

# HAPPINESS BY MANY MEANS: WILLIAM JAMES'S FUNCTIONAL CONCEPTION OF HAPPINESS

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This essay explains William James's conception of happiness. While much has been written about James's conception of emotions, surprisingly little has been written about his conception of happiness. The few scholars who have addressed James's conception of happiness have either failed to provide sufficient context or have taken too narrow a view of the matter. This essay combines a close reading of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) with examples from James's personal life to demonstrate how James developed a functionalist conception of happiness. James believed that unhappiness motivates the individual to adopt new mental habits and transform themselves until they can regain their happiness. This framework permits a considerable degree of flexibility, plurality, and experimentation. Although James believed that some strategies worked better than others, he was open to the possibility that individuals could attain happiness by many means.



## INTRODUCTION

**O**n June 1, 1903, the sixty-one year old William James (1842-1910) watched the southwest horizon from the upstairs window of his summer home on the northern bank of Lake Chocorua in central New Hampshire. The fog of smoke that hung over the thickets of white pines and maple trees was so thick that James could not even see across the lake. Twenty miles in that direction, the city of Laconia was a smoldering ruin. A fire had broken out at a textile mill and strong winds fanned the blaze. One hundred homes, a lumber mill, and an electrical station were all destroyed, along with the textile mill. In the end, five hundred people were left homeless, though, fortunately, no one died.<sup>1</sup> James likely did not yet know the extent of the damage, but the smoke had traveled all the way to his little cottage on the bank of Lake Chocorua. Gazing out at the thick veil of smoke, James could not help but admit in a letter to his younger brother, the novelist Henry James (1843-1916), that within the walls of his Chocorua house, “every breath is a pleasure.” The bleak landscape outside made him “ashamed that one can be so happy.”<sup>2</sup>

A few years earlier, in 1901, James delivered a series of lectures at the University of Edinburgh which would become *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James grappled with a great range of topics during his career, but it wasn’t until those Gifford lectures that he dealt seriously with happiness. Within James’s earlier works, such as *What is an Emotion?* (1884) or *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), where we might expect to find such a discussion, happiness is notably absent. Although James mentioned the emotion now and then throughout his career, he did not find it appropriate to discuss happiness seriously until he broached the topic of religious experience. A simple examination of how frequently he uses the word “happiness” and related words across different texts confirms this. James mentioned “happiness” twice as frequently in *The Varieties* than in the rest of his works combined.<sup>3</sup> Although many scholars have written about James’s conception of emotions, very few have written about James’s conception of happiness. Those few attempts have relied on such narrow readings of James’s work that

their conclusions have been either incomplete or wrong.<sup>4</sup> This essay will attempt to explain James's conception of happiness by focusing on what he has to say about the emotion within *The Varieties*. James's views are best understood in combination with some of his less well-known essays, especially "Vacations" (1873), "The Gospel of Relaxation" (1899), and "The Energies of Men" (1907). James's correspondence also offers a unique inroad into James's personal sources of happiness. These private sources are pertinent to understanding James's formal conception of happiness.

James associated happiness and unhappiness with the stability of the individual's mental habits. Information or events that interfere with those mental habits may produce unhappiness and a wide variety of other mental disturbances. The sensation of unhappiness encourages the individual to modify their behavior and establish more stable mental habits. This can involve dramatic transformations in the individual's worldview or personality. James suggested that by successfully adapting to unhappiness the individual can develop higher forms of happiness. James did not conceive of happiness as the positive feeling of pleasure or bliss, but rather as a reprieve that could be attained by successfully adapting to, overcoming, or retreating from unhappiness. Fleeting moments of happiness could also function as a boon that might fortify the individual against particular sources of unhappiness. This process of transformation involves the continual transfiguration of new information or experiences into (or their rejection from) the individual's worldview. James believed that attaining a stable mental state, one that was free of or even blind to contradictory information, produced the sensation of happiness.

This essay will reflect on James's conception of emotions more broadly, then move on to consider James's personal sources of happiness along with his formal conception of happiness. Since James did not begin explicating his formal theory until the late 1890s, his theory rests upon a lifetime of intellectual and personal experience with emotions. It is difficult to understand why James conceived of happiness in the manner he did without first considering those intellectual and personal influences.

### JAMES'S CONCEPTION OF EMOTIONS

In 1861 nineteen year old William James was determined to become a chemist. It was a short-lived ambition. He had only just begun his training, and at that time, he was likely still adjusting to life in Cambridge. In September of that year, he received a letter from his cousin Katherine Temple, in which she enclosed a photograph of her younger sister Mary "Minnie" Temple. Minny, who was seventeen, had recently cut her hair short, and James was thoroughly amused. Writing after the fact, and with typical flourish, he noted how thrilled he was "when thereout fell the Photograph. Wheeeew! oohoo! Aha! la-la! boisteroso triumphissimmo, chassez to the right, cross over, forward two, hornpipe and turn summerset! [sic]"<sup>5</sup>

James was so excited to receive the letter that he read it right there in the post office. "I read on unconscious of the emotion I was betraying, a vast crowd collected. Profs. Agassiz and Wyman ran with their notebooks and proceeded to take observations of the greatest scientific import."<sup>6</sup> James probably invented this scene, but it reveals the young chemist-in-training's impression of the nascent psychological sciences. The professors from the post office, Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) and Jeffries Wyman (1814-1874) were both experts in physiology and anatomy. They might have recorded James's eager facial expression, his smile, the dilation of his pupils, or maybe a fit of laughter. Still, the professors could not possibly have captured the nuances of James's emotions. In his *Principles of Psychology*, nearly thirty years later, James complained about the way his contemporaries had attempted to catalog emotions using precisely those sorts of physiological observations. James joked that his time might have been better spent reading "verbal descriptions of the shapes of the rocks on a New Hampshire farm."<sup>7</sup>

James suggested that narrative was a better medium for discussing emotions, a belief that strongly impacted his methodology.<sup>8</sup> James drew heavily on self-reported, emotionally and psychologically loaded mental phenomena. Considering this methodological orientation, we should not expect James to have produced anything resembling a list of the physiological features or

mental sources of happiness. Instead, we ought to examine how James used and interpreted stories. Rather than reducing, for example, that post office scene to a set of physiological reactions, we can rely on James's account of this emotionally charged episode. He recorded that on leaving the post office, he "plunged bareheaded into the chill and gloomy bowels of the night, to recover by violent exercise the use of his reasoning faculties, which had been almost annihilated by the shock of happiness."<sup>9</sup> Although no doubt hyperbole, this scene foreshadows a line of thinking that James would explore within *The Varieties*. Even at the young age of nineteen, James believed there was a relationship, perhaps even a tension, between happiness and reason.

James's conception of emotions was also strongly influenced by evolutionary thinkers such as Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). James applied natural selection to many aspects of psychology, often to good effect. He moved beyond the mere description of emotions to considerations of their adaptive function and even the genesis of particular emotions.<sup>10</sup> Other authors have already described James's functionalist theory of emotions in some detail.<sup>11</sup> This essay will attempt to demonstrate that James's conception of happiness conforms to that categorization of his theory of emotions. James conceived of happiness and unhappiness as particular mental functions. He suggested that beliefs and ideas are not significantly different from other sorts of bodily habits. James connected the stability or interruption of those mental habits to happiness and unhappiness.<sup>12</sup>

James's conception of happiness also conforms more broadly with the James-Lang theory of emotions. Rather than the emotion causing the physiological reaction, James suggested that our physiological responses were caused by our environment. Those physiological responses constitute the sensation of emotion.<sup>13</sup> Later in his life, James would even suggest that this opened the opportunity to intervene in our emotional life by deliberately changing our behavior, i.e., deliberately acting out physiological responses. Within "The Gospel of Relaxation," one of a series of public lectures aimed at students, James advised that "if our

*HAPPINESS BY MANY MEANS*

spontaneous cheerfulness be lost, [the solution] is to sit up cheerfully, to look round cheerfully, and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there.”<sup>14</sup> Happiness, therefore, was to James a matter of managing or deliberately modifying one’s physiological or mental behavior, a belief that appears prominently throughout *The Varieties*.

However, as James came to classify happiness as a negative sensation (negative in the purely technical sense, meaning the absence or freedom from any disruptive sensation like pain, fear, or distress), what James means by sitting up cheerfully and looking round cheerfully doesn’t indicate any specific physiological responses, but rather to sit up and look round as if free from what James called “the coarser emotions,” like fear or anger.<sup>15</sup> For James, unhappiness often includes the coarser emotions, but is somewhat more general and strongly connected to intellectual, behavioral, and personality changes. This conception has the advantage of offering an account of happiness that captures the plurality of methods used to attain it. Fear and unhappiness both explain the compulsion to flee from a bear in the woods, but James’s conception of unhappiness proves most interesting when the scenario is more complicated. If one discovers an irremovable bear in one’s living room, for example, fear might compel one to stay in the kitchen, but unhappiness might compel one to change their attitude towards bears or simply to pretend that the bear does not exist.

**HAPPINESS ON THE BANKS OF LAKE CHOCORUA**

Scholars often portray William James as a tortured intellectual. Scholars interested in James are drawn to the frightening hallucination he experienced as a young man.<sup>16</sup> When James was twenty eight years old, his cousin Minny, with whom he was very close, suddenly died. Her death greatly affected James, and he fell into a deep depression that lasted into 1873. Other explanations have been offered for James’s mental collapse, and it seems likely that many factors contributed. Around this time, James was also apprehensive about the possibility that human action might be highly deterministic.<sup>17</sup> The historian George Cotkin has noted that

this depressive period might partly have been a consequence of boredom.<sup>18</sup> James received his medical degree in 1869 but it wouldn't be until 1872 that he would land his first teaching post at Harvard. It likely did not help that James had been studying Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), that great pessimist, throughout the 1860s.<sup>19</sup> Many years later, in *The Varieties*, he described the now well-known hallucination which marked the height of his depression:

suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them enclosing his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculpture Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely nonhuman.<sup>20</sup>

This passage, delivered in the section of *The Varieties*, where James deals with the perpetual pessimists whom he called "sick-souled," is often taken as an admission of himself as a "sick-soul." While he was prone to bouts of depression, he cautioned against assuming that individuals fell neatly into only one category or another, that individuals were either "healthy-minded" optimists or "sick-souled" pessimists.<sup>21</sup>

James himself was somewhere in between, and as his life was both marred by tragedy and blessed by great fortune, we should not expect James to have had either continual optimism or continual pessimism. James had moments of great happiness along with moments of great misery, and they often punctuated one another. The years from 1878 to 1888 were one particularly hectic period in James's life. In 1878 James got married. In 1879 his first son, Henry, was born. In 1882 his second son, William, was born. Between 1882 and 1885 he lost his parents, his brother Wilkie, and his third son,

*HAPPINESS BY MANY MEANS*

Hermann, who passed away within his first year. Despite these trials, in 1886, shortly after purchasing his summer home near Lake Chocorua, James could boast lyrically that “I smile at the pride of Greece and Rome – from the height of my New Hampshire home.”<sup>22</sup> In 1889 James would publish *The Principles of Psychology*, a feat that took him nearly ten years to complete but which would cement his authority as a psychologist. Although he did not explicate his conception of happiness in that work, he had already developed a strong sense of the things which made him personally happy.

James frequently regained his happiness throughout his life through three principal methods: first, by taking refuge in the comfort of loved ones, second by taking vacations, and third by deliberately transforming his mental habits. We saw already how overjoyed James was to receive a letter from his cousins. The mature James was a little less hyperbolic than he’d been at nineteen, but his sentiments generally remained strong. When, for example, he proposed to his wife in the spring of 1877, he later wrote to his sister, noting that he had been “bowed down with this solemn happiness.”<sup>23</sup> In 1888, James wrote to his brother Henry describing what he called “a picture of domestic happiness.” This was the first summer spent with his family in their newly built summer home on the banks of Lake Chocorua. The scene captures how important James’s family and leisure were for his happiness:

I have just been downstairs to get an envelope and there on the lawn saw a part of the family which I will describe, for you to insert in one of your novels as a picture of domestic happiness. On the newly made lawn in the angle of the house and kitchen, in the shadow of the hot afternoon sun, lies a mattress taken out of our spare-room for an airing against Richard Hodgson's arrival tomorrow. On it the Madonna and child--the former sewing in a nice blue point dress, and smiling at the latter (named Peggy), immensely big and fat for her years, and who, with quite a vocabulary of adjectives, proper names, and a mouthful of teeth, shows as yet, although in her sixteenth month, no disposition to walk. She is rolling and prattling to herself, now on mattress and now on grass, and is an exceedingly good-natured, happy, and



intelligent child. It conduces to her happiness to have a hard cracker in her fist, at which she mumbles more or less all day, and of which she is never known to let go, even taking it into her bath with her and holding it immersed till that ceremony is o'er...I, with naught on but gray flannel shirt, breeches, belt, stockings and shoes, shall now proceed across the lake in the boat and up the hill, to get and carry the mail. Harry will probably ride along the shore on the pony which Aunt Kate has given him, and where Billy and Fräulein are, Heaven only knows. Returning, I shall have a bath either in lake or brook--doesn't it sound nice? On the whole it is nice, but very hot.<sup>24</sup>

This idyllic scene of “domestic happiness” may well mark a sort of high point in James’s life. The James we see in 1888, rowing across the lake in his flannel shirt and breeches, is very unlike the young, pessimistic man we saw in the early 1870s. By the late 1880s, James had come into his own as a husband, father, and intellectual. During his maturation, he also clearly came to understand the sources of happiness in his own life.

One scholar has suggested that James did not regard leisure as an effective path to happiness.<sup>25</sup> However, James established that leisure was indeed a valuable source of happiness quite early on. In the summer of 1873, just after his first year of teaching, he took a little journey up the coast of Massachusetts. He wrote to his brother to tell him that:

I succeeded in reading no word for three days, and then took Goethe’s *gedichte* [poems] on my walks, and with them in my memory, the smell of the laurels & pines in my nose, and the rythmic [sic] pounding of the surf upon my ear I was free and happy again. How people can pass years without a week of the Normal life I can’t imagine.<sup>26</sup>

Within that same year, James published an essay titled “Vacations” (1873) in which he called for the creation of “vacation trusts.” He envisioned a public fund designed to provide workers of all incomes with the means to take their families on annual vacations. James

*HAPPINESS BY MANY MEANS*

thought that a month out of every year would do the trick. “Grasp with your imagination,” James asked his reader, “the mass of happiness and sanity of mind which is implied in that proposition.”<sup>27</sup> This wasn’t just a matter of increasing happiness. James believed that such an enterprise would have other positive effects. He argued that occasionally stepping away from one’s daily work, whether one was a laborer or a poet, would improve overall productivity.<sup>28</sup>

He also thought that regular vacations could reform the emotional character of Americans more generally. He frequently compared the emotionality of Americans to that of Europeans.<sup>29</sup> Within the same essay, *Vacations*, he characterized the American emotional temperament as plagued by nervousness and anxiety. “Who that has travelled in Europe is not familiar,” James asked, “with the type of the broken down American business-man, sent abroad to recruit his collapsed nervous system?”<sup>30</sup> The character he described bears a strong resemblance to how James himself might have felt while he was still recovering from his mental crisis earlier that year:

With his haggard, hungry, mien, unfitted by lifelong habit for taking any pleasure in passive contemplation, and with too narrow a culture to be interested in the historical or aesthetic side of what meets his eye, he tries to cheat the *tedium vitae* by a feverish locomotion, and seems to draw a ghostly comfort from a peevish and foolish criticism of everything he meets – the tyranny of despots, the dinginess of the old paintings, and the mendacity of the natives, the absence of the ballot-box, the crookedness of the streets, the fearful waste of raw material in walls, harnesses, and conveyances, and the barbarousness of the window fastenings.<sup>31</sup>

James derived his cure for this pessimistic character through his own experience with depression. He recommended leisure because it had worked for him, and it was a strategy he would rely on continually throughout his life.

Another strategy that James discovered was the deliberate modification of his mental habits. One common narrative of how he overcame his mental crisis of 1870-1873 is evidence of this claim.

After reading Charles Renouvier's second *Essai de critique générale* (1859) in 1870, James decided that his "first act of free will shall be to believe in free will."<sup>32</sup> David Leary observes that James struggled to follow through with that decision.<sup>33</sup> However, James's father, Henry James Sr. (1811-1882), noted how James's temperament had improved by 1873. When James's father asked what had caused the change, James confessed that it had been:

the reading of Renouvier... and Wordsworth...but especially [James's] having given up the notion that all mental disorder required to have a physical basis. This had become perfectly untrue to him. He saw that the mind did act irrespectively of material coercion, and could be dealt with therefore at first-hand, and this was health to his bones.<sup>34</sup>

James could not improve his wellbeing by instantaneously modifying his mental habits, but he could change them through continual practice. This is a strategy that James seems to have used throughout his life to varying degrees. In 1898, while he was preparing for the Gifford lectures, he offered some practical advice to Dickinson S. Miller, one of his former students:

I spent the first six weeks after term began in trying to clear my table of encumbering tasks, in order to get at my own reading for the Gifford lectures. In vain. Each day brought its cargo, and I never got at my own work, until a fortnight ago the brilliant resolve was communicated to me, by divine inspiration, of not doing anything for anybody else, not writing a letter or looking at a MS., on any day until I should have done at least one hour of work for myself. If you spend your time preparing to be ready, you never will be ready. Since that wonderful insight into the truth, despair has given way to happiness. I do my hour or hour and a half of free reading; and don't care what extraneous interest suffers.<sup>35</sup>

Here, James was able to turn his frustration into happiness with a relatively simple change in his daily routine. His earlier decision to "believe in free will," and this more mundane modification to his

## HAPPINESS BY MANY MEANS

daily schedule demonstrate how James sought to regain his happiness through deliberate modification of his mental habits.

By the time James sat down to compile the lectures which would become *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in the late 1890s, he had already spent a lifetime experiencing the highs and lows of life. James discovered that he could attain happiness by taking temporary refuge in his family or through leisure. He also learned to attain happiness by deliberately modifying his habits. These ideas all appear prominently in the conception of happiness which James deployed in *The Varieties*.

### THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Sometime in the late 1890s, James concluded that happiness was a negative emotional state – that is, that happiness was the absence of other disruptive feelings. In 1901, shortly after delivering his Gifford lectures, he confessed to one of his lifelong friends, Frances “Franny” R. Morse, that “Happiness, I have lately discovered, is no positive feeling, but a negative condition of freedom from a number of restrictive sensations of which our organism usually seems to be the seat.”<sup>36</sup> He insisted that happiness came when those restrictive sensations “are wiped out.”<sup>37</sup> He suggested that “the clearness and cleanness of the contrast is happiness.”<sup>38</sup> Although James told his friend that he had only “lately discovered” this, James likely encountered this idea somewhat earlier in the works of Arthur Schopenhauer. Scholars have already demonstrated the significant impact Schopenhauer had on James’s intellectual development, especially on James’s mental crisis of 1870 to 1873. It has also been suggested that Schopenhauer’s “philosophical pessimism” influenced the way James presented his mental crisis within *The Varieties*. Schopenhauer explicitly conceived of happiness as a negative condition, declaring within *The World as Will and Representation* that “only pain and want can be felt positively...well being, on the contrary, is merely negative.”<sup>39</sup> While James came to accept that premise, he also implicitly rejected Schopenhauer’s philosophical pessimism by emphasizing the possibility of psychological improvement, transformation, and change.

In *The Varieties*, James used the restorative power of happiness and the motivational power of unhappiness to explain how an individual's mental habits, including religious beliefs, change. It is worth reflecting on James's methodology within *The Varieties* and considering some of his conclusions before proceeding because they are pertinent to understanding his conception of happiness. In the first three of the twenty lectures, James attempted to justify his methodology. He wanted to take the psychology of religion more seriously than those he called "medical materialists" so far had. The tendency among "medical materialists" was to reduce religious experience to a biological process and diagnose spiritual beliefs as a sort of disorder. James cleverly rejected this argument by first accepting their assumption of the preeminence of biological processes but then demonstrating that their interpretation of that argument's consequences would invalidate any sort of belief, not just religious beliefs. As he put it:

To plead organic causation of a religious state of mind, then, in refutation of its claim to possess superior spiritual value, is quite illogical and arbitrary, unless one have already worked out in advance some psycho-physical theory connecting spiritual values in general with determinate sorts of physiological change. Otherwise, none of our thoughts and feelings, not even our scientific doctrines, not even our dis-beliefs, could retain any value as revelations of the truth, for every one of them without exception flows from the state of their possessor's body at the time.<sup>40</sup>

James did not think that reducing religious beliefs to bodily states was very useful. He had leveled a similar critique against other contemporaneous attempts to describe emotions ten years earlier in *The Principles of Psychology*.<sup>41</sup> His solution at that time had been twofold. First, James insisted that careful interpretation of narrative presented a more effective way of accessing emotions than physiological observation did.<sup>42</sup> Second, he considered the genesis and function of emotions using the lens of natural selection.<sup>43</sup> He applied both strategies in *The Varieties*.

*HAPPINESS BY MANY MEANS*

Throughout chapters 4-13, James analyzed narratives drawn from a wide variety of different sources. He drew heavily on accounts of the lives of saints, but he also used stories taken from the lives of poets, authors, and otherwise ordinary religious individuals. Within chapters 4-7, James explored two psychological dispositions, the “healthy-minded” and the “sick-souled.” The “healthy-minded” included such extreme optimists as Walt Whitman (1819-1892). In contrast, the “sick-souled” included severe pessimists such as Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). James’s prolonged exploration of these two extremes has led to some confusion about his intent. Some scholars have taken his use of these categories to mean that he thought of people as necessarily belonging to one category or another. This was not James’s intention. He deployed the categories of “healthy-mindedness” and “sick-souls” as part of a specific methodological strategy. He argued in *The Varieties* that “it always leads to a better understanding of a thing’s significance to consider its exaggerations and perversions.” He believed that

Insane conditions have the advantage that they isolate special factors of the mental life and enable us to inspect them unmasked by their more usual surroundings. They play the part in mental anatomy which the scalpel and the microscope play in the anatomy of the body.<sup>44</sup>

Later in the text, James clarified this position. He noted that

in their extreme forms, of healthy mindedness & soul-sickness, the two types are violently contrasted; though here as in most other current classifications, the radical extremes are somewhat ideal abstractions, and the concrete human beings whom we oftenest meet are intermediate varieties and mixtures.<sup>45</sup>

James deliberately used extreme examples to gain insight into the more common mental types that exist between the extremes.

James reached a variety of conclusions using this method. One conclusion of particular significance has to do with the evolution of

culture. It is well known that James was influenced by the ideas of Spencer. When James described the history of religious ideas as the “elimination of the humanly unfit, and the survival of the humanly fittest” he echoed Spencer.<sup>46</sup> While James ultimately rejected many of Spencer’s ideas, Spencer’s influence was difficult to expunge completely. James’s formal conception of happiness bears a strong resemblance to the behavioral elements of Spencer’s model of organic adaptation.

Spencer accepted a version of the utilitarian and Aristotelian assumption that happiness was the telos of human behavior. In his first book, which originally bore the title *Social Statics: or, the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed* (1851), Spencer outlined a theory of organic adaptation that assumed happiness and unhappiness were the fundamental motivators of organic behavior. Spencer put it in quite dramatic terms:

Every suffering incident to the human body, from a headache up to a fatal illness, from a burn or a sprain up to accidental loss of life, is similarly traceable to the having placed that body in a situation for which its powers did not fit it. Nor is the expression confined in its application to physical evil...No matter what the special nature of the evil, it is invariably referable to the one generic cause – want of congruity between the faculties and their spheres of action.<sup>47</sup>

From this vantage, Spencer was surprisingly optimistic. He suspected that the “want of congruity” made it the natural tendency of organisms to “tend to become fitted” to changes in their environment.<sup>48</sup> Spencer suggested that on the individual level, organisms achieved this by altering their behavior. He pushed this even further by arguing that such behavioral changes could lead to hereditary structural changes.

James did not follow Spencer to that conclusion, but he did share Spencer’s belief that unhappiness could motivate individuals to modify their behavior. In his exploration of the “sick-souled,” James argued that there were different kinds of unhappiness. In most cases

*HAPPINESS BY MANY MEANS*

unhappiness was “only a mal-adjustment with things.” Or a “wrong correspondence of one’s life with the environment.”<sup>49</sup> These claims echo Spencer’s claim that unhappiness and the sensation of “evil” are caused by a “want of congruity” between individuals and their environments. This belief was colored by James’s incorporation of Renouvier’s neo-Kantian ideas. Recently, T. Pearce has accounted for the way that James merged the ideas of Spencer and Renouvier, noting that James essentially maintained Spencer’s “conception of life as a correspondence between organism and environment,” but complicated the notions of organism and environment by incorporating a phenomenological perspective.<sup>50</sup> That is to suggest that James blurred the distinction between the organism and the environment. James concluded that for most people unhappiness “is curable in principle at least, upon the natural plane, for merely by modifying either the self or the things, or both at once, the two terms [the self and the environment] may be made to fit, and all go merry as a marriage bell again.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, James thought many sources of unhappiness possessed relatively simple solutions. However, James did not think all kinds of unhappiness could be addressed so easily.

**THE VARIETIES OF UNHAPPINESS**

James thought that there were many possible sources of unhappiness and that individual sensitivity to those sources varied from person to person. He thought that many types of unhappiness were of the simpler sort of “mal-adjustment.” Other kinds of unhappiness were more complex and more difficult to overcome. A simple source of pain, such as touching a hot stovetop, might cause the individual to withdraw their hand. Another relatively simple source of unhappiness, such as the anxiety caused by struggling to find time to work on one’s projects, might be alleviated by more diligent use of a calendar. These sources of unhappiness are actionable. Other sources of unhappiness, such as the death of a loved one, the gradual decay of one’s own body, or the fear that human behavior is predetermined, are more difficult to overcome through direct action. In these cases, it simply isn’t possible to remedy the source of the pain through deliberate action. These more complex kinds of



unhappiness can only be reliably overcome through the modification of one's mental habits. However, the decision to "act as if" free will exists is not the same as *believing* that free will exists. Such changes demand either a genuine conversion from one set of mental habits to another, or the deliberate practice of a new mental habit in order to override or escape from the source of unhappiness. In either case, adopting new mental habits is a critical avenue of self-transformation that allows the individual to adapt to more complex forms of unhappiness.

This process of self-transformation was harder for some than it was for others. James described the "sick-souled" as individuals "who cannot so swiftly throw off the burden of the consciousness of evil, but are congenitally fated to suffer from its presence."<sup>52</sup> Generally speaking, James thought that this tended to involve extreme susceptibility or sensitivity to more complex sources of unhappiness.<sup>53</sup> Some of the sources of unhappiness that he thought were particularly pernicious included a sense of "wrongness or vice in one's essential nature," a bitter awareness that pleasurable experiences are ultimately going to end, a disjunction between one's ambitions and reality, and the anguish caused by competing drives in one's soul.<sup>54</sup> These kinds of unhappiness cannot be corrected by external action. Escapism, in the form of leisure or pleasure, may provide temporary relief, but these issues can only be resolved by developing new mental habits or abandoning old ones. James referred to individuals who successfully overcame the more severe types of unhappiness as "twice-born."

### THE PROCESS OF UNIFICATION

One of the more striking examples which James offered of the twice-born came from the life of Leo Tolstoy. James drew from Tolstoy's *A Confession* (1882) and used Tolstoy's religious conversion as an example of the sort of psychological struggle involved in the unification of one's personality. Tolstoy characterized his period of melancholy by a general motivation to find a way out of his unhappiness:

*HAPPINESS BY MANY MEANS*

Whilst my intellect was working, something else in me was working too, and kept me from suicide – a consciousness of life, as I may call it, which was like a force that obliged my mind to fix itself in another direction and draw me out of my situation of despair.<sup>55</sup>

James reflected at some length on Tolstoy's condition. He described the process of unification as a transformation of the individual's happiness into a new kind, one quite unlike the individual's previous happiness. James suggested that once an individual was exposed to one of the more complex species of mental or worldly evil, whatever happiness they subsequently manage to attain would be permanently augmented by their awareness and memory of that evil:

When disillusionment has gone as far as this, there is seldom a *restitutio ad integrum* [that is, a restoration to the original condition]. One has tasted of the fruit of the tree, and the happiness of Eden never comes again. The happiness that comes, when any does come, - and often enough it fails to return in an acute form, though its form is sometimes very acute, - is not the simple ignorance of ill, but something vastly more complex, including natural evil as one of its elements, but finding natural evil no such standingblock and terror because it now sees it swallowed up in supernatural good. The process is one of redemption, not of mere reversion to natural health, and the sufferer, when saved, is saved by what seems to him a second birth, a deeper kind of conscious being than he could enjoy before.<sup>56</sup>

Though departing from the garden might strike us as a particularly damning metaphor, James maintained genuine hope in the possibilities of self-transformation and redemption. The function of happiness and unhappiness does not entail a back and forth between paradise and the wilderness, but a real and natural mental effort to create some semblance of paradise that still accounts for the authentic sources of evil in the world. Indeed, James came to associate this process of unification with a process of individual development and maturation. He thought that pessimists and those

who managed to overcome their pessimism tended to possess more complete conceptions of the world.<sup>57</sup> He suggested that “the higher and the lower feelings, the useful and the erring impulses, begin by being a comparative chaos within us – they must end by forming a stable system of functions in right subordination. Unhappiness is apt to characterize the period of order-making and struggle.”<sup>58</sup> Successful unification could “transform the most intolerable misery into the profoundest and most enduring happiness.”<sup>59</sup>

### **JAMES’S CONCEPTION OF HAPPINESS**

James believed that there were multiple pathways to happiness. He also thought that some strategies work better than others and that, in most cases, happiness is nothing more than the brief absence of unhappiness. However, James does make a couple of exceptions, both of which are outliers. First, he argued that some “healthy-minded” individuals suffer from such a stalwart and stable sort of happiness that they are effectively blind to evil.<sup>60</sup> They are those “who, when unhappiness is offered or proposed to them, positively refuse to feel it.”<sup>61</sup> For them, “evil is a disease; and worry over disease is itself an additional form of disease.”<sup>62</sup> Though this state is no doubt pleasant, these individuals can only maintain such a perspective by ignoring evil, pain, and unhappiness. They are powerless to combat them, and therefore not likely to demonstrate much in the way of self-improvement or development.

The second exception is the “saint-like” whom James considered in chapters 11-15 of *The Varieties*. He suggested that sometimes the unification process can overshoot by a wide margin, transforming the individual’s behavior or personality far beyond the threshold of what is considered normal. Those who have attributed their mental state to a god or have had their mental state attributed in such a manner after the fact have on occasion been elevated to the status of sainthood. Others, of the artistic or intellectual persuasion, have been called geniuses, and those unlucky ones who transform too far in an unrecognizable direction we may even call mad.<sup>63</sup> This set of extreme personalities are indicative of the more complex forms of happiness which James’s model accounts for. James suggested that

*HAPPINESS BY MANY MEANS*

these varieties each involved the incorporation of sources of unhappiness into active and affirmative sources of happiness. He compared the process to the shift in emotional disposition which occurs when one has a child, describing a mother for whom “the inhibitive power of pain...is extinguished wherever the baby’s interests are at stake.” He added that “The inconveniences which this creature occasions have become... the glowing heart of a great joy, and indeed are now the very conditions whereby the joy becomes the most deep.”<sup>64</sup> Hence, in James’s exploration of the lives of saints, we see that ascetic self-denial, humility, charity, and a wide range of other painful obligations can be incorporated into an individual’s happiness. In fortunate cases, the individual attains “an altogether new level of spiritual vitality, a relatively heroic level, in which impossible things have become possible, and new energies and endurances are shown.”<sup>65</sup>

**CONCLUSION**

William James believed that happiness is the absence or ignorance of pain, displeasure, or misery. While James valued happiness for its therapeutic powers, he also believed that unhappiness functioned to motivate the individual to change their environment or themselves to regain their happiness. James did not think that most people should aspire to become “saint-like.”<sup>66</sup> Still, he believed that the unification process, the tension between happiness and unhappiness, and the impulse towards new sorts of happiness was the rule, not a special case. For most people, unhappiness and pain are the stumbling blocks on the path to higher forms of happiness. Fortunately, there are many ways to get there.

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*HAPPINESS BY MANY MEANS*

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Ken Erickson, "History of the Laconia Fire Department," Laconia Fire History, Laconia Fire Department, last modified November 30, 2010. [https://www.laconianh.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1390/history\\_of\\_the\\_laconia\\_fire\\_department\\_1pdf?bidId=](https://www.laconianh.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1390/history_of_the_laconia_fire_department_1pdf?bidId=)

<sup>2</sup> William James, “To Henry James. June 6, 1903,” *The Letters of William James* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 2:196.

<sup>3</sup> I wrote a computer program to search through digital copies of James’s writings for a set of keywords. I used the same program to iterate through each instance rapidly and take notes on the context in which the word was used. This let me create a rough timeline for James’s theory of happiness. Below, I have attached a chart with simple counts of the keywords. It is especially worth noting that while “pleasure” and “pain” are discussed at some length in *The Principles of Psychology*, mentions of happiness are largely absent. I have included hyperlinks only to indicate where I got the plaintext of the listed titles.

Date	Text	Happy	Happier	Happiest	Happiness	Joy	Joyous	Bliss	Delight	Pleasure	Pain
1890	<a href="#">Principles Of Psychology Vol. I</a>	10	3	1	2	1	2	0	2	18	17
1890	<a href="#">Principles Of Psychology Vol. II</a>	6	1	0	5	6	3	0	9	85	47
1896	<a href="#">What Makes Life Worth Living</a>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1897	<a href="#">The Will To Believe</a>	6	1	0	7	4	0	0	1	10	5
1899	<a href="#">Talks To Teachers</a>	10	0	0	7	12	1	1	6	5	3
1902	<a href="#">Varieties</a>	27	0	2	54	25	9	2	10	18	16
1906	<a href="#">Pragmatism</a>	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	3	0
1907	<a href="#">Essays in Radical Empiricism</a>	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	2
1909	<a href="#">A Pluralistic Universe</a>	2	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	4	3
NA	<a href="#">Letters Vol. I</a>	22	3	1	6	8	2	2	7	11	5
NA	<a href="#">Letters Vol. II</a>	30	1	2	0	0	1	0	9	19	8
NA	<a href="#">Memories And Studies</a>	9	0	2	1	3	1	0	3	8	9

<sup>4</sup> See Philip T. L. Mack, “In Praise Of Habit: Making A Case For A Relation Between Happiness And William James’s Conception Of Habit,” in *William James Studies* 11: 96–101; James O. Pawelski, “167. William James and Well-Being: The Philosophy, Psychology, and Culture of Human Flourishing,” in

*HAPPINESS BY MANY MEANS*

*William James Studies*, 14, no.1: 1– 25; “William James,” History of Happiness, Pursuit of Happiness Project, Last Updated 2021.

Mack, for example, gets James quite wrong by relying too narrowly on James’s discussion of habit in *The Principles of Psychology*. To Mack’s credit, he does justice to James’s basic attitude towards habit. His claim that James believed that useful habits were one pathway to happiness is a reasonable one. However, Mack’s decision to contrast James’s conception of habit against Bertrand Russell’s conception of leisure suggests that James did not view leisure as a useful pathway to happiness. This is false. James not only derived much of his own personal happiness through leisure, but he also explicitly advocated for leisure and especially vacationing as a pathway to happiness.

Pawelski has done a better job addressing James’s conception of happiness but it is nevertheless incomplete. Pawelski correctly identified the important role happiness plays in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, but he does not delve deep enough into *The Varieties* to get to the heart of James’s conception of happiness and he does not look broadly enough at James’s work to capture James’s basic attitude toward leisure. Pawelski emphasizes James’s conception of meliorism, an important aspect of James’s conception of happiness, but fails to capture the psychological function which James ascribes to happiness. Pawelski does raise another interesting point by relating James’s work to modern positive psychology. He suggests that modern positive psychologists have, perhaps unknowingly, fulfilled a call to action which James articulated towards the end of his life in his essay “The Energies of Men.” There, James emphasized the need for psychologists to investigate methods of increasing willpower and mental fortitude.

One independent research organization, “The Pursuit of Happiness Project,” has represented James’s conception of happiness with considerable accuracy. The unnamed author has managed to capture more elements of James’s conception of



happiness than any academic publication has so far managed. Paradoxically, they have misconstrued James's attitude towards happiness and misrepresented his conception of what an emotion is. The author reduces James's conception of happiness to four points that we might refer to more simply as freewill, risk-taking, hope, and crisis. These themes are no doubt connected to James's conception of happiness but this author has the connection backward. James conceived of happiness as a sort of neutral emotional state, one free of other "disruptive emotions." It is the introduction of unhappiness, displeasure, or pain that leads to risk-taking and the establishment of hope. James also connected spiritual and mental crises to happiness, but such crises don't necessarily lead to happiness. Rather, James suggests that such crises emerge in response to unhappiness and only lead to happiness insofar as an individual succeeds in eliminating the sources of that unhappiness, or by adapting to the sources of unhappiness. Such success is by no means guaranteed by a mental crisis. The connection between the belief in free will and happiness is a slightly more complex issue. Although a belief in free will was an important solution to James's own mental crisis, it is not clear that James thought a belief in free will was a universal solution. As James points out in *The Varieties*, the character of mental crises varies significantly. The solutions to those crises are equally varied.

<sup>5</sup> James, "To Miss Katharine Temple. September 1861," in *The Letters of William James*, 1:37.

<sup>6</sup> James, "To Miss Katharine Temple. September 1861," 1:37.

<sup>7</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 742.

<sup>8</sup> James, *The Principles of Psychology*. Also consider *The Varieties*.

<sup>9</sup> James, "To Miss Katharine Temple. September 1861," 1:37.

<sup>10</sup> James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 761-766.

*HAPPINESS BY MANY MEANS*

<sup>11</sup> See Jake Spinella, “A Century of Misunderstanding? William James’s Emotion Theory,” *William James Studies*, vol.16 (2019): 1-25.

<sup>12</sup> For James’s claim that ideas are mental habits, see James’s essays “The Laws of Habit” and “The Association of Ideas” in *Talks to Teachers On Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1925), 64-90, but especially 79.  
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16287/16287-h/16287-h.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> James, “What Is an Emotion?” *Essays in Psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983. 170.

<sup>14</sup> James, “The Gospel of Relaxation,” *Writings, 1878-1899*.

<sup>15</sup> James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 743.

<sup>16</sup> For examples of this kind of depiction see: Robert J. Richards, *Darwin And The Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1987); George Cotkin, *William James: Public Philosopher* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*. (New York: First Mariner Books, 2007.); John Kaag, *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> See any of the above or see: Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (New York: George Brazillier. 1948); J Pawelski, *The Dynamic Individualism of William James* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Cotkin, *William James: Public Philosopher*.

<sup>19</sup> David E. Leary, “New Insights Into William James’s Personal Crisis In The Early 1870s: Part I. Arthur Schopenhauer And The Origin & Nature Of The Crisis.” *William James Studies* 11 (2002): 1–27.

<sup>20</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in *Selected Writings*. (New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1997), 182.

<sup>21</sup> James, *The Varieties*, 189.

<sup>22</sup> James, "To Henry James. Cambridge, Apr. 12, 1887," *The Letters of William James*, 1:268.

<sup>23</sup> See *The Correspondance of William James*, edited by John J. McDermott, Ignas K. Skrupskelis, Elizabeth Berkeley, and Frederick H. Brukhardt. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992-2004), 4:571. Seen in Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*.

<sup>24</sup> James, "To Henry James. Chocorua, N.H., July 11, 1888," *The Letters of William James*, 1:281.

<sup>25</sup> Mack, "In Praise Of Habit : Making A Case For A Relation Between Happiness And William James's Conception Of Habit," in *William James Studies* 11: 96–101.

<sup>26</sup> James, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 215-216.

<sup>27</sup> James, "Vacations," 7.

<sup>28</sup> James, "Vacations," 3-4; Correspondence to Henry James Sept. 22, 1893.

<sup>29</sup> James, "Vacations," 3-5; Correspondence 2:280-81; *The Varieties*, 347; "The Gospel of Relaxation," 827-34.

<sup>30</sup> James, "Vacations," 3.

<sup>31</sup> James, "Vacations," 3-4.

<sup>32</sup> Leary, "New Insights Into William James's Personal Crisis," 5.

<sup>33</sup> Leary, "New Insights," 5.

<sup>34</sup> Henry James, Sr., to Henry James, Jr. (March 1873), seen in Perry, *Thought and Character of William James*, 339-40.

<sup>35</sup> William James, "To Dickinson S. Miller. Cambridge, Dec. 3, 1898," *The Letters of William James*, 85-86.

<sup>36</sup> William James, "To Miss Frances R. Morse. Nauheim, July 10, 1910," *The Letters of William James*, 2:155

<sup>37</sup> James, "To Miss Frances R. Morse," 2:155.

<sup>38</sup> James, "To Miss Frances R. Morse," 2:155.

<sup>39</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, translated by E. F. Payne (New York: Dover

*HAPPINESS BY MANY MEANS*

Publications, 1966), 575. Seen in Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 302.

<sup>40</sup> *The Varieties*, 36.

<sup>41</sup> *The Principles of Psychology*, 742.

<sup>42</sup> *The Principles of Psychology*, 742.

<sup>43</sup> *The Principles of Psychology*, 761-766.

<sup>44</sup> *The Varieties*. 44.

<sup>45</sup> *The Varieties*, 189.

<sup>46</sup> *The Varieties*, 353.

<sup>47</sup> Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics and Man Versus the State* (New York: D. Appleton, 1896), 28.

<sup>48</sup> *Social Statics*, 30.

<sup>49</sup> *The Varieties*, 156.

<sup>50</sup> Trevor Pearce, *Organism and Environment in American Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 67-73.

<sup>51</sup> *Organism and Environment*, 67-73.

<sup>52</sup> *The Varieties*, 155-156.

<sup>53</sup> *The Varieties*, 157.

<sup>54</sup> *The Varieties*, 157.

<sup>55</sup> *The Varieties*, 178.

<sup>56</sup> *The Varieties*, 178-179.

<sup>57</sup> *The Varieties*, 187.

<sup>58</sup> *The Varieties*, 192.

<sup>59</sup> *The Varieties*, 197.

<sup>60</sup> *The Varieties*, 110.

<sup>61</sup> *The Varieties*, 100

<sup>62</sup> *The Varieties*, 149.

<sup>63</sup> James did not think all forms of insanity were the product of successful unification. He thought it just as likely that individuals whose threshold for mental disruption was particularly low could succumb to madness, but James seems comfortable with the existence of different inroads to many of these mental phenomena.

For discussions of madness and genius see *Varieties*, 37 & 360.

For a discussion of madness & melancholy see *Varieties*, 183-186.

<sup>64</sup> *The Varieties*, 284.

<sup>65</sup> *The Varieties*, 263.

<sup>66</sup> *The Varieties*, 361.