cultural? Might there be other vectors that pertain to the diagnosis and rectification of inequality? I am thinking here of the ways in which our use and reliance on contemporary technologies create new social, political, and ethical problems, or reinforce and exacerbate existing forms of inequality. As scholars like Simone Browne, Ruha Benjamin, and Safiya Noble point out, technology has been historically instrumental in practices of racialization and contributes to the continued marginalization of Black Americans through practices like predictive policing, surveillance, facial recognition, search engine algorithms, and predictive risk assessment deployed for determining things like credit scores, banking and loan services, parole, and recidivism.²² The role of technology in perpetuating racial inequality has also become a significant site of struggle for activists and organizations like the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition and the Carceral Tech Resistance Network. Irreducible to the individual, cultural, or institutional, technology can function as a relay between these three vectors (for instance, by perpetuating racialized stereotypes through search engine results),²³ but it can also function as a distinct vector through which to critically interrogate and contest conditions of inequality that need amelioration. It may be that pragmatism offers fruitful resources for conceptualizing the role of technology in questions of equality and inequality—indeed, Larry Hickman’s work on Dewey’s philosophy of technology may prove useful for this purpose—or, it may be that political theorists need to take pragmatism’s pluralism seriously and look to other traditions, thinkers, methodologies, and disciplines for inquiring into the

technological. That is, perhaps pragmatism itself should not just tolerate the perspectives of others; perhaps in Jamesian fashion it also needs to disrupt, examine, and rectify its own well-worn habits by inhabiting the view of another.

Bonnie Sheehey
 Montana State University
bonnie.sheehey@montana.edu

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Benjamin, Ruha. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Medford, MA: Polity, 2019.
- Browne, Simone. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.
- James, William. *The Correspondence of William James: Volume 9, July 1899-1901*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- . “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” In *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 141–62. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Kloppenberg, James T. *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: New York University Press, 2018.
- Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin, 1999.
- . *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Sullivan, Shannon. *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- . *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006.

NOTES

- ¹ Rondel, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, 210.
- ² Rondel, 24.
- ³ Rondel, 45.
- ⁴ Rondel, 48–9.
- ⁵ Rondel, 59.
- ⁶ Rondel, 73.
- ⁷ Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victories*, 3.
- ⁸ Rondel, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, 75.
- ⁹ Rondel, 76.
- ¹⁰ Rondel, 80.
- ¹¹ James, “The Moral Philosopher,” 141.
- ¹² Rondel, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, 90.
- ¹³ Rondel, 97.
- ¹⁴ James, *Correspondence*, 362.
- ¹⁵ Rondel, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, 123.
- ¹⁶ Rondel, 115.
- ¹⁷ See Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness*, and Sullivan, *Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*.
- ¹⁸ See Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, and Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*.
- ¹⁹ Rondel, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, 168.
- ²⁰ Rondel, 188.
- ²¹ Rondel, 191–92.
- ²² See Browne, *Dark Matters*; Benjamin, *Race After Technology*; and, Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*.
- ²³ Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 1.

RELATED SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS ON JAMES

October 2020 – May 2021



In recognition of the fact that James scholars are publishing articles in other academic journals, the editors believe that it is important to keep our readers informed of the diversity within James scholarship by drawing attention to relevant publications outside of *WJS*. This section of the journal aims to provide articles that address the life, work, and influence of James's thought. If you have recently published a peer-reviewed article on James or have noticed an omission from this list, please contact our Periodicals Editor, James Medd, at periodicals@williamjamesstudies.org and we will include it at the next opportunity.



Algaier, Ermine L. “Correcting Perry’s Misleading Narrative: Historicizing James’s ‘Shady Excursions’ into Phrenology.” *The Pluralist* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 17-24.

<https://doi.org/10.5406/pluralist.15.1.0017>

While William James’s research in mental healing, psychical research, and religious experience are all well documented, his encounters with phrenology is less closely examined. The leading narrative derives from Ralph Barton Perry’s depiction of James as a believer in the truth of phrenology and also portrays him as being sympathetic to it as an art of character study. Textual evidence suggests that not only does Perry’s account originate from undocumented and shaky oral history, but also that his supporting evidence derives from a misreading reading of Thomas A. Hyde’s *How to Study Character*. As a corrective, I historically and thematically reconstruct James’s interest in phrenology as being scientific in nature, specifically focusing on how his interest in phrenology belongs to the problem of cerebral localization.

Benevides, Rodrigo Barbosa Gomes. “Consciências Saudáveis e Almas Enfermas: Posturas Éticas Religiosas em William James.” [Healthy Consciences and Sick Souls: Religious Ethical Postures in William James]. *Estudos de Religião* 34, no. 3 (2020): 307–335.

<https://doi.org/10.15603/2176-1078/er.v34n3p307-335>

The article examines the notions of Sick Soul and Healthy-Mindedness according to William James in his work *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902). The pragmatism of James is concerned with religious phenomenon in terms of the existential usefulness of beliefs underlying ethical actions and, from this perspective, James perceives religion as a fundamental tool for human psychic balance, with Buddhism and Christianity being the most developed religious systems of humanity. That said, the paper shows these two basic ethical religious postures and presents James’ view of religion.

Boeving, Nicholas Grant. “Metabolizing Death: Re-Thinking Recovery from Substance Use Disorder through the Creative Cartographies of William James and Ernest Becker.” *Pastoral Psychology* 69, no. 3 (2020): 169–83.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-020-00907-4>

This study is designed to bring together the existential-psychoanalytic psychology of Ernest Becker and the pluralistic transpersonal psychology of William James to bear on how perceptions of death and transformations of death anxiety shape, in subtle and significant ways, the phenomenology of substance use disorder. Specifically, this study examines the ways in which these two divergent sympathies (read: ontologies) are actually two reciprocally-enforcing ends of a continuum of how to think about substance use disorder and, more importantly, how to overcome it. In yoking these oppositional cartographies of consciousness together, this article brings to light the integral role that unconscious death anxiety plays in the formation and sustainment of addictions and explores the mechanics of recovery through the lens of the transformation of death anxiety. In doing so, it demonstrates that recovery from substance use disorder is dependent upon the successful metabolization of death anxiety from both a Jamesian and Beckerian perspective.

Bush, Stephen S. “William James’s Democratic Aesthetics.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 49, no. 1 (2021): 90–111.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12336>

William James is famous for his investigations of the “Varieties of Religious Experience” in which people encounter (what they take to be) the divine. But in his essay, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” his interest is in our experiences, not of anything purportedly supernatural, but of

one another. He thinks we need to cultivate the capacity to apprehend the intrinsic value of others, even and especially of strangers. We do so in experiences of the wonder and beauty of our fellow citizens, and of our harmony with them. Democratic societies require a sense of attraction to one another's form of life if they are to inspire shared commitments to public goods. Whereas we shouldn't reject the political significance of aversion, contestation, and dissonance, these negative attitudes do not suffice. Sustaining democratic engagement requires attractive attitudes, and among these are the wonder, beauty, and harmony that James promotes.

Croce, Paul. "William James and the Sustainable Transformation of Values, with a Case Study for Rethinking the American Dream." *Human Arenas* (March 2021): 1–15.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-020-00170-2>

This article addresses the call of the Psychology of Global Crises conference for linkage of academic work with social issues in three parts: First, examples from conference participants with their mix of bold calls for social transformation and realization of limits, a combination that generated few clear paths to achieving them. Second, presentation of Jamesian practical idealism with psychological insights for moving past impediments blocking implementation of ideals. And third, a case study of impacts from the most recent prominent crisis, the global pandemic of 2020, which threatens to exacerbate the many crises that had already been plaguing recent history. The tentacles of COVID's impact into so many problems, starting with economic impacts from virus spread, present an opportunity to rethink the hope for constant economic growth, often expressed as the American Dream, an outlook that has driven so many of the problems surging toward crises. Jamesian

awareness of the construction of ideological differences and encouragement of listening to those in disagreement provide not political solutions, but psychological preludes toward improvements in the face of crises.

Crawford, Dan D. “The Neglected Lectures on Conversion and Saintliness in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: William James’s Search for Redemptive (Saving) Facts.” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 41, nos. 2-3 (2020): 56–81.
<https://doi.org/10.5406/amerjtheophil.41.2-3.0056>

Crosby, Donald A. “The Reach of Empathy: William James’s Metaphysics and the Environmental Crisis.” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 41, nos. 2-3 (2020): 133–50.
<https://doi.org/10.5406/amerjtheophil.41.2-3.0133>

Jatuff, Jose. “Atencion selectiva y moral heroica. El vigor de William James frente a la crisis de Fin de Siècle.” [Selective Attention and Heroic Morality: The Vigor of William James in the Face of the crisis of Fin de Siècle]. *Areté* 32, no. 2 (2020): 395–416.
<https://doi.org/10.18800/arete.202002.005>

In the *Principles of Psychology*, William James defends an active version of the mind through which the understanding of the world is carried out via selective attention. This phenomenon, which is understood as an effort of the will, gravitates between the psychological and the moral and is a vigorous bet that comes to confront both the determinism of the positive spirit of the time, as well as the cynical and pessimistic attitudes that follow from this vision. We will explain the psychology of vigor, its practical consequences, how this proposal is located in the crisis of fin de siècle, and the differences in nuances that occurs in relation to later

publications with the aim of contributing to both the understanding of the concept strenuous mood and to the question of heroism in the thinking of this North American philosopher.

Kuznetsova, Maria M. “The Meaning of the Concept of ‘Spiritual Energy’ in the Philosophy of William James and Henry Bergson.” *Russian Journal of Philosophical Sciences* 63, no. 4 (2020): 115–31. [In Russian].

<https://doi.org/10.30727/0235-1188-2020-63-4-115-131>

The article examines the philosophy of Henri Bergson and William James as independent doctrines aimed at rational comprehension of spiritual reality. The doctrines imply the paramount importance of consciousness, the need for continuous spiritual development, the expansion of experience and perception. The study highlights the fundamental role of spiritual energy for individual and universal evolution, which likens these doctrines to the ancient Eastern teaching as well as to Platonism in Western philosophy. The term “spiritual energy” is used by Bergson and James all the way through their creative career, and therefore this concept should be considered in the examination of their solution to the most important philosophical and scientific issues, such as the relationship of matter and spirit, consciousness and brain, cognition, free will, etc. The “radical empiricism” of William James and the “creative evolution” of Henry Bergson should be viewed as conceptions that based on peacemaking goals, because they are aimed at reconciling faith and facts, science and religion through the organic synthesis of sensory and spiritual levels of experience. Although there is a number of modern scientific discoveries that were foreseen by philosophical ideas of Bergson and James, both philosophers advocate for the artificial limitation of the sphere of experimental methods in science. They call not to limit ourselves to the usual intellectual schemes of reality

comprehension, but attempt to touch the “living” reality, which presupposes an increase in the intensity of attention and will, but finally brings us closer to freedom.

Pihlström, Sami. “Kantian Transcendental Pessimism and Jamesian Empirical Meliorism.” *Con-Textos Kantianos: International Journal of Philosophy* 11 (2020): 313–35.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3864972>

Kant’s philosophy was an important background for the pragmatist tradition, even though some of the major classical pragmatists, especially William James, were unwilling to acknowledge their debt to Kant. This essay considers the relation between Kant and James from the perspective of their conceptions of the human condition. In particular, I examine their shared pessimism, employing Vanden Auweele’s (2019) recent analysis of Kant’s pessimism and arguing that this is required by James’s meliorism (which is put forward as a middle-ground option between optimism and pessimism). A comparative inquiry into Kant’s and James’s views on the relation between ethics and religion is provided against this background of their shared philosophical anthropology.

Recchia, Fabio. “Les sentiments de la raison chez William James: Morale et histoire d’un point de vue pragmatiste.” [The Sentiments of Reason in William James: Morality and History from a Pragmatist Perspective]. *Bulletin d’Analyse Phénoménologique* 16, no. 2 (2020): 174–93.
<https://doi.org/10.25518/1782-2041.1174>

Rondel, David. “William James and the Metaphilosophy of Individualism.” *Metaphilosophy* 52, no. 2 (April 2021): 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12480>

This paper argues that an individualist perspective is a crucial element of William James's metaphilosophical outlook. In broad outline, the individualist argument the paper attributes to James can be characterized like this. Disputes among philosophers about the optimal point of view from which to consider this or that philosophical problem are themselves only adequately adjudicated from an individualist perspective. That is, when it comes to an assortment of important philosophical questions (not all of them perhaps, but a significant number), an individualist perspective should replace a more objective one, and whether it should or not is itself a question that should be decided from an individualist perspective.

Savransky, Martin. "The Pluralistic Problematic: William James and the Pragmatics of the Pluriverse." *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 2 (2021): 141–59.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276419848030>

In his lectures on pragmatism, William James famously proposed that the question of "the one and the many" constitutes the most central of all philosophic problems, and that it is "central because so pregnant." Prompted by James' proposition, this article explores the intimately political connection in James' thought between his pluralistic metaphysics and the nature of the problematic as a generative force that impregnates worlds and thoughts with differences: what I here call "the pluralistic problematic." Exploring the generative significance of the problematic in James' philosophy, I propose that, where James is concerned, the pluriverse has a thoroughly problematic mode of existence. And pluralism, rather than a celebration of the many, rather than a philosophical exposition on multiple worlds and ontologies, or a theory of the organisation of a diverse polis, is first and foremost a pragmatics of the pluriverse—a political,

experimental and pragmatic response to the ongoing insistence of the pluralistic problematic.

Scherübl, Florian. “Nietzsche *comme pragmatiste*: Die Spuren von William James in Gilles Deleuzes Nietzsche-Interpretation.” *Nietzscheforschung* 27, no. 1 (2020): 323–43. [Nietzsche *comme pragmatiste*: The traces of William James in Gilles Deleuze’s Nietzsche interpretation].
<https://doi.org/10.1515/NIFO-2020-0022>

Stepanenko, Walter Scott. “Ecclesial Belonging in a World of Pure Experience: William James, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Religious Rationality in Crisis.” *Open Theology* 7, no. 1 (2021): 111–28.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0152>

The global COVID-19 pandemic has spotlighted several instances of churches violating state issued and scientifically recommended guidelines designed to keep populations healthy and to prevent the further spread of the disease. While these instances are minority responses to these orders, they nonetheless raise questions about the rationality of ecclesial belonging in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, I draw on the work of William James and W.E.B. Du Bois to articulate a conception of ecclesial belonging as a social epistemological process engaging a complex, fluid multiplicity of knowers of various scales. I argue that, in this view, ecclesial rationality involves the construction of a concatenation of internal and external practices individual believers and groups can traverse so long as they consistently satisfy a plurality of desiderata. I suggest that what is irrational about religious-based defiance of COVID-19 guidelines is the church-sanctioned severance of internal from external practices. I suggest that this behavior is supported by a failure to grasp the demands of ecclesial rationality rather than

embrace them, and that this conception of rationality may have been eroded by the value-neutral skepticism of secular rationality.

Weidenbaum, Jonathan. “To Laugh in a Pluralistic Universe: William James and the Philosophy of Humor.” *The Philosophy of Humor Yearbook* 1, no. 1 (2020): 117–34.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/phhumyb-2020-0010>

The purpose of this article is to enlist the work of the American philosopher and psychologist William James in order to investigate the deeper significance of humor. It is neither James’s character nor anything he states directly about humor or laughter that is under discussion here, but the cosmos as grasped through his bold metaphysics and rich phenomenological observations. The thought of James, it is argued, discloses our inherence within a universe rife with ambiguity, complexity, and incongruity. I explore how these features of reality, particularly when illuminated through James’s lush prose, may cause us to laugh. In addition, the insights of James are employed to examine the close relationship between humor and certain forms of religious experience, as well as with horror.