



# WILLIAM JAMES STUDIES

Spring 2025 • Volume 20 • 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: Shawn Welch, University of Michigan

Managing Editor: Lainey Griffith, University of North Texas

Book Editor: Richard Joines

Periodicals Editor: Jordan Williamson, University of North Carolina

**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](mailto:submissions@williamjamesstudies.org). 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 17<sup>th</sup> edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* and include a bibliography and endnotes (we do not accept footnotes). 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. There should also be no references in the paper 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 Richard Joines, Book Review Editor.

**Contact Information**

All inquiries should be directed to the General Editor, Shawn Welch, at [editor@williamjamesstudies.org](mailto:editor@williamjamesstudies.org).

WILLIAM JAMES STUDIES  
SPRING 2025 • VOLUME 20 • NUMBER 1

CONTENT

Front Matter

**PRESS ADDRESS**

Nicholas A. Covino; Gabrielle Palmer: *Becoming William James College.* 1

**CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY FOR  
THE ADVANCEMENT OF AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY,  
BOSTON, 2024**

Justin Bell: *Depression and Pragmatism: Biology, Nonoptimal Societies, and Feeling Bad When We Should Not.* 20

Nate Whelan-Jackson: *Habitats of Madness.* 39

Heather Keith: *Resilience Beyond Diagnosis in a Jamesian-influenced Model of Intellectual Disability: Pluralism, Valor, and (Neuro)Diversity.* 63

**BOOK REVIEWS**

Review of Philip Davis, *William James.* 75

Review of Clifford S. Stagoll, *Transforming One's Self: The Therapeutic Ethical Pragmatism of William James.* 83

Review of *The Pragmatist Challenge: Pragmatist Metaphysics for Philosophy of Science.* 92

**PERIODICALS**

Related Scholarly Publications: Fall 2024 - Spring 2025 98

# BECOMING WILLIAM JAMES COLLEGE



*NICHOLAS A. COVINO, PsyD*  
President, William James College, Newton, Massachusetts

*GABRIELLE PALMER, CAGS*  
Alumna, William James College



At the start of his lectures on *Pragmatism*, William James quotes GK Chesterton who said:

There are some people—and I am one of them—who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe. We think that for a landlady considering a lodger, it is important to know his income, but still more important to know his philosophy. We think that for a general about to fight an enemy, it is important to know the enemy's numbers, but still more important to know the enemy's philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

An institution of higher learning considering a name change has a similar need.

### SCHOOLS OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY (SPPs)

Modern psychology has its roots in the history of philosophy, but most graduate programs in clinical psychology emphasize a foundation in experimental science and academic instruction. Research university programs in clinical psychology prioritize the acquisition of new knowledge regarding cognition, emotion, behavior, learning, memory, child development, and, most recently, brain behavior. Historically, doctoral students in clinical psychology have spent their time pursuing coursework, supporting departmental research, and conducting university teaching, with some programs, only more recently, creating time for clinical practice. Following decades where most PhD psychologists did very little teaching and published one academic paper in their career, if that, the American Psychological Association (APA) became interested in exploring a new training model for professional practice.<sup>2</sup>

In 1973, the *National Conference on Levels and Patterns of Professional Training in Psychology* (The Vail Conference) convened. The social context of this conference was highly influenced by issues related to the mental health and professional needs of underserved racially and culturally diverse people and of

women who were then a minority of psychology professionals. Prior to the meeting, the Black Student Psychological Association petitioned the APA Council of Representatives to create more meaningful curricula and clinical experiences to equip psychologists to work competently in the Black community. A Task Force on the Status of Women in Psychology challenged the APA to enfranchise women as full members of the profession.<sup>3 4</sup> There was a general consensus among psychologists, captured in APA president Dr. George Albee's 1970 address, that the profession was failing to address urgent problems related to racism, sexism, poverty, and the abuse of power by merely researching these issues but not applying interventions to improve them.<sup>5</sup> In the same address, Albee pointed to the handful of emerging professional schools in California, Illinois, and New York as promising alternatives for psychology education. The stage was set for change.

Delegates to the Vail Conference discussed revisions in training related to admission criteria, faculty models, curricula, and the importance of community engagement. Close ties with the community were prioritized to allow social needs and professional opportunities to inform curricula and student development. Practical training requirements were positioned as an opportunity for students to learn while bringing psychological services to under-resourced communities. The new initiatives were expected to improve the recruitment, mentorship, and careers of women and those from underrepresented groups. Degree programs at multiple levels were proposed to bring a range of skilled practitioners to address a wide range of mental health needs.<sup>4</sup>

Two of the main recommendations focused on the creation of *Schools of Professional Psychology* (SPPs) that would award a PsyD as the terminal degree for professionals pursuing careers in direct service. These schools were to emphasize experiential education, hire practitioner faculty to integrate clinical experience into the classroom, and evaluate these professors by more diverse criteria than research productivity. The conference boldly concluded that the disproportionate reliance on grade point average (GPA) and Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores had "proven to be inadequate at providing society with culturally diverse, socially responsive, and professionally sensitive psychologists."<sup>4</sup> Instead, they advised selecting humanitarian students with strong social

values, interpersonal skills, cultural sensitivity, and a broader range of academic achievement.

In August of 1976, nineteen professional psychology programs from universities and independent institutions were organized into the National Council of Schools of Professional Psychology (NCSPP).<sup>6</sup> The California School of Professional Psychology was the first “free-standing” institution in the country with independent schools in four cities under the auspice of the California Psychological Association. Many of the Vail Conference guidelines regarding hiring practitioner faculty, awarding a PsyD degree, enrolling humanitarian and socially skilled students with a range of academic scores, emphasizing community-based practica, and integrating experiential education with psychological theory were quickly implemented. For decades, however, most SPPs offered only one doctoral degree, enrolled few Black Indigenous Persons of Color (BIPOC) as students,<sup>7</sup> published limited outcome studies of the new pedagogical model, conducted few community-based needs assessments, and primarily attracted students with aspirations to become psychotherapists.

In those early years, NCSPP members prioritized refining their pedagogical model, acquiring APA accreditation, attracting students, and achieving financial stability. Annual meetings and professional publications focused on the competencies that professional psychologists should possess and how these should be taught and assessed in SPP.<sup>8</sup> More than a few articles by traditional psychologists criticized the national licensing exam scores of SPP graduates, the programs’ large class sizes, and limited faculty scholarship.<sup>9</sup> Supporters replied that PhD students with strong Graduate Record Exam scores would be expected to perform well on a similar achievement test, and that other professions (e.g., medicine, law, business) enroll large classes and prefer the acumen of a practitioner faculty rather than that of researchers with limited clinical experience.<sup>10</sup>

## **MSPP**

The Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology (MSPP) enrolled its first class of forty-seven doctoral students in September



of 1977. These pioneers, both faculty and students, faced the daunting task of creating curricula, syllabi, policies, procedures, field sites, accreditation applications, and a learning community, while hiring faculty, securing space, and attracting students. While there were resources and models available from the newly established NCSPP, creating a school *de novo* took creativity, patience, and persistence. MSPP founders and faculty created the conditions to successfully petition the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to award the doctoral degree (1980), then to successfully become accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (1984), but it took ten years to receive provisional (1987) and fourteen (1991) for full accreditation by the APA.

Most university SPPs had enrollment expectations that covered operating expenses, but the independent schools were generally self-supporting and tuition dependent. Near the end of the century, they were all struggling financially. In 2001, the four California Schools of Professional Psychology incorporated into Alliant University to improve operations and reduce expenses. The Illinois School of Professional Psychology formed the for-profit Argosy University that held a dozen national PsyD programs until its demise. In 2002, the six APA approved independent schools (Adler, Chicago, Forest, Massachusetts, Palo Alto, and Wright) were experiencing critical financial challenges, lacked sufficient funds to support salaries, services, and infrastructure, and four of these occupied inadequate (or inappropriate) facilities.<sup>11</sup> The presidents of these institutions met monthly for several years and worked with faculty and staff to redesign their schools. The unfulfilled recommendations of the Vail Conference provided a blueprint for growth with an emphasis on offering multilevel programs, community engagement, and creating a more racially and culturally diverse student body. While expansion and inclusion were not easily achieved, a sense of urgency and the support of these independent presidents facilitated the required change.

At MSPP, faculty models, employee benefits, payroll services, and a variety of business systems needed to be developed. A parallel process addressed instruction, recruiting, institutional governance, academic policies, and accreditation. Larger classes were admitted to the PsyD clinical program, yet the GRE scores of admitted

students rose more than one-half standard deviation, academic programs received maximum accreditation for the first time, and students improved their scores on the national licensing exam. A revised mission statement envisioned MSPP as “a preeminent school of psychology that integrates rigorous academic instruction with extensive field education and close attention to professional development” and assuming “an ongoing social responsibility to create programs to educate specialists of many disciplines to meet the evolving mental health needs of society.” Core values of Experiential Education, Social Responsibility, and Personal Growth were articulated to support the educational work. A tagline called for the school to be Meeting the Need...Making a Difference. All of these were connecting points to the philosophy of William James.

New academic programs in School Psychology, Clinical Mental Health Counseling, Applied Behavior Analysis, Organizational Psychology, Leadership Psychology, and Human Services embraced the Vail recommendations that psychology professionals be educated at many degree levels. Specialty training and affinity groups for Veterans, Latinx, Asian, Black, and LGBTQ+ attracted a more diverse student body who contributed to and benefitted from an increased programmatic presence in these communities. As the prevalence of anxiety, depression, substance use disorders and racism reached critical levels, especially among young people, certificate training for teachers, school administrators, police personnel, other first responders, and college professors expanded mental health competence among non-clinicians, enhancing the primary prevention care of mental illness. Closer involvement with the community stimulated the opportunity to create a service-learning year to attract recent college graduates into the field and to create professional training opportunities for behavioral health organizations to recruit, retain, and promote their declining workforce.

It would be inspirational to report that MSPP’s leadership intentionally planned to become William James College, but the true story is a bit uncanny. A move to a more modern building in 2014 made it clear that this “best kept secret” in psychology education needed to raise its profile and increase its marketing efforts. NCSPP’s membership had evolved to include colleges and schools within a university, degree programs within a larger psychology

department, allied independent schools within a for-profit and non-profit systems, and free-standing independent entities.<sup>12</sup> When SPPs were described, it was most likely the PsyD clinical program that was being discussed and not the Vail model. After more than a decade of expansion, MSPP had become a very different entity from its origins and from its NCSPP contemporaries. It had a priority to attract and support BIPOC students, an investment in educating existing community mental health workers, and primary prevention educational programs for non-psychology professionals. Two of MSPP's independent peers assumed the title of university, one went out of business, and another dropped the "of professional psychology" descriptor in its title. Being known as a "school" offered little clarity, since there are many types and levels of these. Some felt that MSPP would need to have an athletic team and residence halls to be considered a university. But, with examples from other graduate professions that adopted the title of college (e.g., Optometry, Law, Health Professions), an initial discussion was held with the Commissioner of Higher Education to discuss that designation. The Commissioner could not have been more understanding or more supportive.

As a committee of stakeholders and branding professionals began exploring options for advancing MSPP, a postcard from a London shirtmaker arrived in the mailbox of the senior author. It was, however, addressed to Mr. William James. Since nobody with that name had ever lived at that address, it prompted the thought: "William James, Father of American Psychology, the Principles of Psychology, Talks to Teachers, Varieties of Religious Experience, Pragmatism...what a great naming opportunity!" There is a William James Hall at Harvard, but it wasn't clear if there were any institutions of higher learning with James's name. A quick search online revealed a William James College among a small cluster of semi-autonomous colleges in Michigan that predated Grand Valley State University (GVSU). Archived videos of faculty and students from that time describe an institution that focused on the future of society, student careers, and personal development, but not psychology. While it seemed to be both beloved and innovative, it was unfortunately closed after twelve years when GVSU was incorporated in 1983. It next seemed important to approach the James Family for their blessing, but the direction for that wasn't

clear. Another online search identified Dr. Linda Simon, a professor at Skidmore who had recently finished writing *Genuine Reality: A life of William James*. Amazingly, she picked up the phone and was very encouraging. Dr. Simon identified Ms. Bay James as someone who helped her with her book and who served as the custodian of William and Henry James's writings. A connection was made to Ms. James through the librarian at the Harvard Littauer Library. Ms. James said that her family had been worried that their ancestor was becoming forgotten and that they would likely welcome the opportunity to learn more about this naming opportunity. Shortly after, a letter of support came from the James family, and not long after that another postcard addressed to William James arrived at the home address. The branding group decided unanimously to change the name of the school to William James College after only an hour of discussion. The Department of Education approved the name change following an open meeting scheduled by the Commissioner for 3:30 on a rainy Wednesday afternoon before Thanksgiving. Adding to the uncanny, one of the earliest recipients of an honorary degree from William James College raised his family at James's former home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Since then, that mailbox has not received any further communications for Dr. James.

### TIES TO WILLIAM JAMES

The writings of William James as well as his professional life made him a very attractive namesake. Most compelling for a college devoted to instruction in applied psychology is his distinction as "Father of American Psychology." Such an appellation leaves little doubt about the nature of the institution and its business. James's decision to leave his Harvard laboratory to be run by Hugo Munsterberg, as well as his famous reflections on the limitations of experimental research career, fit the sentiments of many of the faculty members.<sup>13</sup> The commitment and courage that James demonstrated to Mary Whiton Calkins at Harvard<sup>14</sup> were valued as indications of his sense of social justice, his affirmation of women, and his willingness to stand up to authority and traditional norms. Most importantly, James's seminal work on *Pragmatism* (1907) mirrored the priority that APA president Albee and the Vail

Conference placed upon using psychology not as a vehicle for researching social problems, but to make a difference in the lives of people who were suffering from them.

What you want is a philosophy that will not only exercise your powers of intellectual abstraction, but that will make some positive connection with this actual world of finite human lives.<sup>15</sup>

No particular results, then, so far, but only an attitude of orientation, is what the pragmatic method means. The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.<sup>16</sup>

While a few critics wrote to express disapproval, William James College was an excellent fit for the mission and vision of the school. Several of the common theories of psychotherapy taught at SPP's (e.g., Cognitive-Behavioral, Humanistic, and Psychodynamic) resonate with James's writings and appealed to the faculty.

### COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL THERAPY

(CBT) has many of its bedrock principles in James's *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (1899). Teachers were told that educated persons have developed a collection of abstract concepts, mental habits, and learned behaviors that enable them to quickly understand expectations and flexibly adapt to new experiences. Although James allows that "A teacher who succeeds in getting herself loved by the pupils will obtain results which one of a more forbidding temperament finds it impossible to secure,"<sup>17</sup> he likens teaching to a battle.

In war, all you have to do is work your enemy into a position from which the natural obstacles prevent him from escaping if he tries to; then to fall on him in numbers superior to his own, at a moment when you have led him to think you are far away; and so, with a minimum of exposure of your own

troops, to hack his forces to pieces, and take the remainder prisoners.<sup>18</sup>

James describes education as the “organization of acquired habits of conduct and tendencies of behavior.”<sup>19</sup> The end game of learning for him is less to enable the student to contemplate some eternal truth, but more to increase efficiency through reflexive responses and to lessen indecision. In the manner of behavioral psychologists, he encourages teachers never to forget that “no reception is without reaction, no impression is without correlative expression,” as the mind works to enable the person to adapt to the environment. Teachers are encouraged to take any kind of behavior, good or bad, that the student offers and mold it to a more desired, efficient, and reliable one. Likewise, in the mode of classical conditioning, students are encouraged to increase their capacity to remember and to automate their responses more efficiently when instructors “build up useful systems of associations in the pupils mind.”<sup>20</sup> Later he says: “Any object not interesting in itself may become interesting though becoming associated with an object in which an interest already exists.”<sup>21</sup> Making connections between a student’s native tendency or personal interests and new information builds a repertoire of knowledge and responses that save work, relieves the mind of holding many details, and allows room for other mental processes. All these approaches to students resemble the psychological interventions of classical, operant, and cognitive treatments.

James’s theory on emotions resonates with cognitive-behavioral interventions that emphasize the interconnection of physiology, thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. Unlike current CBT theorists, James gives the primary position to sensations in the body that the person subsequently labels as feeling, such as when a bear is encountered, the person scans the surrounding area, runs, experiences shortness of breath, and a rapid heartbeat, all of which is labeled fear. “Our natural way of thinking about these coarser emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression. My theory, on the contrary, is that *the bodily changes directly follow the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur* IS the

*emotion.*"<sup>22</sup> Despite the difference in position, the interplay of experience, physiology, cognition, and emotion and the various psychotherapeutic approaches to emotional distress are significant connecting points for modern cognitive-behavioral psychologists with Dr. James.

Humanistic psychologists can find an abundance of links to James. While not regarded as a principal figure in this tradition, James's concern with topics such as free will, self-development, religious experience, creativity, and hope position him as a significant contributor.<sup>23</sup> His focus on the whole person, use of self-reflection, and emphasis on pragmatism are closely mirrored by humanistic psychologists. This discipline, which developed as an alternative to behaviorism's reliance on experimental data and the preoccupation of psychoanalysis with psychopathology, finds a kindred spirit in James's prioritization of the human experience.

James presents a complex definition of humanism:

The essential service of humanism, as I conceive the situation, is to have seen that though one part of our experience may lean upon another part to make it what it is in any one of several aspects in which it may be considered, experience as a whole is self-containing and leans on nothing.<sup>24</sup>

A "p-value" does not determine truth, but it is the experience of the individual and the object's contribution to existence.

If a novel experience, conceptual or perceptual, contradicts too emphatically our preexistent system of beliefs, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it is treated as false. Only when the older and the newer experiences are congruous enough to mutually apperceive and modify each other, does what we treat as an advance in truth result.<sup>25</sup>

In the preface to his sequel on *Pragmatism*, the critical role of the individual as validator is made clear:

Truth, I there say, is a property of certain of our ideas. It means their agreement, as falsity means their disagreement

with reality...the pragmatist's insistence that the truth of an idea or a belief is also dependent upon the difference that it makes in a person's life. Pragmatism asks its usual question. 'Grant an idea or belief to be true,'" it says, 'what concrete difference will its being true make in any one's actual life? What experiences [may] be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? How will the truth be realized? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?'<sup>26</sup>

The primary role of the human being is then summarized in the following: "True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot...Truth happens to an idea."<sup>27</sup>

Humanistic psychologists agree with William James that human beings are agentic meaning-makers, psychology is not limited to psychotherapy, truth is not the province of experimental science, and that what does not advance the human condition is not of much value.

Psychoanalysis was in the process of emerging as Dr. James was ending his career and at the end of his life. At the famous convening of psychologists at Clark University by James's student G. Stanely Hall in 1909, Freud's biographer Ernst Jones quotes Dr. James saying to Dr. Freud that "the future of psychology belongs to your work."<sup>28</sup> However, there isn't much data to suggest that Freud drew much from James's writings. The two men were medically trained, visionary intellects, prolific writers, and major contributors to the nascent discipline of psychology. Both had an acute interest in consciousness and unconscious processes, and emotion, but Freud's emphasis on conflict, defense, and psychosexual stages of development reportedly seemed irreligious and dogmatic to James.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, James's stream of consciousness resembles the psychoanalytic technique of free association.

I wish now to continue the description of the peculiarities of the stream of consciousness by asking whether we can in any intelligible way assign its functions. It has two functions that are obvious; it leads to knowledge, and it leads to action.<sup>30</sup>



James wrote little about diversity, although the issue of racism could not have been more obvious in his lifetime. His seeming neglect of this important area might have been due to his pragmatic sense that “no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp.”<sup>31</sup> and that our best efforts at morality simply position us to be reflective, sympathetic, open to the suffering of others, and to arrive at our own truth. Nonetheless, there are ways that he engaged with this suffering. “God be praised.” writes WEB DuBois, “I became a devoted follower of James at the time that he was developing his pragmatic philosophy and he guided me out of the sterilities of scholastic philosophy to realistic pragmatism.”<sup>32</sup> But, there are no stories of DuBois enjoying any relationship that differed from those that James had with many Harvard students and guests in his home. James did not serve in the Civil War, but several members of his family did, and one was severely wounded. He gave the principal oration at the dedication of the Shaw Memorial in Boston that recognized the heroism and service during the Civil War of the Fifty-fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Infantry. These were the first group of Black men from Massachusetts who distinguished themselves as highly trained and courageous soldiers.

“There on foot go the dark outcasts, so true to nature that one can almost hear them breathing as they march,” Dr. James said in his address. “...There they march, warm-blooded champions of a better day for man. There on horseback, among them, in his very habit as he lived, sits the blue-eyed child of fortune...Onward they move together, a single resolution kindled in their eyes, and animating their otherwise so different frames.”<sup>33</sup>

While not taking a position on the morality of slavery or the war, James was sympathetic and aware of the events of the time and the unique heroism of these soldiers and he “showed up” at this important event and time.

## CONCLUSION

As we celebrate our 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, William James’s philosophy and his view of the universe continue to serve our College quite well.

Guided by a vision that emphasizes experiential education as the foundation to form a self-reflective, socially responsible, and compassionate professional, our pedagogy aligns closely with James's philosophy and his values. As the leaders of the Vail Conference wished, the curricula and programs at William James College are evolving to meet the developing psychosocial needs of society. Currently more than 40% of our student body identifies as BIPOC, the College awards a bachelor's completion and eight graduate degrees along with five academic certificates. The College has taken a leadership role in helping schools and behavioral health agencies to attract and retain the multicultural workforce that the country desperately needs. Originally offering only one program training clinical psychologists, the College now trains organizational leaders, counselors, school and other mental health personnel, along with K-12 educators, educational administrators, executive coaches, police and first responders, and college professors who provide primary prevention interventions to improve mental health. Scholars of William James will see many more connections between his writings and the values and work of this College than cited here, but his emphasis on applying psychology where it is needed to make a practical difference in human life inspires this institution.

The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. All realities influence our practice, and that influence is their meaning for us. It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence. No difference anywhere that doesn't make a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and sometime.<sup>34</sup>

It is our hope and our expectation that who we are and what we do by advancing mental health reflects well on his legacy.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

- Aanstoos, Christopher. "The Relevance of Humanistic Psychology." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 43, no. 1 (2003): 121-132. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167803043003010>
- Albee, George W. "The uncertain future of clinical psychology." *American Psychologist*, 25, no. 12 (1970): 1071–1080. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0030393>
- American Psychological Association, "Accredited internship and postdoctoral programs for training in psychology: 2007." *American Psychologist*, 63 (2007): 1016–1040.
- Buhler, Charlotte. "Basic theoretical concepts of humanistic psychology." *American Psychologist*, 26, no. 4 (1971): 378–386. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0032049>
- Calkins, Mary W. "Mary Whiton Calkins." *A history of psychology in autobiography*. Edited by C. Murchison. Clark University Press; Russell & Russell/Atheneum Publishers. Vol. 1 (1930): 31-62. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11401-002>
- Campbell, James T. "Du Bois and James." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 28, no. 3 (1992): 569-581. Bloomington; Indiana University Press.
- Cornish, Jennifer AE, & Smith, Randyl D. "Reflections on the EPPP: A commentary on Sharpless and Barber." *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*. 40 no. 4 (2009): 341–344. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015412>
- Duffy Farifteh F, Wilk Joshua, West Joyce C, et al. "Mental health practitioners and trainees." *Mental health, United States*. Edited by RW Manderscheid & MJ Henderson 2002: 327-368; DHHS Publication No. SMA 04- 3938). Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse

and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, 2004.

Evans, Rand B. "William James, The Principles of Psychology and Experimental Psychology." *The American Journal of Psychology*, 103 no. 4 (1990): 433–447.

James, William. "The Essence of Humanism." *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 1 no. 25 (1904): 673–687.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism* (1909). Harvard University Press, 1975.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Edited by Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Introduction by H. S. Thayer. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1975.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Pragmatism and Other Writings*. Edited by Giles Gunn. New York: Penguin Random House, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Principles of Psychology, Volume I*. Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Introduction by Rand B. Evans and Gerald E. Myers. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1981.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*. Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Introduction by Gerald E. Myers. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1983.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Will to Believe: The Works of William James*, ed. F.H. Burkhardt and I.K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979. (Original work published in 1897).

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Writings of William James, 1878-1899*. Edited by Frederick H. Myers. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1931.

Jones, Ernest. *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*. Edited by Steven Marcus and Lionel Trilling. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964.

Korman, Maurice. *Levels and Patterns of Professional Training in Psychology*. American Psychological Association 1976. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10047-000>

\_\_\_\_\_. "National conference on levels and patterns of professional training in psychology: The major themes." *American Psychologist*, 29 no. 6 (1974): 441-449. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0036469>

Myers, Gerald E. "James and Freud." *Journal of Philosophy* 87 no. 11 (1990): 593-599.

Peterson, Donald R. "Need for the doctor of psychology degree in professional psychology." *American Psychologist*, 31 no. 11 (1976): 792-798. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.31.11.792>

Peterson, Rodger. L., Peterson, Donald. R., Abrams, Jules. C., et al. "The National Council of Schools and Programs of Professional Psychology: Educational Model 2009." *Competency-based education for professional psychology*. Edited by M. B. Kenkel & R. L. Peterson. (pp. 13-42). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/12068-001>

Stob, Paul. "Lonely Courage, Commemorative Confrontation, and Communal Therapy: William James Remembers the Massachusetts 54th." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 98 no. 3 (2012): 249-271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2012.691173>

Stricker, G., & Cummings, N. A., "The professional school movement." *History of Psychotherapy: A Century of Change*. Edited by D. K. Freedheim, H. J. Freudenberger, J. W. Kessler, S. B. Messer, D. R. Peterson, H. H. Strupp, & P. L. Wachtel (pp. 801-828). American Psychological Association, 1992. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10110-024>

Templer, Donald, Arikawa, Hiroko. "Concerns about professional schools." *American Psychologist*, 59 no.7 (2004): 646–647. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.59.7.646>

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> James, *Pragmatism and other Writings*. ed. Giles Gunn, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Peterson, DR, "Need for the doctor of psychology degree in professional psychology," 792.

<sup>3</sup> Korman, *National Conference on Levels and Patterns of Professional Training in Psychology: The Major Themes*.

<sup>4</sup> Korman, *Levels and patterns of professional training in psychology*.

<sup>5</sup> Albee, "The uncertain future of clinical psychology," 1071.

<sup>6</sup> American Psychological Association. "Accredited internship and postdoctoral programs for training in psychology: 2007," 1016.

<sup>7</sup> Duffy et al., "Mental health practitioners and trainees," 327.

<sup>8</sup> Peterson, RL, "The National Council of Schools and Programs of Professional Psychology: Educational Model 2009," 13.

<sup>9</sup> Templer, "Concerns about professional schools," 646.

<sup>10</sup> Cornish, "Reflections on the EPPP: A commentary on Sharpless and Barber," 341.

<sup>11</sup> Striker and Cummings, "The Professional School Movement," 801.

<sup>12</sup> Peterson, RL, "The National Council of Schools and Programs of Professional Psychology: Educational Model 2009," 13.

<sup>13</sup> Evans, "William James," 443.

<sup>14</sup> Calkins, "Mary Whiton Calkins," 31.

<sup>15</sup> James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> James, 29

<sup>17</sup> James, *The Writings of William James*, 740.

<sup>18</sup> James, 718.

<sup>19</sup> James, 730.

- <sup>20</sup> James, 761.
- <sup>21</sup> James, 767.
- <sup>22</sup> James, *Principles of Psychology, Volume I*, 18.
- <sup>23</sup> Buhler, C, “Basic theoretical concepts of humanistic psychology,” 378.
- <sup>24</sup> Aanstoos, “The Relevance of Humanistic Psychology,” 121.
- <sup>25</sup> James, “The Essence of Humanism,” 121-135.
- <sup>26</sup> James, *Pragmatism and other Writings*, 135.
- <sup>27</sup> James, *Pragmatism and other Writings*, 135.
- <sup>28</sup> Jones, E, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*.
- <sup>29</sup> Myers, G, *James and Freud*, 593.
- <sup>30</sup> James, *The Writings of William James*, 726.
- <sup>31</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” in *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, 478.
- <sup>32</sup> Campbell, J., “Du Bois and James,” 569.
- <sup>33</sup> Stob, P, “Lonely Courage, Commemorative Confrontation, and Communal Therapy: William James Remembers the Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup>,” 249.
- <sup>34</sup> James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, 24.

# DEPRESSION AND PRAGMATISM: BIOLOGY, NONOPTIMAL SOCIETIES, AND FEELING BAD WHEN WE SHOULD NOT

*JUSTIN BELL*

University of Houston - Victoria

[bellj1@uhv.edu](mailto:bellj1@uhv.edu)



Depression presents an example of how a human response is made into a disabling condition under specific social circumstances. Many evolutionary psychologists have argued that depression evolved as an important response to the environment that allows for particular sorts of social reflection, self-understanding, and reintegration. At least some of the time, depression becomes disabling when social conditions do not allow for the reactions and growth that depression occasions to occur. Contemporary social, economic, and technological conditions tend to isolate, not integrate, individuals. This means that a response that was conditioned by the environments humans evolved in no longer has an appropriate outlet in the unintelligent environments we have created. I will argue that understanding depression in this way give us clues and methods to ameliorate contemporary problems such that we can more intelligently control our environment for growth and happiness.





The position that society's structure is a factor in what creates disability is nothing new. Indeed, it constitutes a central aspect of many theories of disability—the social model of disability first and foremost.<sup>1</sup> Of course other theories of disability recognize that social construction plays at least some role in disabling individuals.<sup>2</sup> Rightly so.<sup>3</sup> The pragmatist philosopher who is interested in ameliorating experienced problems should take note. The way that we organize institutions of government, business, and school are obvious avenues to create a more inclusive world. We disable people through exclusion and not because bodies are “wrong.” Indeed, often very normal aspects of the human body are, in less-than-ideal social situations, turned into disability. Take for example, aging. Barring early death, we all age, but often the way society is constructed means that the process of aging becomes disabling because of features about the world that are not conducive to slower reflexes, achy hands, or fatigue. Depression presents an interesting example of how a natural human response is often made into a disabling condition under specific social circumstances. While pathological instances of depression certainly exist—such as when neurotransmitters are deficient due to chronic conditions or other physiological causes, my focus here is on how society occasions at least some depression. My claim is that some depression can be explained by social and technological factors which are potentially under our collective control. Put another way, at least some depression is caused by social conditions which do not have to be the way they are and thus there is unnecessary suffering in at least some cases. The answer to this is deliberate and intelligent control over our social and technological environment. I want to be clear that I am not rejecting responsible therapeutic or pharmacological intervention. I am discussing changing society such that there is less depression—not abandoning those who suffer.

Alain Ehrenberg points out in his *The Weariness of the Self* that depression has always presented a problem for mental health because there are clear cases where depression is justified for an otherwise healthy person. When bad things happen, it makes sense to be depressed. However, there are also cases where it is a symptom of other problems or cases where there is no apparent external cause.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, there has been some historical controversy about

whether or not depression even constitutes a mental illness. Early clinicians pointed out that being depressed is a normal reaction to certain bad experiences. If I was not depressed after a great loss, that itself would point to questionable mental health. Many evolutionary psychologists have argued that depression evolved as an important response to the environment that allows for particular sorts of social reflection, self-understanding, and reintegration into the community.<sup>5</sup> It is only more recently that depression has become conceived of as a disease. Ehrenberg argues that most of the pathologization of depression as a disease has to do with the commercial availability of antidepressive medication.<sup>6</sup> The advent of these medications allows those who suffer from depression to enjoy some relief.

Striking a middle ground, my argument is that there is not a clear either/or about depression as an illness or as a response to a less-than-optimal environment. At least some of the time, depression becomes disabling when social conditions do not allow for the reactions and growth that depression occasions to occur. Contemporary social, economic, and technological conditions in the developed world tend to isolate, not integrate, individuals. This means that a response that was conditioned by the environments humans evolved in no longer has an appropriate outlet in the unintelligent environments we have created. To simplify, just as the cardiovascular system did not evolve to be in a cubicle, neither did human emotional responses. There are objectively depressing things that occur in life, and it is perfectly reasonable to be depressed by them. There are at least some cases where the “cure” to depression is not in how we medicate individuals but rather in how we structure social interaction, technologies, and infrastructure. My claim is that it should not be a mystery about why depression is common in the developed world. That is why we are depressed despite many immediate problems such as security, nutrition, and comfort having been mitigated. It is a lack of felt community and interaction—such as we might get from a truly deep democracy—that occasions depression in a social context. Moreover, a society that isolates people does little to allow depression to find resolution. I will argue that understanding at least some instances of depression through a lens informed by evolutionary psychology will uncover possibilities that give us clues and methods to ameliorate technological and

social problems such that we can more intelligently control our environment resulting in growth and happiness. Importantly, I will conclude that at least some socially-conditioned depression can be ameliorated if we pay attention to the way we use tools and techniques—technology—to create meaningful interaction.

### EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY ON DEPRESSION

Evolutionary psychiatrists have asserted that depression, as well as a number of other psychiatric disorders, are at least partially explained by a divergence between the environment human beings evolved in and the realities of everyday life. The specific situations human beings evolved in (namely in small groups in the African savanna) involved different demands and stressors than exist now. There is at least some evidence that depression is evolutionarily advantageous for organisms with strong social connections such as human beings. Indeed, all human beings get depressed and for good reasons. It would be disturbingly out of the ordinary to not be depressed over the death of a loved one. It would also be likely that creatures who are not disturbed by the loss of a loved one would have weaker social connections and would be less likely to form cohesive social groups—social groups necessary for survival for creatures like human beings. There are also cases of pathological depression (diagnosed in several ways but often as major depression) wherein individuals are depressed for no discernible environmental reason. I want to reiterate that I am not addressing those forms of depression. However, some evolutionary psychiatrists have suggested that there are cases of depression that we pathologize which have very clear social or environmental explanations. In these cases, we are not dealing with a brain that produces too little serotonin or dopamine *without a reason*; we are dealing with organisms who are mismatched with intransigent social conditions. What I want to propose is that there are cases of depression we pathologize that look more like justifiable depression. Not dissimilar to the social model of disability, these are cases where social norms, expectations, and structures cause what we end up pathologizing. And like the social model of disability, addressing the deeply systemic features of society that are disabling or depressing requires collective action.

In a series of articles, Rudolph Neese argues that the high cost of emotions for an organism is a sign that they “are set to maximize Darwinian fitness, not happiness.”<sup>7</sup> He argues that depression is an emotional response that signals to a person that they are living in a suboptimal social environment. The attention and inquiry that depression demands, he argues, elicits social inquiry that demands changing reactions to find a more optimal way to respond to an environment. For human beings this environment is specifically a social environment given the extreme sociality and interdependency of humans. Depression is a signal for an individual to reconsider and rethink their situation such that they can reintegrate into a community—and communities are obviously important for human beings to successfully pass their genes along to a new generation. Thus, the pain of depression should occur when there is a rupture in the social fabric and signal to an individual to reintegrate themselves. Isolation is depressing for a reason. Neese argues that humans evolved depression so that social bonds would be stronger and rebuilt when they are broken. Thus, we are depressed when we are excluded, when we suffer a loss, or when we have social conflicts—and the pain of depression drives us to re-integration.

Conceived of in this way, depression is not terribly different from a pain response. If I sit on a nail, the pain I feel is positive insofar as it makes me move away from the nail and the damage it is doing. Not feeling pain, such as we see with individuals with congenital insensitivity, has tremendously bad consequences due to constant and continual injury. Just imagine how much damage we would do to ourselves if we didn't adjust to slight discomforts regularly. Slight discomforts that would otherwise signal a need to move (or even slightly readjust) can result in tremendous injury over time. In more extreme cases, pain signals us to stop doing things that are immediately causing us harm. While the pain itself is unpleasant, having it allows me to respond to the dangers of the environment and pass on my genes. Similar to depression, there can be instances where pain becomes a pathological problem—such as feeling pain when there is not an immediate problem. And like depression, just because there are cases where pain goes wrong, we ought not think that all pain is a bad thing. Hence the title of Neese's article, “What Good is Feeling Bad?” Feeling bad is good because we should sometimes feel bad to survive.

What we see here is that Darwinian fitness does not care if I or anyone else is particularly happy. Instead, sometimes being unhappy is going to mean more success in passing along genetic material. Pain is unpleasant and makes me unhappy but the fact that it exists gives me great motivation to change course, survive, and potentially have offspring. Darwinian fitness is not a recipe to be pleasant or happy but rather a means by which individuals have a better shot at procreation. Depression works the same way by signaling that the depressed organism is not doing something optimal. To continue the analogy, chronic pain becomes a pathological problem when some regulatory mechanism is out of control. Put another way, chronic pain is pain that no longer signals that I should get off the sharp nail but is felt in the absence of environmental conditions which I need to consider. Major depression occurs when “defects in regulatory mechanisms cause much suffering, probably including panic, obsessions/major depression—conditions [Neese] view[s] as true diseases caused by abnormal regulation mechanisms.”<sup>8</sup> however, the fact remains that depression is a mood that “regulates the allocation of resources. ... Low mood withdraws investments from wasted enterprises.”<sup>9</sup> While depression is certainly not pleasant, it makes sense that it would exist as a means by which an organism could receive signals from the environment.

I would stop here to point out that while pain or depression have perfectly natural explanations, that does not warrant us ignoring either. It is not hyperbole to say that paying attention to depression is lifesaving. While it is helpful to receive pain from that aforementioned nail to change my behavior I would still like an analgesic. Similarly, if the less than optimal social circumstances I live in are depressing then that deserves serious inquiry into changing the situation. Finally, while issues of medication for mental illness are certainly fraught, I will simply assert for the sake of this argument that medication is an individual choice people should be able to make. I do not want to imply callousness about real suffering. Only to point out that there are evolutionary reasons why we would have responses like we have.

Following in the vein of Neese, Paul J. Watson and Paul W. Andrews suggest what they call the Social Navigation Hypothesis. The Social Navigation Hypothesis asserts that:

Depression plays two complementary roles in dealing with particularly important and troublesome social problems by (1) focusing limited cognitive resources on planning ways out of complex social problems and (2) motivating close social partners (friends, mates, family) to provide problem-solving help and concessions, especially in cases where they are initially reluctant to do so.<sup>10</sup> They find depressives are more focused on negative social feedback.<sup>11</sup> They write:

Depressives often outperform non-depressives on difficult tasks that tap social problem-solving skills, and are more accurate than non-depressives in judging the control they have over contingent outcomes. Depressives may be cognitively primed to accurately judge their degree of control over contingent outcomes, because planning a successful solution to a social problem often depends on accurately assessing their degree of control over others.<sup>12</sup>

What I take from these insights is twofold. First off, it is interesting that a different sort of cognition occurs while depressed. In other places I have argued that this is likely a reason not to dismiss the experience of those who are depressed.<sup>13</sup> Since depression decreases many self-serving cognitive biases, those who are depressed might have important insights into the world others do not have. But more important to the theme I would like to develop here is that at least as a naturally occurring phenomenon, depression demands inquiry that resolves a problematic situation. What concerns me are cases where social navigation is called for by depression yet there are no solutions to the problem because the environment we have constructed and the technologies we use do not allow individuals to solve problems. Put another way, when problems are intractable yet are also depressing, the depression *might appear to be* pathological. For example, if a workplace is designed to be colorless, isolating, and transactive, it makes perfect sense to find it depressing. The cause of the depression is the place—not an unbalanced regulatory neurological mechanism. The solution to the problem is to change the conditions of the workplace. This is a particularly terrible situation in which to pathologize depression because the pain is not being caused internally but rather because the real needs of the

individual are incongruent with their environment. Put another way, the environment is causing the depression, but we often put the blame on the individual.

I assert that that there are two things going on here. First, that depression as an affect has some role to play in inquiry into problematic situations. Second, that impulses that result in depression tell us something about the ways in which we need to construct our social situation as well as the spaces we inhabit. I would like to emphasize again that I am not praising depression—it is certainly not an optimal thing to feel even if it is helpful in specific situations. Before continuing I would also like to emphasize that I am not asserting that depression would magically go away in all cases if we had optimal social situations and deeply connected communities. Doing so would misunderstand how humans behave as well as what kinds of environments we can construct. Real losses would still cause depression, just as there are cases of depression caused by less than optimal serotonin levels. However, by looking at this sort of work in evolutionary psychology, I believe we can bolster many arguments in support of deep democracy, aesthetically pleasing public spaces, and integrating meaningful activities like art and athletics into our educations, technology, and infrastructures.

What specifically interests me about these findings from psychology is the potentially important way that depression (and by extension many other feelings and moods) condition the limitations and possibilities of moral imagination. Moral imagination is the ability that inquirers have to develop creative values in a rehearsal space that is largely conditioned by, but not directly active upon, the world of activity.<sup>14</sup> Within an imaginative rehearsal space—John Dewey uses the term “dramatic rehearsal”—one can consider possibilities and consequences without committing oneself to action. Part of moral imagination is dramatic rehearsal in the confines of an imaginative space wherein the possibilities of activity are played out and qualitatively evaluated without being explicitly enacted in the major incongruent fit with their environment—an environment.<sup>15</sup> In this process one can recognize the various potentially valuable aspects of a situation which dramatic rehearsal experiments on in the “space” of imagination. Taking account of the cognitive situation an individual finds herself in—and mood does not have to be included here—will help us to understand a great deal

of the limitations and possibilities of inquiry about how to act in problematic moral and social situations. It is my contention that we have not given enough consideration to the inquiry of the depressed and that paying attention to this inquiry will result in several benefits.

Depression and social problems are related and depression encourages an individual toward focus on the problem (as a motivation) and anhedonia, which tends toward reducing distractions. This gives the depressed person particularly interesting limitations on dramatic rehearsal. Thus, the depressed person, especially when not pathologically depressed, has a different perspective for their dramatic rehearsals. This is particularly interesting given that their focus has been shown not to fall into a self-serving bias—that they might be more objective about their own situation. All this while the empathy of others (another aspect of moral imagination) should be trained and developed in such a way as to both recognize and pull people together into communities. If nothing else, insights like this should tell us that the insights that depressed people gain are of value. At least from my own point of view as a depressed person, my insights and inquiries have been dismissed with some frequency. I believe many depressed people have been similarly marginalized.

The second insight that I believe pragmatists should take from this sort of research is that we have good biological reasons to construct our infrastructure, institutions, and technologies with an eye to creating the sort of environment wherein we can thrive. While Neece's research shows that depression occurs in individuals when they are not socially fitting in with the rest of the world, a corollary to this is that a social environment ill-suited to individual human beings is going to result in depression. While depression, on this hypothesis, serves the survival and reproductive interests of individuals it does not take into account the radical differences of contemporary social life from the sort of environment our bodies are biologically conditioned for. And as technologies that can isolate us rapidly develop, our environment is changing fast. In just the same way that we would expect any animal to languish outside of an appropriate environment, it is not an exaggeration to say that developing an environment for humans that not only leads us toward depression but then precludes accessible means to ameliorate the



problems that cause depression is disabling. This is the social model of disability in action—and there are real consequences at play here.

### TECHNOLOGY AND DEPRESSION

Technology is a case where we can unintelligently create situations that are depressing that do not necessarily have to be depressing. Put another way, unintelligent uses of technology can lead to situations where we are disconnected, isolated, and given fewer meaningful possibilities for experience. Because technologies like teleconferencing, social media, and asynchronous electronic communication have become prevalent, these technologies have become not only ubiquitous but often unavoidable. They have become, for many of us, the very environment we exist in for many hours (sometimes every hour) of the day. While intelligent use of these technologies can become freeing, the unintelligent use of them pose dangers.

Jonathan Haidt, in his *The Anxious Generation*, surveys the links between childhood and adolescent uses of smartphones and social media have caused a “rewiring” of the minds of young people. He has tracked the increases in depression, anxiety, suicide, and “failure to launch” (the phenomenon where children do not transition to independent adulthood) to increases in asynchronous communication, social media exposure (such as being bombarded by beautiful perfection from online influencers or constant observation through photos of oneself on Instagram), and a lack of exposure to the typical play children have engaged in.<sup>16</sup> Haidt describes the problems that result in depression as being caused by typical childhood and adolescent social development being interrupted by being given too much freedom with technology (especially the internet) which comes with electronic surveillance and restricted physical activity. All the while, children have less autonomy in the offline world and play less. He suggests giving children more opportunities to face (reasonable and safe) in-person adversities such as problem solving on the school yard, play that requires physical engagement (sports, tree climbing, and the like), and freedom to explore the world unsupervised—or at least freely.<sup>17</sup> Depression, as well as anxiety, stunts personal growth, and degraded interpersonal skills are a result of “the anxious generation” on his account. We can expand on Haidt’s conclusions about childhood

damage being caused by how we use technology to consider how everyone is being negatively effected by unintelligent uses of technology that are more alienating than integrating. One result of social media and smartphone use is that we do not relate to each other as we once did. Changing our relationship with each other is not necessarily a problem—but allowing those changes to become debilitating or depressing is.

What Haidt deftly identifies is the way that technology has not only become ubiquitous but that it is being used in unhealthy ways. Technological and social change has outstripped, and in many cases ignored, the biological capabilities and needs of human beings. Asynchronous and curated communication in social media has causal influence on depression and anxiety. I would also propose that we are seeing the social results of online education and an over-reliance on teleconferencing—especially when these are used as substitutes for interaction and not supplements for human growth and development. Unintelligently replacing human contact with these technologies reduces the aesthetic richness of human interaction as well as the complexity of interpersonal interaction and the rich communication that occurs with in-person interaction. Anxiety and depression would be an expected result of this because biologically expected stimulation and interaction is being prompted by technology but never satisfied. At an embodied level, it becomes a case where our bodies expect more than they ever get. This is especially true given that often our reliance on telecommunication and asynchronous interaction replaces instead of supplements meaningful social interaction.

In her *Against Technoableism: Rethinking Who Needs Improvement*, Ashley Shaw introduces the concept of *technoableism* as a particular form of ablism, which asserts that technology can do away with disability.<sup>18</sup> She holds that this form of ableism occurs when there is an assertion that technology can (or potentially can) completely cure disability. One quintessential example of this is—and this is a personal example from Shaw—those who attempted to placate her anxiety and fear before a leg amputation with assertions like “prosthetic technology has come so far. You’ll be up and running in no time.”<sup>19</sup> She does use a prosthetic—although not all amputees choose to do so—as well as other tools to get around; however, despite the advanced

technologies involved these do not somehow make her able or non-disabled. Yet there is an assumption that technology not only can but does normalize disabled bodies. I assert that many of our attitudes about technology fall into technoableism—not just to “repair” bodies but that technology will always ameliorate problems without those problems being continually re-addressed and attended to. While much of Shaw’s work addresses physical disability, there are insights to her idea that are applicable to our topic here. Technology alone is not the way out of disability. And when we take my assertion seriously—that depression is in many cases a socially caused disability—we have good reasons to problematize merely technological fixes even while we still need tools and techniques to ameliorate the situation. What we need is intelligence that takes the real consequences of how we relate to each other into account.

The striking feature of technoableism is that many people would not endorse the idea that technology completely mitigates disability. However, Shaw demonstrates that many act, speak, and behave in a way that they tacitly endorse technoableism without thinking through the consequences of what they are endorsing. Given these insights about technoableism, I propose that there is a common tendency to assume thoughtlessly that new technologies are necessarily better and do not need to be understood in a deeper and more meaningful context. Shaw was very clear that developments in things like prosthetic technology can be helpful but that none of them “solve” disability. They have to be understood in a context, employed thoughtfully, and sometimes set aside. I propose that there is a tendency to do this with some frequency and in cases that are not straightforwardly about disability. This ties to what Haidt claims about uses of technology that perpetuate depression and anxiety. When we conceive of technological development as necessarily safer, better, more accessible, or easy, we open ourselves to the possibility of unintelligent uses of technology which do not function to improve us at all. Instead, by ignoring real social and biological needs, we create situations wherein our needs are not being satisfied. As I argued previously, this lack of satisfaction of social needs results in depression because the human organism responds to socially and aesthetically degraded situations with depression as a signal to correct interaction with the environment. However, there is no avenue to correct interaction with the environment. Instead, we

pathologize a perfectly reasonable and expected human response as a disease.

What I do not want to do is throw up my hands and declare technological development to be bad. There are real benefits to some of the very tools that cause problems. I know we would not be able to live how we desire or do many of our projects without high levels of technological development. I know we all have our phones ready to go, for example. Indeed, I have observed a very mixed bag of benefits and drawbacks in my own interactions with my phone. While I know my anxiety goes up as I check notifications and doom scroll in the morning, I am also able to maintain very meaningful relationships with distant friends and family, which I would not be able to do otherwise. As Shaw observed in her work, people use tools and people with disabilities do need tools to navigate the world. However, what we should be aware of, as I mentioned earlier, is that we need to be on the lookout for technoableism—the belief that a tool or technology makes disability disappear. A tool or series of tools does not excuse us from the real work of rethinking and reshaping our social interactions and social infrastructure. In many cases this would mean developing mitigating technologies that help with the technology we have but in some cases it would involve intelligent rethinking of how we use technologies and what technologies are required for human flourishing.

One example of this is how we leverage asynchronous online education.<sup>20</sup> Online education does provide accessibility to many people—the disabled, those with children, those with jobs, those who live in isolated areas. However, I have personally had the experience of colleagues claiming that online classes are necessarily more accessible (leaving aside the problems of conforming to accessible practices with content in the LMS and the wave of academic dishonesty that AI has precipitated) precisely because they allow students to have an education without coming to campus. Therefore, it is not a problem that we convert classes that should be face-to-face or do not provide face-to-face options in many cases because the accessibility of online education justifies itself. This is technoableism—it asserts a tool as a universal solution to a problem. Indeed, it ignores a number of accessibility issues that students with ADHD, dyslexia, and other learning disabilities deal with. These students need in-person interaction and learn better because of it. I

also propose that many cognitively typical people are underserved by online education. In this case the technoableism potentially contributes to isolation and, when used as the only option for education in an educational desert such as where I teach, potentially causes the sorts of problems I cite. Indeed, many of my students admit to frustration, depression, isolation, and other problems when they are taking an entirely online load of classes while living in the dorms. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into details on what should be done, it should suffice to say that both other technologies need to be developed to mitigate these problems and resources to give people more options. For example, finding ways to make education more accessible in person (e.g., public transportation, better funding of education, childcare), finding ways to engage people in groups (e.g., other social, artistic, or athletic options), or even developing better technologies that are mindful of the harms possible in online education. Of course, we could extrapolate further about these issues and extend these insights to other technologies which have been unintelligently applied.

It is here that Deweyan Pragmatism—especially in light of Larry Hickman’s work on Dewey’s philosophy of technology—can be helpful. Instead of viewing technological development as something that is either necessarily problematic (such as Heideggerian thought might do) or as something necessarily salvific (such as we see with the technoableist), the pragmatist looks for intelligent reconstruction through inquiry.<sup>21</sup> This inquiry can and should involve tools and techniques, but does not give up on a subtle and experience-based approach to ameliorating the lived situation of people. To put it simply, we are using technology unintelligently when we allow it to cause us harm. This is evident in two ways. First the technoableist is too optimistic and asserts that technology comes problem-free when applied to disability (and depression is, as I have shown, at least sometimes a case of a socially conditioned disability). Secondly, we have evidence that the unintelligent (or unrestrained) use of technology causes suffering—such as in Haidt’s argument.

Democratic education is necessary for functioning democracies. That is because democratic deliberation not only requires a certain amount of intelligence and intellectual skills, but habits of compromise, inquiry, and empathy. In *Democracy and Education* Dewey is very clear that schools need to be community

organizations not just for pupils but for training and conditioning democratic activity.<sup>22</sup> It becomes a problem for democratic education when schools become detached and aesthetically dead. By treating knowledge as detached from meaningful enterprises such as art, athletics, and other forms of inquiry, such as is demanded by standardized testing, makes the content of education aesthetically dead. It takes away the meaning. Importantly, I suggest that aesthetic deadness is depressing. These institutions stymie the development of imagination. Indeed, as I have suggested, the benefit of depression is inquiry into solving that problem. However, we have plenty of educational institutions, in walkable cities, isolating suburbs, restrictions and impediments to community involvement, and near subsistence labor, that prevent any change to the concrete environment humans find themselves in. Depression in this case becomes something like a pain that there is no avenue to prevent on an individual basis. Collective efforts in reorganizing our communities are required.

I doubt it will come as shocking that I am suggesting educational opportunities be aesthetically rich and for technology to contribute to that richness. And of course, many things that would ameliorate our problems require an investment of resources. But what I do think I have presented here is a novel new argument about the tie between how humans react to and experience depression and what our institutions and technologies look like. There is a connection between these very human reactions to an environment and democratic institutions. Involvement, group inquiry, and empathy all have a place in democracy. However, they point to a deeply human impulse which is lacking in our environment. I do not think it's any surprise that we see depressed people in aesthetically dead environments. The real work we have to do is the collective changes in our society that would allow us to ameliorate the problems that unintelligent uses of technology have wrought.

### CONCLUSION

What I hope to have demonstrated in this short piece is that there are at least some cases of depression that are not pathological but are instead conditioned by the environment. This is due to the way human organisms work. Our evolutionary background conditioned us to experience depression as a means by which to reinforce

communities and therefore aid in the survival of a highly social species. However, this survival mechanism can be problematic in contemporary society. Either suboptimal physiological regulatory mechanisms cause depression or the environment conditions depression by being ill-suited for human beings. In the first case, I must leave it to specialists in psychology, psychiatry, and other therapeutic professions. In the second, however, I have demonstrated that there are actual unintelligent uses of technology and infrastructure which contribute to demonstrable suffering. We have good reason to believe that changing many of the ways we construct our social interactions—and the way these social interactions are conditioned by our technology and institutions—will ameliorate at least some instances of depression. Moreover, there is good reason to believe that some social arrangements are unhealthy for people and thus blaming or pathologizing individuals misunderstands the cause of depression. Placing the blame in the wrong place can only frustrate the possibility of amelioration.<sup>23</sup>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Alexander, Thomas M. "Pragmatic imagination." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 26.3 (1990): 325-348.

Bell, Justin. "Depression Applied to Moral Imagination: Deweyan Tools for Moral Inquiry." *Southwest Philosophy Review* 34:1 (January 2018): 93-101.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Deweyan Tools for Disability Studies: Methodological Pluralism and Melioration of Suffering" in *Disability and American Philosophies*. Edited by Nate Whelan-Jackson and Daniel J. Brunson. Routledge, 2022.

Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education* in *The Middle Works of John Dewey 1899-1924*, vol. 9. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985.

Ehrenberg, Alain. *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, Trans. Homel et al. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010.

Fesmire, Steven A. *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*. Indiana University Press, 2003.

Haidt, Jonathan. *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Random House, 2024.

Hickman, Larry A. *Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture: Putting Pragmatism to Work*. Indiana University Press, 2001.

Johnson, Mark. *Moral imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*. University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Nesse, Randolph M. (1990). "Evolutionary Explanations of Emotions." *Human Nature*, 1 (3): 261-289.

———. (1991). "What Good is Feeling Bad?" *The Sciences*, 31 (6): 30-37.

Shakespeare, Tom. *Disability rights and wrongs revisited*. Routledge, 2013.

———. "The Social Model of Disability," *The Disability Studies Reader*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, edited by Lennard J. Davis, Routledge, 1997, 2017, 195ff.

Shaw, Ashley. *Against technoableism: rethinking who needs improvement*. WW Norton & Company, 2023.

Watson, Paul J., & Paul W. Andrews. "Toward a Revised Evolutionary Adaptationist Analysis of Depression: The Social Navigation Hypothesis." *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 72 (1): 1-14 (2002).



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Tom Shakespeare, “The Social Model of Disability,” *The Disability Studies Reader*, 5th edition, edited by Lennard J. Davis, Routledge, 1997, 2017, 195ff.

<sup>2</sup> See Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited*. Routledge, 2013, 11ff and 72ff.

<sup>3</sup> While I do not wholeheartedly endorse the social model, many of the conclusions of it are salient for understanding how disability functions. See my “Deweyan Tools for Disability Studies: Methodological Pluralism and Melioration of Suffering” in *Disability and American Philosophies*, edited by Nate Whelan-Jackson and Daniel J. Brunson, Routledge, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, Trans. Homel et al. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010, 21-25.

<sup>5</sup> While pathological instances of depression are certainly possible, I focus on how society occasions depression. I want to be clear that I am not rejecting responsible therapeutic or pharmacological intervention. I want to discuss changing society such that there is less depression—not abandoning those who suffer, or anything cruel like that.

<sup>6</sup> Ehrenberg, 136ff.

<sup>7</sup> Randolph M. Neese, “What Good is Feeling Bad?” *The Sciences* (November/December 1991): 37

<sup>8</sup> Randolph M. Neese. “Evolutionary explanations of emotions in human nature.” *Human Nature* 1.3 (1990): 261-289, 281.

<sup>9</sup> Neese, “What Good is Feeling Bad?” 34.

<sup>10</sup> Paul J. Watson and Paul W. Andrews, “Toward a Revised Evolutionary Adaptationist Analysis of Depression: The Social Navigation Hypothesis,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 7 (2002): 2.

<sup>11</sup> Watson and Andrews, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Watson and Andrews, 6.

<sup>13</sup> See my “Depression Applied to Moral Imagination: Deweyan Tools for Moral Inquiry” in *Southwest Philosophy Review* 34:1

(January 2018): 93-101.

<sup>14</sup> I depend significantly on Steven Fesmire, Mark Johnson, and Thomas Alexander for my understanding of moral imagination and its connection to American Pragmatism. For a discussion of moral imagination, see Steven Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination*, John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics. Indiana University Press, 2003; Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*. University of Chicago Press, 2014; and Thomas M. Alexander's "Pragmatic imagination," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 26, no. 3 (1990): 325-348.

<sup>15</sup> Fesmire, 225

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Random House, 2024, 23-29.

<sup>17</sup> Haidt, 289ff.

<sup>18</sup> Ashley Shew, *Against Technoableism: Rethinking Who Needs Improvement*. WW Norton & Company, 2023, 7-8.

<sup>19</sup> Shew, 49.

<sup>20</sup> I thank Albert "Randy" Spencer for a number of friendly but critical comments that lead to this clarification.

<sup>21</sup> Larry A. Hickman, *Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture: Putting Pragmatism to Work*. Indiana University Press, 2001, 69ff.

<sup>22</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education in The Middle Works of John Dewey 1899-1924*, vol. 9, Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Southern Illinois University Press, 1985, 88ff.

<sup>23</sup> I would like to thank Kara Barnette, Daniel Brunson, and Nate Whelan-Jackson for their contributions and support as co-panelists at the Boston, MA meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy in March 2024, where an earlier version of this paper was given. I would also like to thank the helpful audiences of both that meeting of SAAP as well as at the 2024 meeting of the Summer Institute of American Philosophy at Hilo, HI.

# HABITATS OF MADNESS

*NATE WHELAN-JACKSON*

Capital University

[njackson1331@capital.edu](mailto:njackson1331@capital.edu)



Multiple frameworks of what madness is can inflect and shape the self-understanding of those deemed “mad.” This multiplicity can yield a sense of instability to self-understanding. In evaluating William James’s reactions to a memory of an asylum patient, along with some contemporary madness narratives, I highlight the phenomenon of different, incompatible frameworks creating tension in making sense of one’s experiences and oneself. In particular, this paper foregrounds the tension between madness-as-dysfunction and madness-as-strategy. With this problem of “sliding” between different narratives outlined, I draw on Emilio Uranga’s notions of *zozobra* and accidentality to build on his language of “habitat” to inform another framework. In line with Uranga’s notion of how *zozobra* reveals a fundamental human accidentality, I suggest mad identity can help reveal a fundamental accidentality with respect to the notion of sanity.



Mad studies seeks to center the experiences of those who have been subject to the psychiatric, or mental health, system. By attending to these experiences, one hopes to ameliorate the oppression and marginalization of users/survivors of that system. As Peter Beresford points out, mad studies, “[...] rejects a bio-medical approach to the domain widely known as ‘mental illness’ or ‘mental health’ and substitutes instead a framework of madness” (2019, 1337). By adopting a skepticism around psychiatry and conceptions of “insanity” for which a medical and carceral system is the appropriate “solution,” mad studies presents an opportunity to re-work meanings surrounding mental health. Luci Costa and Lori E. Ross helpfully summarize, “Mad Studies is tied to a history and discourse that examines not only service user/survivor identity, but the very real consequences of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination based on that identity” (2022, 2). Clearly, there is a stigma to being labelled “mad.” Beyond tracing the stigmata surrounding madness, though, in what follows I suggest that examining mad identity would be usefully served by attending to the experience of navigating multiple incommensurable interpretations of madness. In particular, I maintain that Emilio Uranga’s existentialist philosophy can help to outline this experience and present madness in terms of an encounter with accidentality. The analysis of living informed by multiple conceptions of madness or insanity itself can be a feature of a description of mad identity, and the consequences of those understandings of madness itself a result of stereotypes surrounding the identity.

Broadly, there are multiple traditions informing what madness means, shaping how one might make sense of one’s experience. One outlook, characterized by a medical definition, frames madness as a kind of psychiatric dysfunction — a deviation from “normal” functioning. Language describing the phenomenon in terms of “mental illness” or “behavioral health” can signal a psychiatric or medical approach to madness. Others have characterized madness as strategy rather than a defect in one’s mental apparatus, focusing on madness as goal-oriented, navigating a set of stimuli in our environments. And, “mad” can also be used as an identity category, signaling membership in a community bound by a range of experiences, shared histories, and goals. On the first view, being

diagnosed with a mental disorder marks some species of deficit, the specific features of that deficit then justify medical interventions or the involvement of some form of carceral system. The logic of madness-as-strategy seems more immediately sympathetic; conditions that result in one's diagnosis are not necessarily deficits. Instead, they are varieties and inflections of modes of coping that "fit" specific environmental features in some particular contexts. Medical interventions or carceral medical systems still might await those deemed mad, but presumably not justified by a "need" to enforce "normalcy."

Reflecting on how madness can shape self-understanding and meaning-making, navigating these multiple stories about what madness means, I suggest, can itself be part of a task of self-understanding. One product of these incommensurate frameworks can be a felt experience of tension. One might be inclined to pursue medical interventions while resisting a framework that justifies them by pronouncing that one suffers a deficit. One might find value or pride in the operation of a mad community, while simultaneously concerned with managing the features of experience that bind one to this community. In effect, individuals can experience a slide between these competing frameworks of meaning-making. In part, this experience might stem from a hesitance to embrace one of them as dominant, to which others must submit or reconcile themselves. Here, I want to introduce the possibility of a different framework, drawing on the existentialism of Emilio Uranga. I suggest madness-as-habitat as an alternative framework, one that enables an appreciation for this experience of a slide in self-understanding, particularly emphasizing accidentality in a way that might usefully destabilize how notions of reason/sanity and madness relate.

### AMERICAN PHILOSOPHIES AND MADNESS

Discussions of madness, insanity, and the like are not new in American philosophy. For instance, Àger Pérez Casanovas (2023) recently offered an analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" as exemplifying narrative techniques of resistance that might be of service to Mad Pride. Shayda Kafai (2012) leverages the work of Gloria Anzaldúa to theorize the "mad border body" as a way of dismantling the mad/sane binary. Perhaps the figure most readily associated with discussions of insanity or

psychological “ailment” would be William James. James critiques tendencies to dismiss experiences on the basis of psychiatric diagnoses, betraying an impulse to take seriously non-normative mental experiences where a medical diagnosis might have been otherwise used to dismiss them.<sup>1</sup> There might be an immediate temptation to examine James’s *Principles of Psychology* to develop a distinctive account of insanity in service of centering users’ experiences. However, rather than focus on his account and presentation of pathologies, another moment in James’s work provides a crucial point of departure. In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James famously reports (attributing to a French correspondent) an experience recalling an asylum resident:

[...] suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if I came in the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, used to sit all day on one of the benches, rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against this, in the course gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them enclosing his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. *That shape am I*, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him. There was such a horror of him, and such a perception of my own merely momentary discrepancy from him, that it was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely, and I became a mass of quivering fear. After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. ([1902] 1985, 134)

In this moment, James reports a deep sensitivity, an anxiety, in the face of the possibility of this life for himself. He recognizes his own potential for madness and along with it a certain perceived inhumanity. James's own experiences with depression and anxiety are well documented. And, in looking to expand American philosophical traditions' engagement with madness, it is helpful to remember these early moments. While I will, in a moment, set aside examining James's work in an effort to describe multiple understandings or narratives of madness that could shape one's self-understanding as "mad," James offers at least two themes that the subsequent work will expand. First, his resistance to simple pathologizing opens the door to multiple understandings of madness. Second, his horror in the face of the asylum and identification with the patient directs us to consider how madness can further reveal to us the contingent character of one's supposed sanity.

William James resists a pathologizing impulse, a tendency to offer a diagnosis of psychological "defect" that then justifies ignoring or dismissing the testimony and experiences of those who have been diagnosed. Elsewhere, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James warns against "medical materialism," the tendency to undermine someone's claims by ascribing to them a physical or psychological ailment.<sup>2</sup> Mad studies centers the experiences of those who have been diagnosed, detained, or treated as the object of our psychiatric system. In doing so, we are sometimes left to navigate the confluence of multiple conflicting understandings of what madness is. James's identification with the youth betrays an impulse to center the experience of patients.

Second, that this interaction takes place in the asylum and highlights both James's identification with the patient and his fear of their inhumanity provides important context. Rather than looking to justify the treatment of this young man in the asylum, James points out his humanity by highlighting continuity between this young man's comportment and his own. At the same time, James is struck by how the patient looks "absolutely non-human." The fear that James reports, that he could be in the position of this young man, could be read as anxiety at the precarity of one's supposed sanity. But we might usefully read it as a kind of vertigo, signaling a recognition of the confluence of the supposed inhumanity of

madness and the threat to self-assurance that though he is not insane, he could be.

Moving forward, we might take this signal as a recognition of an issue at the heart of mad studies: As a liberatory enterprise, mad studies works to highlight the frameworks of understanding madness that contribute to marginalization and confront them. Further, by examining the consequences of those narrative structures and meanings, we can elucidate something of the experience of madness understood not as a pathology, but as a social category. Below, I examine multiple frameworks of understanding what madness is, not to assess relative accuracy or strengths, but instead to outline a condition of living in the midst of multiple frameworks. I leave James aside for now, and instead turn to the work of Emilio Uranga to provide an alternative account.

### NARRATIVES OF MADNESS

Rather than focus on experiences of psychosis, depression, and the like, or experiences of psychiatric facilities or mental health professionals, I begin with narratives that trace the motions of self-understanding in the face of diagnosis. In these narratives, it's not uncommon to read that mental health conditions are something external, that episodes of mania and the like are something that overcomes someone. At the same time, there are themes of construing the experience as something that is a part of oneself. There are sources of pride, along with echoes of a notion that insanity counts against being "normal."

Zack McDermott recounts his experience attempting to return to work at the Legal Aid Society after being involuntarily committed at Bellevue and diagnosed with bipolar disorder. His reflections illustrate that the label of madness followed him:

I knew I had a lifelong disease and that bipolar disorder is something to be managed, not cured. I knew I'd need to take medication for the rest of my life and that I'd humiliated myself in front of countless friends and strangers alike. I knew I had more in common than I liked with my schizophrenic uncle Eddy who lived the last 15 years of his life in a state mental institution. That no matter how early I got to work, no matter how useful I made myself, no matter



how reasonable and modest my khakis and my sweater were,  
I was and would always be the “crazy” dude. (2019, 101)

McDermott’s experience betrays not only a sense of the permanence of the label “crazy,” but juxtaposes it against being useful, against being appropriate for work. Just before this point, he recounts gathering himself in the bathroom ahead of a meeting with his supervisor, telling himself, “*You look good, you look normal. You’re a normal guy*” (2019, 101), consciously trying to set aside an understanding of himself as mad, though, of course, the narrative makes clear that this notion follows him.

Likewise, in her narrative of life as a creator with a bipolar diagnosis, Shoshanna Kessock recounts struggling with decisions to seek medical intervention. She faces temptations to connect her diagnosis with artistic ability: Isn’t madness supposed to be a spark of creativity, an underlying force in creating art? She recounts the message she encountered from people who used medication, “[...] ‘If you go on the drugs,’ they said, ‘the creative drive goes away. You’ll lose that spark inside you. If you want to be an artist, stay away from medication. It’ll kill your art’” (2020, 183). At the same time, the symptoms of bipolar disorder weigh heavily on her psychology, as did the feedback she received from a family that didn’t have a lot of information about BPD: “My parents tried to get it, but when I’d do something irresponsible, it was always because I was ‘bad.’ I tried to explain how it was impossible to keep my whirlwind mind straight sometimes” (2020, 182). She slides between narratives of self-understanding that link creativity to her condition, narratives that say that believing in that link is just the disorder talking, narratives that say she should continue with medication when the side effects become worse and worse, subordinating her experiences to a doctor’s expertise, and narratives of suspicion in seeking medical interventions at all. In the end, she sought intervention without regret, but only after a decade-long process in which she found herself wrestling with the tensions between frameworks of understanding stemming from her own psychology, from a social order that sometimes links madness and creativity, and the medical system she had to navigate. Underlying these frameworks are multiple stories of madness, and the

contradictions of these narratives molded this condition of lacking a “perch” for self-understanding.

In these kinds of narratives, we encounter tensions between the multiple narrative structures surrounding insanity and mental health. In each, there is a sense in which the author strives to land in a place where there is stability in self-understanding. For each, BPD ends up being something to be managed, while sometimes being regarded as a source of uniqueness, identity, or creativity, or even a vehicle through which they form relationships.

### URANGA: ACCIDENTALITY & HABITAT

Foregrounding the experiences of those deemed “mad” provides another avenue for giving contours to what we mean by madness. Part of the environment in which one might arrive at a self-conception as a “mad” person consists in the multiple frameworks for understanding madness. That is, part of the experience involves a slide between frameworks of understanding oneself and one’s experience. I’m suggesting that our inquiry into madness can follow a framework or metaphor suggested by Emilio Uranga in his reaction to the work of Merleau-Ponty. Uranga writes,

[...] The value of existentialism to give a foundation to a systematic description of human existence, but not of human existence in the abstract, but of a situated existence, in a situation of a human existence framed in a determinate geographical *habitat*, and a social and cultural frame likewise determined and with the precise historical legacy (quoted in Sánchez, 2019).

In using existentialist methods and traditions, Uranga was trying to theorize “Mexican Being.” Philosophizing out of this habitat, for Uranga, brought forward a notion of accidentality as a feature of Mexican-ness, a feature that he further suggests is a hallmark of authenticity. In proposing to start theorizing madness in terms of habitat, in conversation with Uranga, it is not the intention to unproblematically apply his analysis of Mexican-ness to that of madness. Rather, his impulse to begin in the concrete conditions of experience, embrace the foregrounding of accidentality, and aim to describe the features of particular form of uncertainty have the

potential to aid the process of further describing the effects of the ways we talk about and police the boundaries of madness and sanity. Though I am cautious, by taking Uranga's conception of existentialism as a guide, I would suggest that madness can be described using this language of habitat to emphasize the particular ways in which madness-as-habitat likewise foregrounds accidentality.

In *Analysis of Mexican Being* and elsewhere, Uranga likewise confronts a species of groundlessness or anxiety as a feature of lived experience of mestizo identity, a phenomenon of zozobra. Experiencing zozobra, an individual swings between different frameworks of self-understanding, without finding solid ground. He offers,

Zozobra refers to a mode of being that incessantly oscillates between two possibilities, between two affects, without knowing which one of those to depend on, which justifies it, indiscriminately dismissing one extreme in favor of the other. In this to-and-fro the soul suffers, it feels torn and wounded ([1952] 2021, 180).

In a way that hearkens to the oscillations in Kessock's narrative, multiple incompatible frameworks perpetuate an unmoored character in self-understanding. For Uranga, the phenomenon of Zozobra stems from the plural notions of being grounded in indigenous and European culture, but also against these frames, resulting in what Carlos Alberto Sánchez describes as, "a state of incessant swinging to-and-fro in which Mexicans, according to Uranga, find themselves" (2016, 66-67). Uranga describes the phenomenon as "an oscillating or pendular manner of being that goes to one extreme and then to the next, that makes both instances simultaneous and never annihilates one for the sake of the other" (quoted in Sánchez 2016, 69).

Looking ahead, this experience of being unable to "perch" on one framework of understanding, sliding between incommensurate notions of self-understanding, can helpfully distill features of what Uranga might call the ontological condition of madness. While Uranga is concerned with giving an account of the particularities of Mexican-ness, his process can be usefully applied here.

Uranga locates features like *zozobra* in a more fundamental, ontological accidentality. Drawing on the language of substance and accident, he suggests European/Spanish being presents itself as substance, that which is defined on its own, without reference to some other characteristic for its mode of being. He writes, “The European does not ask himself the question regarding his own being because, for him, his own being is the measure of the human” ([1952] 2021, 138). Mexican-ness for Uranga, by contrast, defines itself in opposition to the European/Spanish, “[...] which presents itself as substantial” ([1952] 2021, 137). This “originary election of accidentality” becomes a defining feature of Mexican Being. Juan Garcia Torres summarizes Uranga on accidentality as a mode of being: “to be an accident is to be ontologically un-stable, for it is to have no foundation upon which can rest the ontological stability enjoyed by a substance (Análisis 40, II .2.1). Accidents are thus ontologically ‘insufficient’” (2024, 62).

Out of this habitat, though, emerges a form of humanism. On Uranga’s analysis, this ontological accidentality more accurately resembles the condition of humanity as accidental, contingent, and vulnerable. Rather than flee accidentality for substantiality, Uranga’s Mexican humanism, per Sergio Gallegos-Odorica, is grounded, “[...] on the feelings brought about by the visceral realization (e.g. vulnerability and finitude) that are impossible to transcend” (2020, 16). As such, this distinctive humanism is characterized by, “[...] an attempt to humanize others by relating them to one’s condition of accidentality and anguish” (2020, 16). The foregrounding of accidentality avoids a bad faith move available to the “European,” or, in the case of madness, the “sane.” Posited as sufficient and conflating human and European, European being masks its own accidentality, which also undermines the possibility of empathy through recognition of our shared condition.

The notion of habitat, and the subsequent analyses of the modes of being shaped by that habitat, allow another metaphor to serve as a framework for madness. Uranga’s work in the years after this call to understand the habitat, the qualities of Mexican-ness, led to the centering of accidentality in his *Analysis of Mexican Being*. Part of that foregrounding of accidentality stems from a recognition of a sense of slide between distinct frameworks of self-understanding and interpretation. Madness as an experience of self or self-

understanding can involve a similar slide, one not to be dismissed merely as a symptom of a medical disorder. Experiences of madness instead motivate trying to account for this species of anxiety in self-understanding. In analyzing accidentality as an analytical tool, Juan Garcia Torres highlights that, for Uranga, “an accident has relative sense-making instability” (2024, 66). I want to suggest that we leverage accidentality in theorizing frameworks for theorizing madness that resembles Torres’s interpretation. Part of what makes sense-making unstable, in the case of madness, might be the plurality of interpretive frameworks, stemming from a history of interface with a medical-carceral system, that feed into the possibility of sense-making. Madness as a habitat involves navigating a landscape where diagnoses can simultaneously “fit” and grind against the realities of the experience. Similarly, the narrative of self-interpretation afforded by madness-as-strategy offers a potentially friendlier account of mad identity, but one that leaves the remnants of navigating the stigma surrounding diagnosis outside the bounds of what the identity involves.

#### **FRAMEWORKS OF MADNESS: MADNESS AS DYSFUNCTION**

Perhaps the most familiar of these frameworks is an account of madness as a deficit or dysfunction. In Kessock’s narrative, she takes her mental comportment to deviate from some norm or understanding of typical functioning. On this framework, madness motivates cure or alleviation, reifying that norm. It casts insanity as a personal or individual *problem*, demanding some form of intervention. At the same time, though, Kessock’s self-understanding does not improve by jettisoning her identity as a problematic deviation from a norm.

In part, this “slide” in self-understanding seems to embody a number of frameworks or underlying narratives concerning madness. Accounts of madness-as-dysfunction posit madness as a disruption of “normal” psychological functioning. Wouter Kusters summarizes,

as a deficit, a disorder, a nonfunctioning of some aspect of the mind/brain/body that is supposed to be well-functioning in the individual who is not psychotic. [...] Such a

judgement implies that there is good, proper thought, and that psychotic thought can be sufficiently defined as a disturbance, a disordering of this normal, natural way of thinking (2022, 15).

This deviation from the norm justifies a correction. Sometimes that correction is medical; prescription medications and therapies enable some approximation to the “normal” ideal. Historically, such “correction” includes long-term psychiatric treatment facilities, short-term centers, and the carceral system.

In her critique of the Mad Pride movement, Alison Jost leverages a view of madness as dysfunction. She questions the extent to which madness, or mental illness, can be conceived as a social phenomenon:

It is true that one reason living with a mental illness is difficult is that others stigmatize you. But stigma is not the only thing that makes a mental illness an illness. Most mental illnesses, for most people, are inherently negative. They demoralize people. They halt lives, figuratively and literally (2009).

While acknowledging that stigma can be among the issues that create hardship in the lives of those with mental illness, she locates suffering stemming from these conditions squarely on the psychiatric condition itself.

No matter how destigmatized our society becomes, mental illnesses will always cause suffering. They are not simply different ways of processing information or emotion; they are disorders in the capacities for processing information or emotion (2009).

Where Mad Pride and approaches to mental illness that emphasize social factors and a lack of fit between one’s environment and mental comportment fail, in this view, is in the fundamental conception of what mental illness is. This focus motivates interventions like medication, as well as forms of therapy and other interventions, to remediate dysfunction.

Turning to patients' or users' perspectives shows that people are not univocal in their reactions to these interventions. Regarding medication, users report a range of responses. In the narratives cited above, McDermott and Kessock endorse the benefits of medication, though not with some caveats and an acknowledgement that medical intervention can have its flaws. Beyond side effects, you might have difficulty in determining when and how to cease using medication, or knowing whether these interventions are responsible for every change you might experience, and you might find yourself in a sometimes-frustrating relationship with a psychiatrist, who retains authority over the prescription, and may or may not seem receptive to the input of their patients. More strikingly, madness has been leveraged to justify institutionalization or interfacing with community mental health systems. Without rehearsing histories of institutionalization or abuse within these contexts, they rely on diagnoses of madness as a deviation to justify their treatment. The point in briefly rehearsing these positions is to outline the conception of madness-as-dysfunction and its implications to suggest it as one framework impacting the lived experience of those deemed "mad."

That impact can be witnessed in reflections on what it means to be mad or insane. Sofia Jeppson, as part of a larger critique of testing environments used to show that mental illness is primarily a dysfunction, highlights that, while adopting this kind of understanding,

I used to think that stigma accounted for very little of my problems. I used to think, like Alison Jost, that in a hypothetical completely stigma-free situation, I would still suffer horribly from being chased by demons. I would still suffer horribly from the terror. Intense terror, just like intense pain, is inherently bad, regardless of how much other people accept you (2023, 47).

That is, the extent to which madness impairs, on this self-understanding, resists changes in social circumstances. Further, there's a substantial question about whether or not one identifies with the mental illness. One's dysfunction seems like something external to oneself, something that acts on one's mental states.

**FRAMEWORKS OF MADNESS: MADNESS AS STRATEGY**

In contrast to madness-as-dysfunction, madness-as-strategy conceives of at least some forms of insanity as manifestations of some goal-driven feature of our psychology. Justin Garson advocates creating space for such an understanding of madness alongside the dysfunction view. Garson reviews a series of approaches that one might call madness-as-strategy, including Darwinian interpretations that link symptoms of insanity to a goal of coping within a broader environment. In examining Kurt Goldstein's holistic approach to the "biological perspective," for instance, Garson summarizes that the effect of this perspective is "to place the phenomenon in the context of the organism's ever-changing interactions with the environment, rather than in the context of the relationship between diverse mental faculties" (2022, 208). Examining anxiety from this perspective, it might be understood as an organism-environment interaction in which the organism responds to its relationship to the environment in a way that "aims" at a species of holistic fulfillment. Garson summarizes,

Anxiety is the *subjective* manifestation of a looming *objective* catastrophe. Fear, for Goldstein, is actually the fear that I am going to be anxious; this fear causes me to modify the environment in such a way that as to minimize the prospect of this anxiety-provoking catastrophe (2022, 206).

Anxiety therefore is goal-oriented, a strategy to bring about some set of circumstances. Through his work reviewing the history of psychiatry regarding madness, Garson brings to light this alternative mode of understanding madness.

In discussing madness and evolutionary adaptations, Garson further opens the possibility that at least some of what we recognize as mental illnesses are adaptations. He offers,

True, the evolutionary perspective in psychiatry is not committed to the idea that *all* mental disorders are adaptations; some of them may very well be dysfunctions of innate mental mechanisms. Nonetheless, the evolutionary perspective encourages us, as did Freud, to consider the



prospect that some mental disorders that strike us, at first glance, as dysfunctions contain a hidden purpose or end. It invites us, in other words, to *reinstate* a certain measure of purposiveness and goal-directedness into madness. (2022, 257)

Rather than construe madness as necessarily a malfunction, thereby motivating a narrative wherein one suffers an aberration to be excised, we might examine the impulses to re-shape the environment or one's own experiences as emblematic of some adaptation to environment, a striving for a form of fulfillment.

Madness-as-strategy offers an alternative narrative shape for understanding one's own relationship to experiences attributed to one's diagnosis. As a complex of the relationship between organism and environment, the experience that might be labelled as an aberration on a medical framework could be understood as an outcropping or expression of an organism-environment interacting "aiming" at fulfillments. In the narratives reviewed above, we saw something of the intuition that madness might be goal directed in Kessock's reflections on the story linking manic episodes with creativity. Whether or not she's correct, part of what is worth noting is that there are competing narratives that seem to exemplify these distinct frameworks. The co-existence of these metaphors raises questions about the potential for other alternative metaphors for madness, as well as the possibilities for understanding or developing an account of life as mad, caught in possible self-interpretation informed by multiple frameworks. The tension between dysfunction and strategy consists in that, though both suggest that madness is a kind of aberration, as strategy, it's an aberration by virtue of a lack of fit within the organism's environment. Garson ends his monograph by suggesting that the question becomes what to make of sanity (2022, 263). After all, sanity would seem to be a strategy that happens to navigate the environmental context "successfully."

Again, my point is less to arrive at the relative strengths and weaknesses of these accounts. Rather, the suggestion is that these provide different available logics that can shape self-understanding. Here, Garson's analysis might provide fruitful insight. In contrast to a narrative of self-understanding that something is amiss or needs to

be cured, diminishing the experience of the individual deemed mad, the framework of strategy gives shape to an alternative narrative.

### **FRAMEWORKS OF MADNESS: MADNESS AS MEMBERSHIP**

Others have theorized madness as a social category, alongside race, class, gender, ability, etc... On this analysis, Mohammed Abouelleil Rashed argues that we are witnessing the creation of mad culture, in the cultivation of shared symbols and meanings, as well as a community contesting dominant, medicalized meanings attributed to their mental comportment (2023). Elsewhere, Rashed maintains that we can use concepts like misrecognition to theorize vocabularies with respect to mental illness that resist the deficit view (2019). In particular, he argues that madness can be the basis for identity-based claims for recognition insofar as it provides a broader context within which one can embark on the project of self-understanding, not merely because there are a number of people who share a similar passive experience (2019, 188-199). Rashed highlights the importance of mad narratives in this project. He writes,

Mad narratives are unique in that they are constructed to make sense of madness as it is experienced by individuals and not of madness after it has been redescribed in medical or psychological language. [...] Mad narratives are constructed to correct for professional narratives (and their inadequacy vis-à-vis the experience of madness) and for subjective narratives (and their idiosyncratic character). They are worked out in a group and hence are more likely to achieve a degree of social intelligibility (2019, 190).

Regarding madness-as-dysfunction, use of medicalized vocabularies in professional narratives constructs a social imaginary of madness that does not align with how diagnosed individuals understand themselves. More pointedly, that vocabulary can further contribute to a sense of isolation and impede self-understanding. For Rashed, madness can serve as a basis for identity. This focus on mad identity and self-understanding motivates analyzing features of the lived experience of madness and community membership.

This focus raises important questions at the heart of Mad Pride, namely, delineating what community membership entails. In her engagement with the history of Mad Pride Toronto, Shaindl Diamond offers a helpful map of different constituencies and the tensions between them (2013, 67-73). Among the tensions are whether inclusion extends to non-psychiatrized individuals, in addition to those who have interfaced with the psychiatric system, whether a particular experience of impairment is the foundation for the understanding of madness, or if that essentialized experience of madness risks exclusion. In its place, Diamond advocates an approach to community solidarity and political strategy that foregrounds how the possibility of being perceived as mentally ill or mad, which varies in through historical and social contexts, functions to “[...] monitor and regulate those who disrupt hegemonic social relations and institutional processes [...]” (2013, 74). In one mode of reading, Diamond’s project of trying to delineate what “makes” a mad community exemplifies the kind of slide between frameworks we saw in individual narratives. Community membership seems to rest on some shared quality, perhaps a diagnosis, an experience, or a commitment. The project motivates a pluralistic conception of madness, “[...] recognizing that Madness is constructed differently in various historical and cultural contexts, and that there is no real basis of inherent or natural characteristics that define an eternal Mad subject” (2013, 74).

In that vein, we might understand the project of theorizing living through the lens of multiple conflicting narratives of madness, rather than trying to defend any one particular framework as part of the analysis of the experiences of living under the threat of regulation on the basis of having been deemed mentally ill. Thinking through this lens, I suggest, can take the complex and at times contradictory experience of self-understanding at face value. To return to Kessok’s narrative, she associates her mental comportment with creativity and power, as well as suffering and vulnerability. She recognizes herself as having a non-normative experience, brought on by some “abnormality,” but also as uniquely adapted to some kinds of activities. Further, she does seem to think of herself in terms of community membership, at least in some moments, recounting experiences in the early days of the internet, on internet chatrooms sharing worries, advice, and sometimes (mis)information.<sup>3</sup> In these

reflections on some of the frameworks shaping self-understanding of oneself as mad, and even in wrestling with the notion of community membership, there are plural incommensurate impulses. In what follows, I develop Emilio Uranga's work to suggest that his particular analysis of existential anxiety, *zozobra*, and his comments on accidentality can provide a valuable tool for describing how the threat of being policed as mentally ill can provoke a unique, and potentially important, experience confronting contingency.

### HABITAT AND MADNESS

Here we can ask, what is madness as habitat, or the habitat of madness? As Carlos Alberto Sánchez comments on Uranga's use of habitat,

[M]ore than dwelling *in* or *inhabiting* the habitat, the habitat itself also *inhabits* persons through social and cultural sanctions, histories, habits, and the internalisations of experiential modes of being belonging to the determinate habitation (2019).

Attending to Uranga's call in this context, we might understand madness in terms of the ways in which experiences of madness highlight and hide accidentality. What narratives give shape to mad experience, and how might an understanding of madness be shaped in relation to sanity/mental health as a default mode of being? Where do breakdowns in making oneself intelligible to the world of "reason" create disruptions? Finally, we might investigate the ways in which the various alternative frameworks of madness, including notions of madness as inarticulate, can contribute to an account of madness that acknowledges the situatedness of madness in the currents of multiple irreducible understandings, while not finally leaving madness in the corner of the inarticulate, the completely illegible, or unreason.

The language of habitat can call attention to the social and geographical location of those deemed mad within broader communities. La Marr Jurelle Bruce likens madness to diaspora:

It seems to me that madness, like diaspora, is both location and locomotion. Madness, like diaspora, is both place and

process. Madness and diaspora transgress normative arrangements—of the sane and sovereign, in turn (2017, 307).

Others have highlighted that mad people find themselves concretely in a condition of diaspora. On one hand, madness displaces one from a world of “reason.” On the other, mad people are distributed within a world of reason, largely in communities where madness isn’t predominant. Psychologist Gail Hornstein, for instance, likens madness to loss of a homeland, and cautions against recolonizing the interior worlds of people who have been diagnosed (Miller 2018, 311-13).

In a diasporic habitat, experiences of madness have their own distinct relationships to mad histories and accounts of possible futures. Exiled from communities since they were bastions of “reason,” sometimes physically, there can be an internalized sense that such exile can’t be the future. At the same time, given the concept of madness’s relation to sanity or reason, we might glean that, as a habitat, madness could reveal a particular kind of ontological accidentality. Recall James’s experience, struck by the memory of the young man in the asylum. He is at once struck by the apparent “inhumanity” of the man, signaling a participation in this exiling notion of sanity and insanity. Simultaneously, he experiences a deep anxiety of how contingent his own sanity is, of how close his own condition is to that of the young man. We can read this experience as a form of recognizing his own accidentality.

Similarly, accidentality might be helpfully read onto the analysis of madness. “Being driven mad,” “going crazy,” “losing my mind” are phrases that posit madness as a species of limit case. To be insane is to lack reason, or rationality, to be out of one’s mind. Reading these phrases through the foregrounding of accidentality in Uranga’s analysis, madness occupies a position of insufficiency. He writes,

The insufficiency of a particular ‘reality’ is equivalent to insufficiency or lack of ground. Insufficiency, ontologically speaking, characterizes what is accident in relation to substance. *Every modality of being grounded on accident is*

*partly grounded on an absence*, these modes of being are situated in an inconsistent and fractured base (2021, 103).

In these moments, Foucault's archeological work on madness and mental illness is helpful to illustrate how "mad" functions as a kind of insufficiency. In his comments on confinement, he offers, "Confinement merely manifested what madness, in its essence, was: *a manifestation of non-being* [...]. Confinement is the practice which corresponds most exactly to madness experienced as unreason" (1988, 115). Madness, in the various frameworks of interpretation, often defines itself against sanity or reason.

Conceived in terms of diaspora or exile and as defined against sanity, madness seems to embrace its own essential accidentality. The sense-making instability thereby engendered, a slide between different modes of understanding madness, can be read as a form of existential anxiety. But I would hazard that we could follow Uranga's insight a little further. This sense-making instability has a mark of genuineness, as positing oneself as substantial prevents one from recognizing and engaging with one's own contingency. There's a critique of taking "sanity" as substantial, standing in relation to madness as Spanish does to Mexican, on Uranga's analysis. That risk is to ignore one's fundamental character as contingent. The habitat, dwelling in multiple frameworks of sense-making and self-understanding at once, allows a criticism of sanity's apparent stability and necessity. The distinctive humanism discussed above cultivates empathy in the realization of accidentality.

The framework of habitats of madness, then, allow an analysis of the existential condition of having been deemed "mad." Without demanding that accounts of madness as a medical condition, as identity, and as strategy "step aside" or serve as the account to which others conform, habitats allow a role for the stories of sliding between these kinds of frameworks as part of the meaning of madness, positing a madness-as-habitat that centers accidentality. The phenomenological home of madness includes not only the "symptoms" of episodes, but navigating the historically situated narratives that inflect self-understanding. Investigating madness as a habitat, then, opens toward possible directions for understanding the interplay of different interpretative frameworks and the

navigation of a world wherein madness and reason are often construed as necessarily at odds.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Beresford, Peter. "Mad', Mad Studies and Advancing Inclusive Resistance." *Disability & Society* 35, no. 8 (2019): 1337-42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2019.1692168>.

Bruce, La Marr Jurelle. "Mad Is a Place; or, the Slave Ship Tows the Ship of Fools." *American Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2017): 303-8. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26360850>.

Costa, Lucy, and Lori Ross. "Mad Studies Genealogy and Praxis." *International Mad Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2022): e1-8. <https://doi.org/10.58544/imsj.v1i1.5239>.

Diamond, Shaindl. "What Makes Us a Community? Reflections on Building Solidarity in Anti-Sanist Practice." *Mad matters: A critical reader in Canadian mad studies*. Edited by Brenda A. LeFrançois, Robert Menzies, and Geoffrey Reaume. Canadian Scholars' Press, 2013.

Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in an Age of Reason*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.

Gallegos-Ordorica, Sergio Armando. "The Foundations of a Mexican Humanism in Emilio Uranga's *Análisis del ser del Mexicano*." *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 20, no. 1: 13-18.

Garson, Justin. *Madness: A Philosophical Exploration*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

- Hornstein, Gail. *Agnes's Jacket: A Psychologist's Search for the Meanings of Madness*. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Jackson, Nate. "Significant Lives and Certain Blindness." In Clifford S. Stagoll and Michael P. Levine, eds. *Pragmatism Applied: William James and the Challenges of Contemporary Life*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press (2019): 73-100.
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Vol 15 of *The Works of William James*. Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1902] 1985.
- Jeppson, Sofia. "A Wide-Enough Range of 'Test Environments' for Psychiatric Disabilities." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 94 (2023): 39–53.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246123000206>.
- Jost, Alison. "Mad Pride and the Medical Model." *The Hastings Center Report* 39. 4: c3 (2009).  
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hcr.0.0159>.
- Kafai, Shayda. "The Mad Border Body: A Political In-betweeness." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 1. (2012).  
<https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v33i1.3438>.
- Kessock, Shoshana. "Falling/Burning: Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*, and Being a Bipolar Creator." *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-first Century*. Edited By Alice Wong. New York: Vintage Books, 2020.
- Kusters, Christiaan Wouter. *A Philosophy of Madness: The Experience of Psychotic Thinking*. Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier. Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2020.
- McDermott, Zack. "The 'Madman' is Back in the Building." *About Us: Essays from the Disability Series of The New York Times*. Edited by Peter Catapano and Rosmarie Garland-Thomson. New York: Liveright Publishing, 2019: 98-103.



Miller, Gavin. "Madness Decolonized?: Madness as Transnational identity in Gail Hornstein's *Agnes's Jacket*." *Journal of Medical Humanities* 39 (2018): 303-323.

Pérez Casanovas Àger. "On the Borderlands of Madness: Narrative Tactics of Resistance in C.P.Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Disability Justice." *European Journal of Pragmatism & American Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2023): 109-26. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.3250>.

Rashed, Mohammed Abouelleil. *Madness and the Demand for Recognition: A Philosophical Inquiry into Identity and Mental Health Activism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Mad Pride and the Creation of Culture." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 94 (2023): 201-17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246123000188>.

Rubin, Jeffrey. "William James and the pathologizing of human experience." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 40, no. 2 (2000): 176-226.

Sánchez, Carlos Alberto. *Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2016.

\_\_\_\_\_. "(M)existentialism." *The Philosophers' Magazine* 84 (2019): 82-88.

Torres, Juan Garcia. "Emilio Uranga and Jorge Portilla on Accidentality as a Decolonial Tool." *Res Philosophica* 101, no. 1 (2024): 55-80.

Uranga, Emilio. *Emilio Uranga's Analysis of Mexican Being: A Translation and Critical Introduction*. Edited and translated by Carlos Alberto Sánchez. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, [1952] 2021.

**NOTES**

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Jeffrey Rubin's "William James and the Pathologizing of Human Experience" (2000) for a fuller exploration of the evolution of James's use of pathologizing language and his critique of "superficial medical talk."

<sup>2</sup> For a more extended treatment of James on medical materialism in relation to testimony and disability, see Jackson (2019), "Significant Lives and Certain Blindness: William James and the Disability Paradox".

<sup>3</sup> Likewise, psychologist Gail Hornstein likewise highlights an approach to knowledge of madness foregrounding "experts by experience" (2018, 137-53), examining peer networks as arenas of knowledge-generation surrounding madness.

RESILIENCE BEYOND DIAGNOSIS IN A JAMESIAN-  
INFLUENCED MODEL OF INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY:  
PLURALISM, VALOR, AND (NEURO)DIVERSITY



*HEATHER KEITH*

Radford University

[hkeith1@radford.edu](mailto:hkeith1@radford.edu)



In October, 1898, a mother dropped her young son off at what was then called the Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children in Glenwood, Iowa. The boy, Mayo Buckner, was mild-mannered and had a talent for music, but his mother was concerned that she could not care for him and that he would be bullied in a public school system that was not created for what we might today term neurodivergent learners. Instead, the institutionalized Mayo grew up far from his family in a facility that included the use of isolation and restraint as both treatment and punishment. Labeled as a “medium-grade imbecile” by the institution, Mayo lived for over 60 years in the Glenwood facility as “patient #822,” where he was never able to learn the skills needed for a life outside, due largely to a diagnosis and social structures which prevented others from seeing his value and potential. Despite his label as an “imbecile,” Mayo thought of himself as normal, achieved a score of 120 on an IQ test, learned to play and give music lessons on several instruments, and became skilled in the print trade. If his institutional handlers weren’t so quick to label and number him, Mayo would likely have been seen only as the resilient and valued member of the community that he was rather than “patient #822.”<sup>1</sup>

It would be pleasant to say that over a hundred years later, cases like Mayo’s would live only in the dim reaches of a time that was darker and more difficult for people with disabilities or who are categorized (by themselves or others) as neurodivergent, and it’s true that psychologists, ethicists, physicians, educators, families, and disability advocates have pushed our social systems to be more accommodating of difference. However, mental health challenges such as depression occur at a higher rate among children and adults with developmental disabilities,<sup>2</sup> and depression and anxiety disorders also occur at a higher rate among children and adults categorized as on the autism spectrum.<sup>3</sup> We live in an era when a candidate for the highest office in the land can be elected after publicly bullying a person with a disability.<sup>4</sup> While it may be the case that challenges to mental health are unique to some people due to physical characteristics of disability, it is also likely the case that many find themselves, as Mayo Buckner did, in educational and social settings that were not created with their disabilities and abilities in mind. This paper explores, with the help of William

James and pragmatism, how we might rethink social structures and how we categorize and label individuals in order to better ensure that quality of life is prioritized above maintaining norms and status quo systems. I will note here that I'm discussing both developmental and intellectual disability AND neurodiversity, which can include ASD, ADHD, and other learning differences; and that technically, neurodiversity should refer to us all—no one learns, thinks, or develops the same; however, when all things aren't equal, we sometimes need to talk about distinct groups and categories. I'll also note that I use the word "disability" contextually in that sometimes a "disability" is just diversity, perhaps something that more traditionally abled folks simply don't understand or accept; and that sometimes "disability" is more a function of the external social context than it is traits internal to an individual (as will be explored below). I will also use both "disabled people" and "people with disabilities," as well as "neurodivergent people" or "people of neuro or intellectual diversity" to encompass a spectrum of intellectual and cognitive differences. This is likely just another case where our language and categories are insufficient to the job, and the bottom line of this clumsy paragraph is that, rather than acknowledging and celebrating diverse ways of being in the world, we have a crisis of normalization in which people are excluded based on perceived cognitive or intellectual deficits.

Related to the messy business of talking about humans, philosophers including James note that how we label and frame things and people makes a difference in our perception of their individual and social worth. In order to build individual and social resilience around neurodiversity and difference, we need to expand its perception from static concepts such as diagnosis and disability to more dynamic traits of value, virtues, and abilities; from a deficit model to one of resources and resourcefulness. Grounding social psychology approaches such as the social model of disability and Wolf Wolfensburger's social valorization theory in pluralistic pragmatism offers a way of reframing disability as diversity, with the cultural and social values that accompany it, such as a commitment to equity. Faith in the ability of all members to contribute to families, schools, workplaces, social and political organizations, and communities likely leads, according to Jamesian thinking, to greater inclusion.

First and perhaps most importantly, James and his pragmatist colleagues bring pragmatic pluralism to the discussion, especially as it prioritizes human experience. Contemporary readers of James such as Nate Whelan-Jackson and Daniel Brunson note that James's pluralism regarding human experience stems at least in part from his own experience of disability, both in his own life and in that of his sister. As Brunson says, James's philosophy of experience and imagination is grounded in the fact of neurodiversity, acknowledging that differences perceived as both trivial and profound exist on the same continuum. He writes: "Human variations provide sites of both continuity and discontinuity, of understanding and misunderstanding, and James's pragmatic pluralism comes, at least in part, from a desire to provide a philosophy that includes this variation, rather than denying it."<sup>5</sup>

With its focus on context and pluralistic experience, Jamesian pragmatism also gives us tools to avoid essentialism. One of the debates within disability studies is about the roots of disability—whether a person's functional difference is based in some internal impairment (usually referred to as the "medical" model of disability in which it is primarily a physiological condition that decreases function), or whether disability is more a matter of the inadequacy of social structures to accommodate diverse ways of being in the world (such as the lack of easy access to social spaces for people who use wheelchairs; usually referred to as the "social" model of disability).

According to Jeffrey Brosco, the medical model in America has its origins in the nineteenth century when large institutions were built to accommodate disabled people who various physicians thought could be "cured" by medical interventions (when this claim proved problematic and funding dried up, many institutions became mere warehouses where people were neglected and abused).<sup>6</sup> In the twentieth century, medical interventions were aimed instead at prenatal and early natal detection and prevention of disability. In both cases, intellectual disability was viewed as a problem that science and technology could solve. The medical model focuses on individual impairment and defect, which is problematic if intellectual disability isn't determined to be fixable, and views individuals as primarily defective.

The rise in the latter part of the twentieth century of community-based living situations for people with intellectual disability, on the other hand, denoted a move toward a social model in which levels of support in light of individual needs was of primary concern.<sup>7</sup> In this case adaptive and social functioning in everyday life is relevant to our treatment of and attitudes toward disability, and, in addition to medical prevention and care, issues such as financial well-being, food security, accessible and equitable education, and psychosocial care come into play. How we define disability—as individual defect or lack of social support—affects how we view neurodiversity and what changes we are willing to make to social structures to be more equitable, inclusive, and caring. James would likely agree with Brosco: “from the historian’s point of view, each generation’s choice of how to define ID [intellectual disability] also defines contemporary attitudes and approach to persons with developmental disabilities.”<sup>8</sup> As Burton Blatt observed, perhaps it isn’t an individual who is disabled, but it is society that is disabled and disabling.<sup>9</sup> While the medical model is essential when thinking about how we can, for example, prevent lead poisoning, the social model provides a vision in which we can build social structures that best support equity, well-being, and inclusion.

In thinking about disability and well-being, Whelan-Jackson writes:

The revitalized concern for accounts of flourishing compatible with disability stems from recognizing that underlying our designed structures and institutions is a conception of the individual navigating them, and that our conception of this person is often one of “normal” ability. The disparity between this “idealized” individual and the realities of disability can further entrench disabled persons’ social isolation.<sup>10</sup>

While pragmatism, with roots in the social context, would likely favor the social model of disability over the medical or impairment model, its anti-essentialist metaphysics also allows us to consider a middle way, one that affirms the relational contexts of the social model, while also acknowledging that sometimes taking note of individual traits, such as health, that are disabling is essential to

getting appropriate services. In both cases, the goal should be in ensuring access and support structures that bolster quality of life and full membership in the moral community. Robert Schalock's conceptual framework for enhanced human functioning involves five aspects of an individual's environment, their intellectual abilities, adaptive behavior, health, participation, and context; all filtered through support structures; and those structures are themselves enhanced by a well-functioning individual in community.<sup>11</sup>

Jackson also notes that James's rejection of medical materialism and his emphasis on experience enables a more diverse view of functional and abled living, as well as trust in the diverse lived experience of others.<sup>12</sup> The assumption that quality of life and capabilities must be lessened by disability or difference from the perceived norm may lead to disabling factors in the environment. If we assume our neurodiverse college students aren't as capable, we don't create structures to help them learn. Likewise, if we assume that people with developmental disabilities don't have the capacity to form opinions about society or politics, we don't ensure their access to informed voting and community engagement.

One antidote to this "certain blindness," as James might say, may be found in social role valorization theory, proposed by Wolf Wolfensberger as a replacement for the principle of normalization. Wolfensberger's idea was that valuing the roles that people play—citizen, neighbor, friend, colleague, advocate, voter, student—gets us closer to justice, morality, improved living conditions, and other "good things in life."<sup>13</sup> Wolfensberger argued that how, or whether, we value individuals depends on our perception of their social roles and relationships. If we view someone as having a positive social role, then other goods tend to follow. This is true also in social and physical environments: if one is in an "institution," as was Mayo Buckner in Iowa, then others (and oneself) should assume that one is impaired and in need of repair. Likewise, Wolfensberger noted that if an institution had cages (as some did) and seemed fit for animals, then its residents must be less than human.

Social roles are important, because, as Wolfensberger wrote: "almost all of one's relational behavior is profoundly informed and shaped by the roles one holds" and "it is largely via roles that people



define and situate others in the world.”<sup>14</sup> He argued that how individual roles are perceived by others determines to a large extent whether people are valued or devalued, and in turn how people respond to others’ expectations. These roles are varied and malleable, however, which offers us the opportunity to reframe our relationships in more positive terms, and to highlight some roles that will be perceived more positively. Seeing people with disabilities as citizens, colleagues, friends, companions, neighbors, and voters results in more value and better treatment. Normalization as valorization, instead of using medical diagnoses or intelligence tests to determine worth, means that we see people as ordinary participants in daily life, whether in apartments and houses, using public transportation, shopping, going to school, working, paying taxes, participating in religious activities, enjoying meals together, or working in the community.<sup>15</sup>

Social valorization is a rising concern in the neurodiverse workforce, as well. People who aren’t typically abled have much to offer in widening and diversifying the moral and workplace community. For example, Temple Grandin’s unique ability to empathize with nonhuman animals led her to design chute systems for handling cattle at slaughter facilities that are more humane in that they are less likely to cause unnecessary stress and discomfort. Grandin contended that it is her autism that allows her to imagine the experience of cattle better than a “neurotypical” person would be able to.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, neurodiversity is seen by some employers as offering a competitive advantage. For example, the computer industry is among a growing list of businesses recognizing that people identified with autism, ADHD, or dyslexia often have special skills, like pattern recognition, memory, or mathematical skills, that make them desired employees. While sometimes companies have to adapt their hiring processes and workplace to accommodate employees who may have different needs, they realize that neurodiversity can be beneficial to business and to the workplace community. A senior vice president at SAP, Silvio Bessa, noted that working to accommodate neurodivergent employees causes him to have greater sensitivity to workplace quality of life: “It’s made me a better manager, without a doubt.”<sup>17</sup> Other businesses have reported that neurodiversity programs have wider benefits, such as better

products, more innovations, greater employee loyalty with lower rates of turnover, and even global corporate citizenship awards.<sup>18</sup>

This movement may be a good model for inclusive moral communities. If we recognize and valorize the positive traits that all humans possess, both individually and in social groups, then marginalized communities might be more valued and equitably treated. Our conversations might be less about fixing and typicalizing people and more about improving quality of life, enhancing support structures, and allowing our communities to learn and grow from people with a diversity of capabilities. And valued social roles don't have to be instrumental or traditionally "productive" (such as in the workforce). Disability advocate Martha Perske wrote that

[s]ome of the best friends I have can neither read or write. But the many things they have been able to do with me and for me have outweighed many times the things they could not do. And my relationships with such people have been so rich that my world-view has changed for the better. Over the years, they have introduced me to a world I had never known before. And as bewildering as it seems, it is a world that society had programmed me to shun and stay away from.<sup>19</sup>

Likewise, valued social roles can be internalized. One person my co-author and I interviewed for a book on the legacies of people with intellectual disability, Lisa, describes herself as a caregiver and a strongly politically engaged citizen. Among Lisa's satisfactions are the facts that she has lived to see a minority person (Barack Obama) elected President of the U.S., that laws have changed to allow gay people to marry, and that people with disabilities and Native American people have rights that make discrimination less likely than in the past. She has strong political views and votes, she says, for laws to make things better, and she pays her taxes and her bills. In her view, "I have to support myself like everybody else, no matter if I have a disability or not." Lisa's legacy will likely be not in the ways she was disabled, but that she was a kind person, a valued family member, and a solid, active, responsible, and civic-minded citizen—social role valorization at work.<sup>20</sup>

James understood the importance of the ways we conceptualize ourselves and others to the quality and meaning of our lives. In *The Will to Believe*, standing at his metaphorical abyss, James (in a precursor to positive psychology and the widely-streamed meliorist Ted Lasso) knew that to believe that he could make it made it far more likely that he could because faith creates its own verification.<sup>21</sup> This faith, however, has to have foundation in real possibility. James and Wolfensberger might agree today that though we have come a long way since the days of eugenics and dehumanizing institutions, we must continue working to value, and valorize, all humans. If we see others, as well as ourselves, as moral agents, political citizens, and partners in improving life, then we just might find that we have become those things.

Recognizing the social context of disability and neurodiversity, and how that context cultivates better or worse quality of life, and learning to value people for the important social roles they inhabit, does not just elevate disabled and neurodiverse folks. In Deweyan fashion, movements in education that don't just accommodate disabilities (in order to try to make everyone fit a typical framework), but that try to celebrate the unique gifts and interests of the learners in our classrooms is likely a better education for all students. Similarly, rather than just accommodating students to help them work around the barriers we otherwise put in their way, building educational experiences that are universally accessible (such as universal design for learning) helps everyone because accessibility *is* for everyone. And let's face it, we will all be disabled at various points of our lives, just as we all come to learning with different challenges and interests. The more seasoned I am as a professor, and now as a faculty development specialist working with other instructors, the more I think back to times I "held the line" on what a "good" student looks like, or on doing philosophy or writing in a very narrow way that probably put up barriers and was antithetical to the justice-oriented teacher I wanted to be. We know that resilience and grit aren't just one's response to adversity; rather one's successful and supported response to adversity.

But normalization as valorization isn't just an individual journey. We have to create accessible and equitable social structures in a culture that enables pragmatic sensitivity to context and the Jamesian recognition that human experience, imagination,

cognition, morality—all the human things—exist on a spectrum, and it is our collective moral responsibility to elevate diverse ways of being in the world and make it more likely that difference enables belonging and resilience.

Finally, a Jamesian-influenced view of resilience and well-being acknowledges tragedy and the fact that human living and well-being is hard work. In “The Sentiment of Rationality”<sup>22</sup> and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he reminds us that there are events, perceptions, and mental dispositions that are beyond our immediate control. At the same time that we find value in everyday lives, we have to provide supports for people to flourish in their environments. While the social model of disability calls for us to change attitudes, behaviors, and social settings to be more inclusive, there is a merit to a medical model that recognizes individual difficulties (for all of us). In both cases, we need to acknowledge that if life is worth living, in Jamesian terms, it is because there is a “liver” that has the (individual) desire and (social) means to overcome challenges and a community believes that the world can be improved. In that sense, people with disabilities can be seen not only as neighbors and friends, but as world-changers and pioneers.

When after six decades of institutional life in Iowa Mayo Buckner was given the opportunity to live on the outside, he found it too challenging. Perhaps he could have lived well and grown in his talents and interests without being institutionalized if his mother and others would have felt more supported in seeing him in the valued and sometimes extraordinary social roles he fulfilled—son, musician, artist, expert printer, friend, and teacher. And in the social context of humanness, we would all be better off, and likely lead more meaningful and purposeful lives, and have stronger schools and communities, if we choose to look first for those valued attributes in others in a diverse landscape of experience, rather than looking primarily for what needs fixing.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Heather E. Keith and Kenneth D. Keith, *Intellectual Disability: Ethics, Dehumanization, and a New Moral Community* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Simon Whitaker and Stephen Read, "The Prevalence of Psychiatric Disorders among People with Intellectual Disabilities: An Analysis of the Literature" in *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 19 (2006): 330-345.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew J. Hollocks, Jian Wei Lerh, Iliana Magiati, Richard Meiser-Stedman, Traolach Brugha, "Anxiety and Depression in Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis," in *Psychological Medicine*. 2019; 49 (4): 559-572.

<sup>4</sup> "Donald Trump under Fire for Mocking Disabled Reporter." BBC News, November 26, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34930042>

<sup>5</sup> Daniel J. Brunson, "Pragmatism and Neurodiversity," in *Disability and American Philosophies*. Edited by Nate Whelan-Jackson and Daniel J. Brunson (New York: Routledge, 2022), 73.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey P. Brosco, "The Limits of the Medical Model: Historical Epidemiology of Intellectual Disability in the United States," in *Cognitive Disability and its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*. Edited by Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>9</sup> Keith and Keith, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Nate Whelan-Jackson, "Significant Lives and Certain Blindness: William James and the Disability Paradox" in *Pragmatism Applied: William James and the Challenges of Contemporary Life*. Edited by Clifford S. Stagoll and Michael P. Levine (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019), 74.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Schalock, Ruth Luckasson, and Marc Tassé, *Intellectual disability: Definition, diagnosis, classification, and systems of supports (12th Edition)*. (Washington, DC: American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Whelan-Jackson, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Wolf Wolfensberger, “Social role valorization: A proposed new term for the principle of normalization” in *Mental Retardation*, 21(6) (1983): 234–239.

<sup>14</sup> Wolf Wolfensberger, “A Brief Overview of Social Role Valorization,” in *Mental Retardation*, 38 (2000): 105-123.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Perske and Martha Perske, *New Life in the Neighborhood: How Persons with Retardation or other Disabilities Can Help Make a Good Community Better*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon), 1980.

<sup>16</sup> Temple Grandin and Chelsey Shivley. “How Farm Animals React and Perceive Stressful Situations such as Handling, Restraint, and Transport.” *Animals: An Open Access Journal from MDPI* 5, no. 4 (2015): 1233–51.

<sup>17</sup> Austin, Robert D., and Gary P. Pisano. “Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage.” *Harvard Business Review*, May 1, 2017, 98.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Austin and Gary Pisano, “Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage: Why You Should Embrace it in Your Workforce.” *Harvard Business Review*, 95 (2017): 98-103.

<sup>19</sup> Perske and Perske, 1980: 77.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Keith and Heather Keith, “The Lives and Legacies of People with Intellectual Disability” (Silver Spring, MD: AAIDD, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1897/1956).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 97.

Review of Philip Davis, *William James*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 208 pp. ISBN 9780192847324. \$24.99.

In *A Stroll with William James*, Jacques Barzun writes: “Prolonged acquaintance with almost anyone but the unregenerate is likely to bring liking, sympathy, enthusiastic admiration, as the case may be. But to arouse love without direct living acquaintance is unusual.”<sup>1</sup> Philip Davis’s *William James*, however, appears in a series—“My Reading” from Oxford University Press—based around books that inspire just such a love for their authors. The words “love” and “care,” in fact, appear three times in half as many pages in the series introduction, which invites authors to reflect on the questions: “What is it like to love this book?” and “What is it like to feel, long after, that this writer is a vital part of your life?”<sup>2</sup> Even without the nudge from Barzun, Jamesians will recognize in that word “vital” the close fit between James’s expressed interests and those of the series. For the thinker-writer, psychologist-philosopher wordsmith-stylist interested in what thoughts and words can *do*, inclusion in this first batch of the series—along with titles on Balzac, Beckett, Dickens, and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*—presents an opportunity to delve into a topic reverberating with James’s own priorities.

Philip Davis, for his part, has devoted a career to studying the relationship between reading and living well, publishing *Reading for Life* (Oxford 2020), *Reading and the Reader* (*The Literary Agenda* series, Oxford 2013), among other works, and formerly serving as director of the University of Liverpool’s Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society (CRILS). In the present study, Davis reads James literarily *and* takes him seriously as an ethical thinker on the question of how to live.

The result is a book that, though aimed at a general audience, differs from a popular, self-help inflected approach to James (though it may cover that base, too, in final accounting<sup>3</sup>). Because of Davis's extraordinary skill as a reader of literature, specialists—or simply those who have spent a long time poring over James and would like to *enjoy* him together with someone to revel in his prose—will also find fresh insights, sometimes precisely because Davis has the freedom, writing in this format, to obviate some scholarly conventions. To take one example, rather than respecting periodized divisions of James's thought, Davis plucks quotations from different periods of James's work and analyzes them together, as though they exist in an eternal present. This citational practice might trouble those who prefer thicker description or fuller context, but Davis's method of assembling texts—in part because he has such a good eye for apposite quotation—yields unexpected, profound connections. Or, as a pragmatist might say: it works.

Davis draws on long acquaintance with the breadth and depth of James's vast body of work, from the early talks and essays to *Principles of Psychology*, to correspondence, to *A Pluralistic Universe* and *Essays In Radical Empiricism*. And his magpie method is intentional, aimed at encouraging certain results: he admits to “some rough-and-ready handling, some pragmatic smash-and-grab of what matters in James's work” and then explains:

To achieve their fuller meaning and be useful, crucial moments and arresting sentences have to be taken out of their place and sequence, and put in a new context, in relation to their reader, for their use to be transmitted into other lives and other situations, for the thoughts to complete and fulfil themselves.<sup>4</sup>

What this book does, then, is help readers create the portable, the applicable James—a James who goes with them, to help them live better.

In *Reading and the Reader*, Davis has written of literature as a “holding-ground for investigation and contemplation;”<sup>5</sup> that is, “an energy-field...for the generation of thoughts” that “offers both writer and reader a holding-ground for the contemplation of experience.”<sup>6</sup> There is a sense expressed here that literature does not so much communicate content as create the conditions for thought



itself—by virtue of its specific form. For example, speaking of John Henry Newman, Davis comments: “It would have been less of a holding-achievement of mind had Newman written more simply....But his massy syntax *helps create the mind* that can hold its own thoughts most powerfully together.”<sup>7</sup> In back of Davis’s description of literature is the belief, which I wholeheartedly share and strive to teach by (sometimes in vain, as the digital/information age gives way to the age of artificial intelligence), that “An idea at its deepest has more than just a statable content.”<sup>8</sup> Thank you, Philip Davis, for stating an elusive idea so clearly! The societal importance of maintaining this ability to think well, skillfully and subtly, cannot be overstated, and Davis shows us how literature can help us idiosyncratically enlarge our own deep capacities.

One of these deep human capacities is what James analyzes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (and continues to engage with in *Pragmatism*, for example, as he describes human beings as “tangents to the wider sense of things” [144]). James, on my reading, takes religion as a “permanent function” (507) of the human spirit, notable for its creative power, “a postulator of *new* facts” (518) that “raises our centre of personal energy, and produces regenerative effects unattainable in other ways” (523). Some of Davis’s phrasings seem to suggest he may hold a different conception of religion than James’s, perhaps one that may be closer to what James classifies as a “survival theory”<sup>9</sup> attitude toward religion, in which the “human faculty” of religion is treated as something that serves a particular function and so can be substituted or replaced, satisfied by other means or expressed in other ways. James’s view is so broad and capacious, that at some point the issue may resorb into semantics. But there is still a difference evident in phrasings like: “James said that religion was *created out of* the human cry, ‘Help! Help!’ This book is structured in relation to that idea of ‘help!’”<sup>10</sup> Here is what James wrote: “How irrelevantly remote seem all our usual refined optimisms and intellectual and moral consolations in presence of a need of help like this! *Here is the real core of the religious problem: Help! help!*”<sup>11</sup> It may be more accurate to say for James that our religious instinct “responds to” or is “connected to” rather than is “created out of” the need from which this human cry arises, because “created” implies a claim about its origin, and James was careful to avoid making any such claims. On my reading of James, the

interpretive pressure is uniformly prospective rather than retrospective when it comes to any considerations of the function or usefulness of religion, which, on my view, complicates or even disqualifies the concept of causality from applying to any terminus a quo discussions.

In the first lecture of *Varieties*, James sets up an intellectual cordon to protect his subject (religion) from the “medical materialism” that “finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex.”<sup>12</sup> James makes a case for the careful separation between the theory of origin and the determination of value. Thus he writes: “not its origin, but whole *the way in which it works on the whole*, is...[the] final test of a belief. This is our own empiricist criterion....”<sup>13</sup> Davis excels at analyzing and applying this criterion of usefulness, regarding James’s thought. (Elisa New in *The Line’s Eye* also underlines this criterion of usefulness even with regard to religion, for James: “Parrying both the rationalities of sophisticates and the metaphysics of the pious, he recommended faith for its plain serviceability.”<sup>14</sup>)

In one of the most fascinating chapters of the study, Davis compares James to W. E. B. Du Bois and Thomas Hardy, addressing themes of failure and pessimism (Chapter 5). This despite the commendable fact that Davis does not paint James in an overly healthy-minded light in the first place, noting his struggles with depression and his willingness to believe “the universe to be really dangerous and adventurous,” with “real losses and real losers, and no total preservation of all that is.”<sup>15</sup> Davis, however, registers James’s muscular emphasis on action, energy, and resistance and suggests that “if Thomas Hardy turned his suffering face towards William James,” the latter might not be able to “meet the sort of pain that Hardy represented.”<sup>16</sup> Or, to borrow a phrase from Melville’s “Bartleby,” of someone who experiences the world as containing, or even constituted by, “excessive and organic ill.”<sup>17</sup> But Davis brings the reader around, ultimately, to the idea that perhaps the desire for hope, or the emotional, counterfactual mood of hope, and hope itself are not so very far apart, in the end, finding a kind of “interpenetration”<sup>18</sup> of James and Hardy’s apparently opposite philosophical temperaments.

Davis is able to make a similar move, throughout the book, with James’s seemingly conflicting descriptions and uses of the term

“truth” that have inspired scholarly debates. By taking a literary approach and staying close to the texture of James’s own language, Davis does not take a position but, I would argue, manages to do with James’s thought exactly what he credits James with: “James’s reformulations of what reality is are beautiful in the way a mathematical equation can be elegant, by putting things a wholly different way round, giving them an extra dimension.”<sup>19</sup> He notes the “strange recursive loop working between finding *and* making”<sup>20</sup> in James’s various depictions of truth, and, in a brilliant chapter devoted to drama (chapter 6), elucidates the “otherwise barely capturable” aspects of James’s thought, such as the “whole drama of the voluntary included in the involuntary and the pre-voluntary in suddenly coming into release.”<sup>21</sup> Instead of the “strange recursive loop,” resulting from conceiving of a tension between “finding” and “making,” Davis shifts us into the territory of imagining truth as

the agnostic or aesthetic moment when (we hardly know how) the actor or musician gets it right in performance, or the psychoanalyst offers a moment of cathartic release in treatment, or you manage a right word or action in an important conversation: something comes to life and falls into place.<sup>22</sup>

Truth somehow as correspondence and creation, simultaneously. Davis makes a poetic contribution, certainly, but I think his redescription and analogy amounts to a theoretic one as well.

Reading James “literarily,” then, pays philosophic dividends. As Richard Poirier observed in *Poetry & Pragmatism*:

James is partial to transitives and conjunctives, to fragments that decentralize any grammatical or ‘textual’ structure and that loosen the gravitational pull of substantives. Even before *Principles of Psychology*, his writing looks for a grammar that will do that work of what he later called radical empiricism. The grammar would make us aware that the relations between things are as important to experience as are the things themselves. It is necessary to stay loose.<sup>23</sup>

Davis devotes the second chapter of his book to what he calls, resonantly with Poirier, “The Pragmatic Grammar of William James.” Introducing the chapter, he relays his first memorable

encounter with James's prose in a close reading of a passage (21-22) that shows James's very expressiveness—language, phrasing, syntax—to be a form of “thinking forward, thinking enabling some forward movement.”<sup>24</sup> If I. A. Richards gave us books as “machines to think with,” Davis gives us James's ideas as “not static conclusions or final answers to arrive at, but *instruments to ride upon*, to give you forward movement.”<sup>25</sup> This forward movement Jacques Barzun, another fine reader of James, noted, too:

Whether in spoken or printed prose, the forward movement that makes it attractive comes from the author's offering his thought not as made but as being made. In possessing that quality, James's style is the perfect mirror of his philosophy, where ‘what really *exists* is not things made but things in the making.’<sup>26</sup>

In this book, then, Davis makes the case for “William James as a ‘literary’ thinker, in whom you can see thought not finished and aloof, but in the very act of its making”<sup>27</sup>—and can and must participate, yourself, in its ongoing construction. This book is manifestly “about the personal experience of reading William James, where reading means being involved in the very movement of his sentences, suddenly creating ideas to work with.”<sup>28</sup> And the involved reader becomes the locus of experimentation, a link not in a passive transmission of ideas, but an active participant in furthering thought, according to Davis. In his words: “James's unsystematized work, his work against systems, is *resonantly incomplete*: its involved reader becomes the attempted furthering of the thinking's completion, in another version of experimental practice.”<sup>29</sup> One of the ways this idea shows up in *William James* is in the generous sense, so rare in academic literature, that Davis has written this book as a kind of bequest or inheritance for the reader; not simply to argue for or pass on *his* James, but to introduce or reintroduce you to yours. He ends the book by reinvoking the epigraph cited in the book's dedication (notably, to his students and readers), a line drawn from Henry James's Preface to *The Ambassadors*: “Live all you can; it's a mistake not to.”<sup>30</sup> And the James Davis gives back to us, “handed on in the human relay,”<sup>31</sup> is a James that can give us more life.

Justina Torrance  
Santa Clara University  
[justinatorrance@gmail.com](mailto:justinatorrance@gmail.com)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Barzun, Jacques. *A Stroll with William James*. New York: Harper & Row, 1983.

Davis, Philip. *Reading and the Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

James, William. *Pragmatism. The Works of William James: Volume 1*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Varieties of Religious Experience. The Works of William James: Volume 15*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Melville, Herman. "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street." In *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860. The Writings of Herman Melville*. Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1987.

New, Elisa. *The Line's Eye: Poetic Experience, American Sight*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Poirier, Richard. *Poetry & Pragmatism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> Barzun, 262.

<sup>2</sup> Davis, "Series Introduction," v.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *ibid*, 46: "I don't want words of explicit, normalized encouragement; I don't want to write a book entitled 'how William James can save your life'. I want signs, instruments, and directions towards knowing how to be able to *do* something, to *get* somewhere, to *realize* more."

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, *Reading and the Reader*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 29, italics added.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>9</sup> James, *Varieties*, 387.

<sup>10</sup> Davis, xi, italics added; see also 4-5 and cf. 134.

<sup>11</sup> James, *Varieties*, 135, italics added.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 24-5.

<sup>14</sup> New, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, 125-6, quoting James, *Pragmatism*, ch. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, 132.

<sup>17</sup> Melville, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Davis, 148.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

<sup>23</sup> Poirier, 152.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 22, italics original.

<sup>26</sup> Barzun, 292.

<sup>27</sup> Davis, xi.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, x.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 20, italics added.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 177; for a more detailed discussion of this quotation, see 71.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 177.

Review of Clifford S. Stagoll, *Transforming One's Self: The Therapeutic Ethical Pragmatism of William James*. Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2023. 214pp. \$99.00

It is curious to reflect how the vagaries of intellectual fashion and place affect the understanding and reception of philosophers over time. At the time of William James's death in 1910, his popular lectures on pragmatism and religious experience as well as his campaigning anti-imperialist activism were relatively fresh in collective memory, and there was little doubt in the minds of commentators on both sides of the Atlantic that he was America's pre-eminent philosopher, psychologist, and public intellectual. In the first half of the twentieth century, this reputation was slowly eclipsed by the rise of John Dewey and the resurrection of the thought of Charles Sanders Peirce, with James eventually being popularly remembered most distinctly for *Pragmatism* and his writings on religious experience. Once the work of Rorty and others helped end the wider postwar eclipse of pragmatist philosophy, such philosophical attention as returned to James once again aimed primarily at his epistemology or his philosophy of religion; certainly, this was the general focus when I myself discovered James as a British PhD student in the 1990s. With just a few honorable scholarly exceptions from the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is only in recent years that the fuller and richer picture of James as a philosopher of broad pluralistic vision whose concern with values infused every aspect of his thought has been restored. Thankfully, this restoration has featured a plethora of notable recent works in which James's contributions to ethics and political philosophy have been rediscovered, reinterpreted, and returned to a central place in Jamesian scholarship: Sarin Marchetti's *Ethics and Philosophical*

*Critique in William James* (2015), Alexander Livingston's *Damn Great Empires! William James and the Politics of Pragmatism* (2016), Todd Lekan's *William James and the Moral Life: Responsible Self-Fashioning* (2022), and John J. Stuhr's *No Professor's Lectures Can Save Us: William James's Pragmatism, Radical Empiricism and Pluralism* (2023) are all examples of this resurrection, along with edited essay collections such as Goodson's *William James, Moral Philosophy and the Ethical Life* (2017), Stagoll & Levine's *Pragmatism Applied: William James and the Challenges of Contemporary Life* (2019), and Marchetti's *The Jamesian Mind* (2022). It is against this background, and within this esteemed company, that Clifford Stagoll's *Transforming One's Self: The Therapeutic Ethical Pragmatism of William James*, operates. Stagoll himself helps situate the work's project as both helping "to rejuvenate and develop some of the themes that emerged during humanist pragmatism's darker days" and "using the latest ideas from the study of James's work to address contemporary circumstances and locate prospects for humanist pragmatism's development" (7). Gaining greater clarity about the meaning and scope of James's pragmatist test of practical usefulness might, Stagoll suggests, in turn support seeing "various aspects of his oeuvre" as "elements of a set of ethical recommendations for living a richer, more fulfilling life than much Western philosophy would indicate as possible" (8). The emergence of such greater richness and fulfilment comes from analysis of the interconnecting Jamesian themes of human freedom, introspectively accessed dynamic experience, attention, and the capacity for self-transformation, leading into Stagoll's bold central claim that "it is not merely ethical themes that James provides us but a holistic and comprehensive theory" (16).

Structurally the book consists of an extended introduction explaining the project and putting it into context, followed by four main chapters and a brief summary conclusion on the Jamesian ethics that Stagoll has claimed to recover. Chapter One examines the particular historical background and changes that both inspired and informed James's ethical reflections, the ending of the Gilded Age's comfortable moral and religious certainties by mechanistic science in combination with an ever more dynamic and acquisitive industrial capitalism. This serves to help focus the attention on what sorts of



problems James sought to solve and enables better sense to be made of various bones of interpretative contention, especially around his ethics. For Stagoll, the tensions of this era inspire James to “begin with the evidence of everyday experience... and then work toward answering the challenges posed by materialism and determinism”, developing a “therapeutic pragmatism” which “sought to resolve the contemporary conflicts between religion and science and free will and determinism” in a distinctive manner via “a general observation about their *form*” (28, emphasis in original), a form shown in the tendency of philosophy to conceive of complex problems in terms of antagonistic dualist bifurcations. James’s attempts to reconceive and sometimes reconcile these divisions represent a project aimed at human thriving amid the tensions and possibilities, and it is against this understanding of James’s purpose that Stagoll introduces his initial overview of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”. Repudiating readings that interpret the essay in semi-utilitarian terms, Stagoll instead notes James’s emphases on freedom, on the necessary linkage of human moral life with the rest of our existence, on the unfinished, contingent character of moral rules and the linkage of all these components to his meliorist belief in the development, enrichment and improvement of human possibilities. On this account, “the good life ought to be conceived as a series of experimental self-creative engagements with life’s myriad possibilities rather than a series of activities projected toward a predetermined ideal” (43). This emphasis on self-transformational possibilities in ethics leads into Chapter Two, where the focus shifts to James’s treatment of the dynamics of human experience, in part via introspection.

Maintaining that James’s determination to stress the experientially concrete over conceptual theory leads him to deliberately blend philosophy with psychology, Stagoll allocates a central role to radical empiricism in explaining James’s approach to moral experience and in understanding his use of introspection. This requires some interpretative work given the notorious plurality of characterizations that radical empiricism has for James, and so Stagoll chooses to read it primarily in terms of first-person relational experience, stressing that James’s ideas of ethical actions and decision-making “begin with prephilosophical, introspectively attained observations about the relationships between oneself and

the surrounding objects and other people" (67) with metaphysical matters set aside. The emphasis on the first person here, however, should not be taken to deny either the presence or the meanings of relationality in James's scheme, for despite his well storied individualism, James recognized that the private self was largely defined by human relationships which influenced our decisions, and that our concern with these relationships is of more importance for an empiricist ethics than are abstract ideals. Moreover, radical empiricism's stress on the areas that classical British empiricism struggled with - dynamics of direct experience, novelty and relationality - along with its adoption of a field model of consciousness means that "all aspects of thought's dynamism can be understood in terms of the interplay between the multitudinous relational possibilities of experience and our ability to focus attention - however fleetingly - on one thing at a time" (83), and thus provides a sort of testable phenomenological account of experience for practical ethics. This duly gives the core guide to uncovering moral life potentialities in Jamesian ethics, but although the treatment gives enough in terms of explaining the immediacies of experience, the demands of ethical self-understanding and self-fashioning over time are not of themselves thus defined, a concern that takes us to the next chapter.

Chapter Three focuses on James's perspectives on the self: its putative existence, identity, and characterization (from the *Principles* onward). Stagoll maintains that in James's account of the self, the empirical verifiability of its existence involves selfhood being mutually implicated with active experience, while experience itself exists as the continuous interactively transformative interest-guided engagements of the self with the environment. Accordingly, for James "the self emerges as a *product* of conscious activity" (91), and only from this point can it begin to categorize the elements of selfhood, distinguishing the empirical self as a known object ("me") from the "I", the self that arranges, distinguishes, and sorts our experiences into those that are personal and those which are not. James's description is thus best thought of as a phenomenological rather than a metaphysical one, with a special place granted within the empirical "me" to the spiritual self, the core aspect that enables us to harness memories and abilities, and to make judgments of the relative importance of different experienced phenomena. It is this

spiritual self that is accordingly most central to James's ethics, especially in its role as the source of effort and will, and in its capacity to identify relevant phenomena to act with or upon grounds of interests, even while our relational experience renders the self at least as much a membrane or a verb as a thing. But we have the capacity to have some say over the unfolding development of the self by virtue of the relations and interests that we seek, choose and shun from the field of experience: it is this capacity that enables us to make sense of a possibility central to Stagoll's reading of James, the possibility of self-transformation. Arguing that James's developed account of the self can be seen as a sophisticated expansion of the themes of his early critique of Herbert Spencer's account of mind, invoking similar anti-reductive emphases on human creative spontaneity and the importance of qualitative experience to those he used against Spencer, Stagoll sees a Jamesian indeterminism as vital here. It is an indeterminism that operates between stimulus and response, with our freedom deriving from and manifested through our capacity to attend to some items in the experiential flux and to ignore others, but this is an account of freedom that is ongoing, processive, and which involves self-experimentation rather than invoking Kantian detachment. The important point about it, consistent with James's meliorism, is that while the actual scope of human freedom might be relatively slim, it is enough to generate the possibility of tipping the scales of action, and thus the "two conditions for the possibility of self-transformation – the possibility of meaningful human action, and the world's being (at least somewhat) receptive to the effects of such action – are satisfied" (107). The remainder of the chapter is devoted to the relationships between interests, ideals (which serve as a special kind of significant interest for ethics), the selectivity of interest-driven consciousness, and the self. While our interests generally are focused on ends and command the selectivity of consciousness, our ideals stand out as special forms of interest in two ways: because they are intellectually conceived, and because they possess novelty, a feature that James sees as possessing greater power to inspire. In this respect they fit with James's assertion in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" that all the "higher, more penetrating ideals are revolutionary", and since our interests are never finalized and every experience is potentially

transformative, the uses to which we put our thoughts and attention are themselves forms of moral action and manifestations of freedom. Within the frames of environmental circumstances, in Stagoll's reading of James our "goals and ideals are decisive *relative to our psychological capacities and material and social constraints*" (114, emphasis in original), so we must make our own choices as to the best imperatives and engage in deliberate remaking of the self in order to do so, an invocation of human potential and habituation that leads into the concerns of Chapter Four.

In this final full-length chapter, Stagoll takes the broad perspective that the Jamesian ethics so far outlined stresses the significance of patterns of thinking over time rather than actions, and accordingly that habits of perceptual attention need to move to center stage. The importance of habit for James is not only as an importantly binding conservative principle in society, but as an enabling factor for freeing up our attentive capacities by reducing the need for conscious attention in relation to much of our routine activity. This enables greater opportunities to consider new problems, ideas, patterns, and moral possibilities, including the evaluation of our existing habits themselves, though habit also brings with it the dangers of needlessly narrowing one's possibilities through exaggerated loyalty to the relevance of past experiences. Accordingly, the Jamesian ethics of self-transformation that Stagoll unearths here is one that stresses "the need for self-reflective review of one's habits, and [recognizing] the extent to which even habitual physical reactions are consequences of beliefs that are forms of habituated thinking" (131). Critical self-reflection of this sort is of the essence of living an ethically engaged Jamesian life, with moral education devoted to developing the habits of thought that "encourage a richer life" and to "act in ways that encourage more receptive and positive thinking" (132-3), with habit in turn also operating in combination with the strengthening of effort and the will. These latter capabilities are what enable the birth and growth of James's familiar "strenuous mood," the ability to battle and if necessary to sacrifice for greater long term moral ends, rather than merely accept those hedonic goods noted as biologically originary (in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life") and as potentially decadent (in "The Moral Equivalent of War"). There is thus a sort of processive, developmental notion of the good built into Jamesian

ethics on Stagoll's reading, but it is far indeed from being any philosophically traditional concept of the good which recommends an abstract formula to live by. Rather, it manifests a theory of self-transformation whereby accounts of the good life must resonate with the multiple embodied relational possibilities of human consciousness and experience. In Stagoll's own words of most economical summary, James's theory is "an endorsement of the ideal of personal growth for everyone, not just those few gifted with exemplary psychological capacities, and it is built around his model of the dynamic, empirical self rather than any specific attitudinal characteristic" (149).

In terms of this book's place in the growing recent literature, it probably has the closest affinity with Todd Lekan's *William James and the Moral Life: Responsible Self-Fashioning*, though in its stress on the transformative aspects of some free decisions, I was intermittently reminded of Richard Gale's account of what he called "Hollywood Ethics," an emphasis on certain key free decisions which fit well with James's account (Gale 1999: 61-2). Stagoll's account, however, works hard to find a unity in James's ethics, whereas Gale's view stressed precisely the tensions and duality in much of his thought. Though primarily an important interpretative work of philosophical scholarship to tease out a coherent Jamesian ethical theory, the book's effective highlighting of the ethical centrality of human attention made me think of just what striking possibilities could be available today for a Jamesian critique of the digital attention economy and the moral dangers unleashed by the fragmentation of the human capacity to focus that it has engendered. (So far as I know, no James scholar has yet attempted such a task, though some of James's thought in this area was invoked to these ends by the artist Jenny Odell in her well received 2019 book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*). But perhaps Stagoll's well-constructed elucidation of a Jamesian transformative ethics may help inspire some such wider works; in the meantime, this is a book that really is required reading for anyone with interests in William James's ethics and his account of the human experiential condition.

Piers H.G. Stephens

Full Professor, Philosophy Department  
University of Georgia  
[piers@uga.edu](mailto:piers@uga.edu)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Gale, Richard. *The Divided Self of William James*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Goodson, Jacob L. ed. *William James, Moral Philosophy and the Ethical Life*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017.

Lekan, Todd. *William James and the Moral Life: Responsible Self-Fashioning*. New York, Routledge, 2022.

Livingston, Alexander. *Damn Great Empires! William James and the Politics of Pragmatism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Marchetti, Sarin. *Ethics and Philosophical Critique in William James*. New York: Palgrave, 2015.

Marchetti, Sarin, ed. *The Jamesian Mind*. New York: Routledge, 2022.

Odell, Jenny. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. New York: Melville House, 2019.

Stagoll, Clifford S. and Michael P. Levine, eds. *Pragmatism Applied: William James and the Challenges of Contemporary Life*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2019.

Stuhr, John J. *No Professor's Lectures Can Save Us: William James's Pragmatism, Radical Empiricism and Pluralism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

Review of *The Pragmatist Challenge: Pragmatist Metaphysics for Philosophy of Science*. Edited by H. K. Andersen and Sandra D. Mitchell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 224 pp. ISBN 9780198805458. \$97.00.

In recent decades, debates in contemporary analytic metaphysics have reached a stalemate—a state that David Lewis famously characterized as the stage when “all is said and done.” Various attempts have been made to break this dialectical impasse: inquiries into the nature of these debates, which have led to the rise of meta-metaphysics; the post-modal revolution and the introduction of new conceptual tools, such as grounding; the use of more refined conception of meaning, resulting in hyperintensional metaphysics, to name just a few. At the same time, the philosophy of science has seen a significant shift toward the philosophy of special sciences—most notably physics and biology. Questions at the intersection of philosophy of science and metaphysics (i.e., the metaphysics of science) have also been addressed. Indeed, ongoing debates in this area exhibit the same kind of entrenched opposition described earlier: Humeans versus non-Humeans about laws of nature, structural realists against entity realists, and the ever-contentious battle between realists and anti-realists in general. *The Pragmatist Challenge: Pragmatist Metaphysics for Philosophy of Science*, edited by Holly K. Andersen and Sandra D. Mitchell, offers a fresh perspective on these discussions, bringing together insights relevant to both metaphysics (especially the metaphysics of science) and the philosophy of science. Andersen and Mitchell collected seven papers (including

contributions from Andersen and Mitchell themselves, as well as their joint introduction), which at first glance may seem unrelated. However, as the introduction makes clear, they all share a common thread: posing the “pragmatist challenge” to contemporary metaphysics and the philosophy of science.

The pragmatist challenge originated from the idea of applying pragmatism—very broadly construed and in line with the core ideas of classical pragmatists such as James and Peirce—to pressing issues in these fields. All authors share an understanding of pragmatism as more of an approach, method, or a way of thinking, than a fixed set of doctrines each pragmatist endorses. For Andersen and Mitchell, the pragmatist challenge is twofold: first, it is a distinctive approach to current debates in the metaphysics of science; and second, the application of pragmatist tools to key topics and problems in the philosophy of science. A pragmatist approaches metaphysical disputes by asking what difference each of the conflicting theories makes to experience, aiming to *actually resolve* the dispute (as James once addressed the puzzle of the squirrel on a tree). In this sense, the pragmatist challenge functions as an alternative meta-metaphysics. By posing this challenge to opposing sides in a dispute, we work toward resolving the disagreement and arriving at a pragmatically acceptable—or pragmatist—metaphysics. On the other hand, applying pragmatist tools, such as functional, means/ends analysis, to issues of interest to philosophers of science results in a typically pragmatist philosophy of science. All the contributions in this volume paint a compelling picture of what the general pragmatist approach in the philosophy of science looks like, while simultaneously providing specific pragmatist solutions.

Humeans claim that scientific laws are nothing more than generalizations grounded in a Humean mosaic consisting of facts about the instantiation of perfectly natural properties at spacetime points. The paradigmatic Humean view is Lewis’s Best System Account of laws. On the other hand, non-Humeans object that Humean laws cannot explain these non-modal facts, because those laws are themselves explained by the very same facts. Edward Hall argues that the entire debate has been misconstrued: Humean account of laws should not be understood as a metaphysical explanation of the facts about laws in terms of the facts in the



Humean mosaic. Rather, Hall contends that Humeanism about laws provides an explanation of the (pragmatic) reasons for adopting the concept of law and using it in specific ways to structure scientific inquiry, thereby helping scientists achieve their goals. This proper understanding of Humeanism deflates the entire debate, which is why Hall sees Lewis's Best System Account as "a paradigm of respectful deflationism"—radically pragmatist and anti-metaphysical.<sup>1</sup>

In a similar spirit, Sandra Mitchell examines the debate within the realist camp between structural realists and entity realists. Structural realists claim that what is real is what figures in the abstract structures present in scientific theories and models, while entity realists maintain that reality consists of entities with causal powers. Mitchell argues that reality is not limited to structures or entities alone; rather, real phenomena emerge through the interaction between theoretical and conceptual frameworks and experimental models and practices. She proposes an interactionist metaphysics of affordances as her version of pragmatist metaphysics underlying science. According to this view, what is real are affordances—"stable, detectable and representable, entities and relations... built from both experiment and theory."<sup>2</sup> Real affordances can be represented both as entities engaged within experimental practice and as structures in our best scientific theories. What makes this variant of realism pragmatist is that it "reflects the role of human judgments about reliability, types of phenomena and causation in identifying the real affordances."<sup>3</sup>

As can already be seen from Mitchell's paper, the pragmatist philosophy of science advocated by these authors is modestly realist. Scientific realism, in its strong or traditional form, holds that there is a single way the world fundamentally is, discoverable at the end of scientific inquiry. On this view, the role of scientific theories, models, and other knowledge products is solely to correctly represent the world, where representation is understood in terms of mirroring or being isomorphic to Nature. James Woodward demonstrates how this oversimplified view of science leads to various forms of ambitious metaphysics, in which dubious entities are postulated as truthmakers for current theoretical claims. According to Woodward, a pragmatist philosophy of science requires only minimal metaphysics—empirical facts about the

world that explain why scientific procedures and theories work. Contrary to Hall, he regards Lewis's Humeanism concerning laws of nature as a form of ambitious metaphysics, illustrating that these authors do not align in every respect. Woodward rejects a literal interpretation of scientific theories and models but does not deny that they enable us to extract information about the world. In conducting general pragmatist philosophy of science, we should focus on how models are used, understanding them as tools that scientists employ to derive information from nature. Beyond its descriptive or interpretive function, a pragmatist philosophy of science necessarily includes an evaluative or normative component, assessing scientific tools within a means/ends framework—specifically, how effectively they serve various scientific goals, such as prediction, explanation, causal analysis, classification, manipulation, and control.

Holly Andersen begins with James's views on experience and truth, as well as his broader interpretation of the "pragmatic maxim." His expansive conception of experience and of what counts as making a difference in experience allowed him to use the pragmatic maxim primarily as a means of settling metaphysical disputes. Andersen builds on these considerations to develop the notion of the pragmatist challenge, making an interesting observation that even terminological disputes have consequences for experience. Moreover, she develops a Jamesian metaphor of truth as "trueing"—a process by which knowledge products are "brought into true" with certain aspects of the world. Following James's rejection of the correspondence theory of truth, she argues against the view that idealizations in science are straightforwardly false or merely useful falsehoods. Instead, given her conception of truth as trueing, idealizations are not false but are rather essential to true models onto particular aspects of reality. They are neither true nor false in isolation, as assumed by those who subscribe to truth as correspondence, but should instead be assessed in terms of their role in improving a model's fit for its intended purpose.

According to David Danks, there are two distinct approaches to pragmatist philosophy of science: one focusing on realist science, the other on pragmatic science. From a realist perspective, science is solely an enterprise focused on truth, whereas from a pragmatic perspective, science is a means of achieving the various goals of

scientists. Danks demonstrates how a realist understanding of science leads to the reification of scientific objects or the contents of many scientific theories, which in turn makes science difficult (or impossible) to unify. Consequently, the pragmatist philosophy of science should be pursued by focusing on science as a pragmatic endeavor. The pragmatist philosopher is concerned with providing methodologies to advance science, and their proposals are simultaneously evaluated based on pragmatic criteria—specifically, whether they effectively help scientists achieve their aims.

Laura Ruetsche's paper demonstrates the nature of a pragmatist philosophy of physics. Ruetsche takes a pragmatist stance on the interpretation of fundamental physical theories, arguing that the best way to understand a physical theory is to associate it with “different interpretations supporting its application in different circumstances.”<sup>4</sup> Regarding quantum field theory, she argues that it necessarily involves pragmatized content—content indexed not only to the way the world is, but also to our aims and the circumstances of theory use. This pragmatized content remains, despite claims that it reflects only a current incomplete state of physics.

It is not possible to do justice to all the arguments and promising ideas this volume contains. Therefore, I will only point out that the main pragmatist attitude towards realism, adopted by all these authors, goes against that of mainstream positions in contemporary literature—specifically, Theodore Sider's strong realism. Unsurprisingly, many authors here explicitly address his views and attempt to refute them (Hall, Woodward, Danks). Sider's position is roughly that the world is fundamentally structured in a unique way, which can be captured by a privileged description that will presumably be achieved when science reaches its culmination. As emphasized in the introduction, this volume offers an alternative between this kind of strong realism based on “the end of science” and oversimplified operationalism and anti-realism, making it an essential resource for everyone working in metaphysics, philosophy of science, and the metaphysics of science. Authors did an excellent job of developing their ideas and articulating this pragmatist approach to current and lively debates in these fields. Of course, much work still needs to be done, and this approach applied to other

debates and problems. That is why I expect that this book will be read and carefully scrutinized in years to come.

Nikola Stamenković  
University of Belgrade, Serbia  
[nikola.stamenkovic@f.bg.ac.rs](mailto:nikola.stamenkovic@f.bg.ac.rs)

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> H. K. Andersen and Sandra D. Mitchell, eds., *The Pragmatist Challenge: Pragmatist Metaphysics for Philosophy of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 141.

<sup>2</sup> Andersen and Mitchell, 115.

<sup>3</sup> Andersen and Mitchell, 128.

<sup>4</sup> Andersen and Mitchell, 181.

# RELATED SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS ON WILLIAM JAMES

Fall 2024-Spring 2025



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, Jordan Williamson at [periodicals@williamjamesstudies.org](mailto:periodicals@williamjamesstudies.org) and we will include it at the next opportunity.



**Castella-Martinez, Sergi and Bernadette Weber. "Artistic Imagination and its Role in Moral Progress. Embracing William James' Cries of the Wounded," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (2024), <https://doi.org.10.1177/01914537241284964>.**

In recent pragmatist-leaning philosophy and ethics, the Jamesian notion of the cries of the wounded has reemerged as a method of evoking moral progress. Philosophers like Philip Kitcher have argued that a surefooted approach to the complaints of those harmed by given social moral arrangements may lead to an improvement of moral thought, practices and institutions. Yet, at the same time, it has been acknowledged that this comprises a most evident problem: many wounded stakeholders do not cry out about their sorrow, not at last because they may not be capable of doing so. In this paper, we aim at providing a more detailed account on the communicative *range* of social unrest, capable of overcoming the reductive vision of some possibly harmed as being silent. Some moral philosophers have highlighted the role of the arts and the humanities in the fostering of a more empathetic imagination. With the aid of continental aesthetics (T. W. Adorno and M. Beistegui), we acknowledge the value of artistic imagination as a communicative faculty extending beyond the limits of discursive reason through non-conceptual tools. Taking it into account in moral inquiry effectively expands and provides a more detailed account on the wounded that are apparently silent, as it includes a variety of forms of communication as moral standpoints and conversational apostrophes. This finally leads us to reread James' take on the notion of the cries of the wounded, to emphasize the necessity to understand it as a fruitful stance about inclusive moral inquiry exceeding the limits of a conceptual-discursive focus.

**Ceragioli, Michael Andrew. "Josiah Royce, William James, and the Social Renewal of the "Sick Soul": Exploring the Communal Dimension of Religious Experience." *Religions* 15, no. 9 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091045>.**

In *The Sources of Religious Insight*, Josiah Royce assesses William James' pragmatic evaluation of exalted, private religious experience, advanced in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as inadequate to encompass the full range of religious experience. Among other contributions, Royce adds social and communal experience to James' individualistic appraisal. Rather than tacking on to the familiar contemporary critical conversation about the Jamesian restriction to private experience, I argue that James and Royce are helpfully brought together through an understanding of religious conversion: James' foundational predicament of the "sick soul" returned to health through religious conversion gains depth and coherence through the attention Royce gives to overcoming alienation through communal participation. In our time of dislocation and self-preoccupation, drawing together these two seminal models of religious experience provides an instructive account of the individual's transformation by way of communal renewal.

**Debaise, Didier. "The Land of the Moderns: The Sense of Latour's Pragmatism." *Theory, Culture & Society* 41, no. 5 (2024): 59-68, <https://doi-org.10.1177/026327642412754>.**

In his major work, *An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence*, Bruno Latour sets out to establish an anthropology of the Moderns based on the plurality of the modes of existence that make up their world. What about the beings of science, politics, art, religion, economics and so on? How do these beings relate to one another, and how do they constitute the specific forms of thought of the Moderns? Taking as its starting point one of the central notions of modern thought, namely the notion of matter, this article seeks to identify the way in which Latour shows its importance in the constitution of modern thought. It examines its topicality through the double prism of an ecological and decolonial approach that animates Latour's work, and which this article proposes to revisit.

**Dyck, Denae. "Surprised by Hope: Possibilities of Spiritual Experience in Victorian Lyric Poetry." *Religions* 16, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16020255>.**

This article reconsiders literature's capacity to express and evoke spiritual experiences by turning to William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, especially his discussion of mysticism and his suggestion that poetry can bring about such states. James's ideas are especially promising given recent developments in postsecular and postcritical scholarship that problematize a religious/secular divide and call into question a hermeneutics of suspicion. Bringing James into conversation with Paul Ricoeur, I aim to show how receptivity to spiritual experiences in literature might generate expansive models of both poetics and hermeneutics. To pursue these possibilities, my study analyzes three examples of Victorian lyric poems that probe the edges of wonder: Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush", Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Nondum" and Dollie Radford's "A Dream of 'Dreams'". These case studies strategically select work by writers of various belief or unbelief positions, highlighting the dynamism of the late nineteenth-century moment from which James's writings emerged. I argue that this poetry facilitates a re-imagination of hope, beyond a faith/doubt dichotomy, as well as a re-framing of revelation, from proclamation to invitation. Building on insights from both James and Ricoeur, my discussion concludes by making the case for cultivating an interpretive disposition that does not guard against but opens toward poetry's latent potential to take readers by surprise.

**Molto, Daniel. "Passional Atheism, Passional Agnosticism and 'The Will to Believe.'" *Religions* 16, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16010043>.**

Jack Warman and Joshua Cockayne have recently claimed that the arguments that William James provides in his famous lecture 'The Will to Believe' to justify passional



theism would equally justify passional atheism. They are correct in this claim, but there is in fact more than one way that a non-theistic doxastic attitude can be passional justified given what is said in James's lecture. In addition to outright, passional motivated, atheistic belief, there is also the possibility of arriving at theistic non-belief (henceforth 'agnosticism') when the passional reasons for adopting theism (even where that option is "live") are overcome by the passional reasons for not adopting theism. James takes great pains to argue against the claim that we must prefer passional non-belief over passional belief, but he does not argue that we must prefer passional belief over passional non-belief and, in fact, he explicitly denies this, or so I shall argue. Thus, on my interpretation of the lecture, the choice to go without religious belief, even where that option is presented as forced, momentous and live, can be passional justified. Moreover, so can the adoption of outright atheistic belief for passional reasons.

**Stengers, Isabelle.** "With and After the *Inquiry*: How do we Pragmatically Move from the Moderns to the Contemporaries?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 41, no. 5 (2024): 45-57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764241275483>

In *Down to Earth*, Bruno Latour addresses all inhabitants of the Earth as contemporary, all sharing a same present which he names 'the new climatic regime'. It does not mean that Latour endorses a new type of coloniality, erasing differences in the name of the emergency. 'Becoming Terrestrials' is not a call for unity in order to 'save the Earth'. It does however put into question the 'charitable fiction' Latour proposed in what he considered his opus magnum, the *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*. This paper will address the concern Latour expressed at the end of his life: has his *Inquiry* a future in the new climatic regime? Will the values Moderns both instilled and mistreated still matter for the ex-Moderns? This induces a reading of the *Inquiry* attentive to both its strategy and its partis pris, that confronts them with the radical orientation changes that mark *Down to*

*Earth*. This results in a speculation about some of the rewritings Bruno Latour might have considered, had life granted him the time.

**Stewart, Jon.** "William James's Assessment of Nihilism as a Psychological Phenomenon." *Phainomena* 33, nos. 130-131 (2024): 49-71. <https://doi.org/10.32022/PHI33.2024.130-131.2>

The present article examines the contribution to the problem of nihilism found in the American philosopher and psychologist William James, specifically in his essay "Is Life Worth Living?" from 1896 and the chapter "The Sick Soul" from his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* from 1902. At the age of 27, James suffered a period of intense depression that lasted from the fall of 1869 until the spring of 1870. This experience shaped his views on nihilism. The present article argues that James's proposed solution to the problem of nihilism, although formulated rather differently, is in essence the same as that of Jean Paul and the Danish thinker Poul Martin Møller. James's originality can be found in his treatment of the issue as a psychological problem.

**Viney, Wayne.** 2024. "William James on Unification." *History of Psychology* 27, no. 4 (2024): 371-83, <https://doi.org/10.1037/hop0000265>.

The major focus of this work is on William James's insistence that unification should not be explored in the abstract as if it were one thing. Rather, unity should be understood in terms of its major kinds. There are unities and pluralities with respect to such topics as values, methods, causes, and prescriptions about what to read and study. This article explores James's mature position on unification as set forth in his major psychological and philosophical works and letters.