

## CHAPTER 1

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# External Dimensions of James's Individualism

Of all the contexts in which James discusses individualism, it is in his writings on interhuman relationships that he is most straightforward about it. In these writings, he defends the view that society must be understood in terms of its parts—its individuals—and attacks the view that individuals are to be explained in terms of the whole of society. It is important to keep in mind, however, that individualisms are not all the same. In order to understand the precise nature of the individualism James espouses, it is necessary to study in detail the particular way he holds individuals to be primary to their societies. That is the purpose of this chapter.

I will discuss James's views on the relations between individuals and their societies in five sections. In the first, I will begin examining James's social individualism by analyzing his view of the role of individuals in social evolution. According to James, there are two types of individuals involved in this evolution: geniuses and what I will call non-geniuses. These two types of individuals have different roles to play in the selection model of social evolution. According to this model (which can be seen as a variant of the reflex action model), novelty is presented, selected, and then assimilated. James holds that geniuses are those individuals who present novel ideas to a society. Non-geniuses are those who select from these novel ideas the one that will be assimilated into the structure of the society. Important to the discussion in this first section will be the question of the origin of geniuses, as well as that of their identification.

The last four sections of this chapter further develop the picture of James's social individualism by examining the relation between individuals and particular communities within society. The particular communities I examine are the scientific, the governmental, the religious, and the academic. Because institutions in the form of the government, the church, and the university play significant roles in the life of the last three of these communities and because James has much to say about them, their discussion will raise the question of James's view of the proper role of institutions in society.

### THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

James gives his clearest account of the roles of genius and non-genius in "Great Men and Their Environment," first published in 1880 and reprinted later in *The Will to Believe*. In this article, he argues against Herbert Spencer's view of the causes of social evolution. Spencer's view is that environmental conditions determine what changes a society will undergo, and that individual contributions are properly not assigned to the individuals themselves, but to the environment that formed them. James claims this view is unscientific, as well as mistaken, and argues for the rival view that societies change as a result of the "accumulated influences of individuals" (WB, 164).

James is not entirely clear in this essay to what extent he holds the influences of individuals to be the *exclusive* catalysts of social change. In stating his thesis, he claims of a community different in one generation from what it was in another, "The difference is due to the accumulated influences of individuals, of their examples, their initiatives, and their decisions" (WB, 164). This seems to imply that individuals are the *sole* cause of social change. Later, in a footnote, he admits that the individuals' environment shapes them to some degree through its educative influence (WB, 170, n. 3). Still later, he writes, "The fermentative influence of geniuses must be admitted as, at any rate, one factor in the changes that constitute social evolution" (WB, 172). Here James seems to weaken his conclusion to the view that individual influences are one cause among many that result in social change.

Whether or not James believes that individuals are the sole catalysts of social change, he is convinced that the relation between individuals and their social and physical environments is not one of mere dependence. Individuals may, indeed, be influenced by their environment, but they have something to contribute to that environment that they did not originally derive from it. In James's terms,

individuals belong to a different cycle of operation from their environment. Although an omniscient knower would not have to distinguish between different cycles of operation, such distinctions are, for James, an essential part of human knowledge. Exploring further the difference between finite and infinite knowledge will help us understand better James's notion of cycles of operation, a notion that is central to his individualism.

James himself believes in free will, but he grants, for the sake of argument, that all human actions are determined. On this supposition, an omniscient and omnipresent being would rightly see remote environmental occurrences as causes of concrete occurrences in the human sphere. James takes as an example the case of a little boy who throws a rock at a sparrow and kills it. An eternal being might cite among the causes of this action the configuration of the Milky Way, the Constitution of the United States, and the early history of Europe. However, human beings cannot be infinitely concrete. We can think universally only by thinking abstractly. If we want to think concretely, we must limit ourselves to a specific part of the whole. We can either say abstractly that the boy's action is the result of the predetermined course of the universe acting in accordance with natural law, or we can remain concretely within the specific purpose of a particular inquiry. For example, if our interest in the sparrow's death is for the purpose of punishing its killer, we must consider the immediate factors that could have caused its death and leave to one side long-term astronomical and historical influences.

From a human perspective, James concludes, there are various cycles of operation, depending on our purposes. For a mycologist, the mold growing on certain biscuits in a ship's hold may be of great interest. In her study of it, she naturally disregards the nationality of the ship or the direction and purpose of its voyage. For the captain engaged in a naval battle, however, the mold growing on the biscuits is totally irrelevant. These two cycles of operation would be related only from a universal perspective (or at least from some perspective far wider than the human one). From the narrower, human perspective, they must be kept separate.

James points out that Darwin's theory of evolution involves a distinction between cycles of operation. In fact, James argues, one of Darwin's greatest insights is the distinction between the cycle of operation involved in the production of biological change and the cycle involved in its maintenance. Pre-Darwinian biologists hold that biological evolution is produced by adaptive changes of an organism to its environment. For example, the necks of giraffes are lengthened when they

stretch to forage on the leaves of trees. Other adaptive changes include the strengthening of taxed muscles and the growing of calluses on persistently rubbed skin. Darwin contends that these adaptive changes pale in significance when compared to physiological changes produced through mutation and that mutational variations occur almost independently of the environment. That is, the production of change belongs to a non-environmental cycle of operation, even though the maintenance of that change has very much to do with the environment.<sup>1</sup>

When Darwin calls mutations “accidental variations,” James argues, he does not mean to imply that they do not occur in accordance with natural law. He means, rather, that the changes are remote from environmental factors. Perhaps if we knew the total system of the universe, we would be able to trace the connection between the birth of a giraffe with a peculiarly long neck and the environment into which it was born. From a human perspective, however, we separate these situations into two cycles of operation. The variation occurs irrespective of the social, political, or physical environment. From the standpoint of the environmental cycle, we must accept the variation as a given and then proceed to the question of whether, through natural and sexual selection, the environment will maintain or destroy the variation.

In a similar way, James holds that the causes of production of great men and women lie in a cycle of operation different from that in which a sociologist works. A sociologist must accept geniuses as given, just as Darwin accepts spontaneous variations as given. The sociologist’s proper inquiry is not into the origins of genius, but into the interplay between geniuses and their environment. Although the social environment does affect a genius through socialization and education, its main relation to genius is one of selection.

A society, James points out, is capable of development in a number of ways. The great individuals in a society use their creativity and influence to suggest certain specific alternatives, and the society selects which one to follow. Of course, a society is more positively disposed toward certain types of suggestions than it is toward others. But this is largely due to its having followed geniuses in previous generations. These past selections have closed off certain possibilities and opened up new ones. Thus, social change involves an interplay between two different cycles of operation: the genius—a product of physiological and infrasocial forces—who creates certain specific alternatives; and the social environment, which accepts or rejects the suggestions of a particular genius. James writes of these two cycles of operation and their interplay, “Both factors are essential to change. The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The

impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community" (WB, 174). Although James's claim that geniuses are the catalysts of social change shows him to be an individualist, it is clear that he is not defending "sheer" individualism, since he emphasizes the dependence of the creative ideas of geniuses on communal selection for survival.

After establishing the importance of the individual cycle of operation, James is in a position to show why he holds the arguments of thinkers such as Herbert Spencer and Grant Allen to be unscientific. These men claim that the environment is solely responsible for social evolution. If by "environment" they mean "the outward cycle of visible nature and man," James contends, their claim is simply incorrect. He argues, first, that it fails to take into consideration the physiological cycle of operation. Second, James points out that their claim fails to distinguish between necessary and sufficient conditions of change. Certain geographical features of an environment may be necessary for a people to develop in a certain way. But it is possible to respond in a variety of ways to the same geographical parameters. An arctic climate, for example, necessitates industry. But it is not sufficient in itself to determine whether that industry will be peaceful, as in the case of the Eskimos, or warlike, as in the case of the Norsemen. Third, James holds that it does not fit the facts of actual communities. New Guinea, James contends, is very similar to Borneo in size, geological features, climate, and flora, but it is very different from Australia in these ways. According to Spencer and Allen, we would expect the fauna of New Guinea to resemble that of Borneo and to differ from that of Australia. Empirical investigation shows that, in fact, the opposite is the case and casts doubt on their theory. James raises a similar problem with respect to the human populations of Corsica and Sardinia. Because the physical conditions of these two islands are very favorable, it is to be expected that their human populations would have distinguished themselves over against their neighbors. The physical conditions of Sardinia, in particular, are superior to those of Sicily. Once again, the fact that Sicily has played a significant role in world events, while Corsica and Sardinia have rarely appeared in the pages of world history, argues against the claim that the environment is the sole determiner of social development. James concludes that the vast differences in the histories of these islands are due to the individual cycle of operation. That is, great men in Sicily pointed out the way toward the greatness of the society; whereas, Corsica and Sardinia lacked such men of genius to guide them.<sup>2</sup>

If, on the other hand, by "environment" Spencer and Allen mean "the whole of nature," James argues that their claim then resembles

Eastern mysticism far more than it does science. Their ultimate explanation for any event must be a vague appeal to the ultimate conditions of the universe. According to James, this appeal is a fatalistic pantheism that is more a metaphysical presupposition or an emotional stance toward the universe than it is a scientific explanation.

At this point, James's basic understanding of the relation between geniuses and their environment should be clear. Although it is true that an individual is influenced by the environment through processes such as socialization and education, James maintains that an individual's insights are not determined by that environment. Specific insights are produced by great men and women and may be preserved by the society. I have already pointed out that James is not clear to what extent he believes these insights are the *only* catalysts of social change. It seems reasonable, however, to interpret this ambiguity in James's account in accordance with Darwin's position. Just as Darwin admitted that there are adaptive changes but argued that the changes due to spontaneous variation are much more important for evolution, so I think James would admit that there are factors in social evolution other than individual influences but argue that it is these that are the most important.

This basic understanding of James's views leads to two very important questions. First, who are the "great men and women" in a society? We know that these geniuses are highly creative persons with original suggestions for the way a society ought to develop. But how can these geniuses be identified in a particular society? James does not speak directly to this question, so it is necessary to formulate a Jamesian answer based on his indirect treatment of the issue. Of course, there is no difficulty in identifying the geniuses who have been selected by a society. Their names appear in the society's history books, or, if they are still alive, in its newspapers. These geniuses have talents in different areas. Some are political geniuses; some are artistic geniuses; some are military geniuses. In rare cases, an individual may be a genius in more than one area. Usually, however, political geniuses are artistic non-geniuses, and artistic geniuses are military non-geniuses.

Easy as it is to recognize selected geniuses, non-selected geniuses can be very difficult to identify. This identification, however, is as important as it is difficult, since non-selected geniuses are potential selected geniuses. Without this identification, it is unclear how a society should allocate its scarce resources of support. Competitions, tournaments, and other contests are methods societies often use to identify these important individuals.

The difficulty of identification is made greater by the fact that the proper categorization of individuals is dependent, in part, on social

context. For example, there are many individuals who are not international geniuses but who are geniuses in their particular country or city or in a particular political or religious organization. In fact, if the society is defined in narrow enough terms, there is a sense in which all individuals can be considered geniuses. Thus, the important task of identifying potential selected geniuses often involves less the mere identification of genius than the identification of individuals who have genius to the degree required by the social context in question.

This leads to an important point about the categories James creates and the distinctions he draws in his work. They often resemble his definition of genius in that they collapse under the right kind of pressure. We have just seen how, careful as James is to set up genius as a special category of individuals in a society, there is a sense in which all individuals can be considered geniuses. In chapter 2 we will see, similarly, that in his psychological writings James states in the strongest terms the psychological isolation of each individual and then softens that isolation by suggesting ways in which the borders of individuality can be crossed. In his writings on religion, to consider an example we will discuss in great detail in chapter 3, James takes great pains to distinguish between healthy-minded and morbid-minded religion and between once-born and twice-born types of individuals. Later, he blurs the first distinction by claiming that it is an abstraction and that most people are a mixture of healthy-mindedness and morbid-mindedness. He then blurs the second distinction by stating that the classification of an individual as of the once-born or of the twice-born type is often quite arbitrary.

These examples point to James's special use of categories. On the one hand, he sees certain general distinctions in a topic of inquiry and finds it helpful to create categories to describe these distinctions. Wanting to remain true to the facts, however, James never lets himself be beguiled by these categories. He sees that there are cases that fit the categories only imperfectly. A more systematic and rationalistic thinker might ignore such cases in order to preserve the neatness of the categories. In James's hands, to the contrary, it is the neatness of the category that is sacrificed to do justice to the individual cases. By keeping in mind James's approach toward categorical thinking and by understanding the reasoning behind it, we can understand better what can and what cannot be reasonably expected from a Jamesian category.

The second question that arises from James's discussion of the genius cycle of operation concerns the actual value of the contributions of geniuses. If it is true that the universe is determined, an omniscient and omnipresent being would be able to see that the contributions of geniuses are completely determined and are not novel,

unique, or irreducible. James's distinction between cycles of operation would concern merely finite perspectives of the universe. That is, the contributions of geniuses would seem important to us only because of our limited perspective. Whether or not Spencer's position is merely a metaphysical presupposition or an emotional stance toward the universe, he would be right in claiming that the contributions of geniuses are nothing other than functions of their environment.

There are seeds in this early article of views James develops later. Using terms from these more developed views, we can see that James's point here is that, even if we grant that the universe is a deterministic, block universe, pluralism and individualism still have their place. James points out that Darwin's distinction between spontaneous variation and environmental selection is a pluralistic move, and he recommends to Spencer and other sociologists that they make a similar pluralistic distinction between the origin and the selection of genius. Even if the universe is completely determined, James argues, the human perspective is too limited to understand that determinism concretely. Human endeavors such as natural science and sociology must recognize human limitations. These endeavors make progress precisely by remaining within the boundaries fixed by such limitations. Thus, James's argument is that, even on the assumption that the universe is determined—an assumption James grants Spencer only for the sake of argument—pluralism must not be abandoned.

In a deterministic universe, the limitation of human knowledge results in an uneasy tension between an abstract notion of the way the universe "really is" and the concrete knowledge we humans can have of it. Spencer and others try to resolve this tension by giving up the human perspective. Although it appears that individuals change society, they argue, individuals are merely puppets in the hands of the environment. James's response to this tension is just the opposite. His commitment to the reality and meaningfulness of human experience is of the highest order. Instead of giving up the human perspective, he rejects the abstract picture determinism paints of the way the universe "really is" and develops a pluralistic view of the universe that does not seek to displace the concrete. James rejects both determinism and the existence of an omniscient and omnipresent knower of the universe. For him, cycles of operation form real barriers in the universe and are not mere functions of the limited nature of human knowledge. Thus, geniuses are not determined, and their contributions are cases of true novelty.

In "Great Men and Their Environment" James is on the defensive, criticizing monism. Even if the universe is determined, he contends,

human endeavors as revered as natural science and as new as sociology must proceed pluralistically. Even if this is not the way the universe really is, it is the way natural science and sociology really are. In subsequent works, James takes the offensive, developing his pluralistic view of the universe. As we proceed, we will see that James holds that the universe "really is," like our knowledge of it, pluralistic. On this view, the finite perspectives of natural science and sociology are functions, not of a faulty human perspective, but of the pluralism inherent in the universe. This is a point to which I will return in chapter 3 and that forms a crucial part of James's mature individualism, which I will formulate in detail in Part II. For the present, I will continue tracing out the social aspects of James's pluralism, since these are also important for understanding the precise nature of his individualism.

Having examined James's views on the evolution of society in general, we are in a position to see how he applies these views to his understanding of the proper functioning of the smaller scientific, governmental, religious, and academic communities within society at large. Taking up the scientific community first, we will see that scientific progress, which follows a pattern similar to that of social evolution in general, poses a particular threat to individual freedom of belief.

#### THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

It is easy to see how James's pattern of social progress applies to the scientific community. Great scientists develop theories, which, although they take advantage of the research of other scientists, are nevertheless products of their individual genius. They then present these theories to the larger community of scientists, which ultimately decides whether the new theories will be accepted or rejected. James's writings on the scientific community, however, do not focus on the details of how this process works or on citing historical examples to prove that this pattern is followed. Instead, James concentrates his energies on curbing what he sees as abuses perpetrated by all too many members of this community.

Because of its great and lasting contributions to human knowledge, science enjoys a great deal of authority in our society. It is a standing temptation for scientists to attempt to apply this authority beyond scientific matters to other areas of human experience. James has little patience for scientists who yield to this temptation. He devotes much energy to trying to keep his fellow scientists from dictating to individuals what they should believe in contexts in which, James holds, science has no legitimate authority.

James does not, of course, dispute the great range of legitimate authority science does have. As a scientist himself, he has a great appreciation for the painstaking work of thousands of persons over the hundreds of years that modern science has been in existence. The scientific method they used has proved to be a most effective way to investigate our physical environment, and the moral integrity that, for the most part, characterized the founders of science adds to its prestige. For these reasons, its conclusions carry great weight over against any subjective pretensions of individuals (WB, 17, 49).

James argues, however, that some scientists—W. K. Clifford and T. H. Huxley among them—allow themselves to be carried away by the phenomenal success science has enjoyed and attempt to put in place what he calls the “scientific veto.” These scientists believe that science is the only source of valid belief and that it has a right to forbid individuals to adopt beliefs except on the basis of coercive scientific evidence. Clifford contends, for example, “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (quoted in WB, 18). Where such evidence is lacking, Clifford maintains, we must remain in doubt.

In his various writings, James marshals four arguments against the scientific veto. First, the veto is self-contradictory; second, neither science nor its practitioners have the authority to implement it; third, science itself does not follow the veto; and fourth, some nonscientific beliefs are unavoidable. It is important to examine these arguments in more detail, not only for a better understanding of James’s views on the proper relation between the individual and the scientific community, but also because of their connection with James’s psychological and metaphysical writings to which we will turn in subsequent chapters.

In support of his first argument that the scientific veto is self-contradictory, James discusses the relation of science to that which still lies beyond its borders. Some of James’s scientific colleagues go so far as to say that science has made all of the foundational discoveries, which, lacking only certain details, will soon lead to the final truth about the universe. But James points out that such a view of science fails to take into account the facts that modern science is only a few centuries old and that it continues to make fundamental discoveries. A realistic view of science shows that its task is far from completion. Science is still surrounded by a vast sea of ignorance it has yet to explore. Thus, whatever this sea contains, and whether or not science will eventually be able to explore it in its entirety, we can be certain that the world of our present knowledge is only a part of some larger world, a world that, at present, is a mystery to us.

Scientists such as Clifford and Huxley, whom James calls agnostic positivists, maintain that we must respond with neutrality to this larger world. Since it is a mystery to us, we must remain skeptical about its contents until we acquire adequate scientific knowledge about it. But this scientific veto, James argues, is self-contradictory. It lacks scientific justification itself. The scientific veto is merely a statement of personal preference on the part of some scientists. The first step in applying the veto would be the declaration that the veto itself is unscientific and for this reason illegitimate.<sup>3</sup>

James's second argument is that, even if the veto were not self-contradictory, science would not have the authority to impose a limitation of this sort on individual belief. Science can make legitimate claims concerning matters that have been adequately studied by scientists, but it cannot make legitimate pronouncements about things that have not yet been adequately studied.

Third, in a move that anticipates the work of Thomas Kuhn, James argues that scientific progress depends, in part, on nonscientific motivations, desires, and beliefs. Science would not have enjoyed its great success had it not been for investigators who stubbornly demanded that the apparent chaos of the world reveal itself in an orderly, rational way. Moreover, the best investigators are not disinterested observers; rather, they have a great interest that the universe reveal itself in a particular way. That is, the best investigators are those who, while they are careful to avoid deception, want to see their hypotheses confirmed. James concludes that science is actually driven by psychological desires and beliefs that the scientific veto would not allow (WB, 21–2, 55–6).

The final reason why James considers it illegitimate for scientists to attempt to impose the scientific veto is that the veto is impossible to follow in practical matters. Concerning purely theoretical matters, we may believe, disbelieve, or doubt a certain proposition. Consider, for example, the fifth theorem of the first book of Euclid: "In isosceles triangles the angles at the base are equal to one another, and, if the equal straight lines be produced further, the angles under the base will be equal to one another."<sup>4</sup> Most persons who are familiar with Euclidean geometry believe in the truth of this *pons asinorum*. Of course, it is possible to disbelieve this theorem despite the wrath and pejorative epithets this would draw from those who believe it. A middle way is also open. Those who know nothing about Euclidean geometry may doubt the theorem. They may lack both a belief and a disbelief in it. Because geometrical theorems are theoretical matters, doubt is quite possible in this case. The practical life of a

doubter of this theorem is unlikely to differ in any substantial way from that of a believer in it.

In practical matters, however, the case is quite different. In these situations, we must act in accordance with either belief or disbelief. We do not have the luxury of doubting. Consider, for example, the statement, "I should buy fire insurance for my house." The practical result of a theoretical *belief* in the truth of this statement is that I will buy insurance. The practical result of a theoretical *disbelief* of the statement is that I will not buy insurance. But what is the practical result of a theoretical *doubt* that the statement is true? If I doubt that buying fire insurance is a good idea, then I probably will not buy it. But this result, in the practical world, is indistinguishable from the result of outright disbelief.<sup>5</sup>

At this point, James's account does not seem to correspond with experience. Bertrand Russell disagrees with James's claim that there is no practical difference between doubt and disbelief. Russell points out that we "habitually act upon hypothesis, but not precisely as we act upon what we consider certainties; for when we act upon hypothesis we keep our eyes open for fresh evidence."<sup>6</sup> That is, the practical result of doubting a hypothesis is often different from the practical result of believing or disbelieving it. In the example we considered in the last paragraph, my doubt about the wisdom of purchasing fire insurance may lead me to consult my neighbors to see whether they have bought insurance, to confer with friends in the insurance business, or to read a book on the subject before making my decision. If my doubt and indecision remain, I may express them practically by buying a smaller amount of insurance.

Although James does not take up these objections, someone might answer for him by pointing out that, as long as I am consulting neighbors and friends and reading books, I do not have fire insurance. This practical case is a strong disjunction. Either I buy the insurance or I do not. If my house burns down and I have paid the premium, the insurance company reimburses me. If I have not paid the premium, I receive no money. There is no third way. Investigation into the wisdom of buying insurance is not so much the result of doubt whether I should buy it as it is the result of belief that I ought to investigate to find out whether or not I should. If I buy a smaller amount of insurance, my action is prompted, not by doubt, but by a belief that I should buy just that smaller amount.

Although this defense could be made for James, it is unsatisfying in that it shores up his position in a merely verbal way that leaves the real issue untouched. It tries to solve the problem by redefining what

we normally consider to be doubt as belief in something else, and this redefinition leads us away from our commonsense understanding of the terms involved. For these reasons, a better response to Russell's criticism would be to admit that James overstates his case. James is quite right in showing that theoretical doubt *can* result in practical disbelief, but he goes too far by claiming that theoretical doubt *always* results in practical disbelief. There are often clear practical differences between doubt and disbelief in a given hypothesis.

Even this weaker form of James's argument, however, is strong enough to show that there are real problems with the scientific veto. Within the realm of hypotheses whose truth science is not yet in a position to decide, the rule that belief can be legitimately established only scientifically leads often (if not always) to the same practical results as the rule that we must disbelieve all such hypotheses. From a practical point of view, this seems to be a rather arbitrary way of making decisions.

In certain cases, James argues, individuals have the right to make decisions at their own risk when scientific evidence is as yet insufficient. These cases are what James calls genuine options. An option is a decision between two hypotheses, and a genuine option is an option that is living, forced, and momentous. Living options are ones in which both hypotheses seem plausible. Forced options are ones in which the alternatives are logical disjunctions, so that it is impossible to avoid making a decision. Momentous options afford unique and important opportunities.<sup>7</sup>

James cites moral, social, and religious questions as examples of genuine options that cannot be decided by science. Moral issues cannot be so decided, James argues, because they involve what *ought* to be the case, while science is concerned only with what *is* the case.

Social structures, James points out, require a certain faith in them on the part of their members. James observes that friendships are unlikely to develop unless both parties have faith in the other's good will. This is a case not only where the question cannot be decided scientifically, but also where the truth of the fact itself depends on a faith in the fact. If I believe that someone likes me, for example, I will tend to act toward that person in such a way as to make that belief true. James also notes that the facts our faith can help to create are not limited to the social realm. They include other cases in which the outcome of a decision is based on our personal action. James cites an example of one of these extra-social cases. Imagine that I am climbing in the Alps and that, at some point in my climb, I get myself into a dangerous situation from which I can save myself only by a difficult

leap. The more I doubt the success of my jump, the more likely I will fail. My doubt will likely make me hesitate so long that when I do attempt the leap, my energy will be spent, and I will be so full of fear and doubt that I will not make it. Faith in the success of my leap, on the other hand, will likely help to make it a reality (WB, 53–4, 80).

Religious matters, too, according to James, must be decided by our passional natures. If a religious option is a living one for us, then it is a genuine option, because it is bound to be momentous and forced. Furthermore, the religious hypothesis often considers the eternal element of the universe to be personal. Thus, the religious issue becomes a social one, as well, and faith in the existence of a relationship with the personal in the universe may help to create that relationship.

Because science cannot decide genuine options of a moral, social, or religious kind, James argues, these options will be decided some other way. They cannot, by definition, go undecided. Both on a practical and on a theoretical level, any attempt to avoid deciding them ends in failure. On the practical level, the attempt to avoid deciding a genuine option has the same result as deciding one way or the other. On the theoretical level, as our study of James's psychology in the next chapter will show, the attempt to avoid believing either of the two hypotheses in a genuine option requires a volitional act of disbelief in both. In genuine options that cannot in principle be decided by the intellect, James contends that: "[Our] passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide . . . for to say, under such circumstances, 'Do not decide, but leave the question open,' is itself a passional decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth" (WB, 20, italics deleted).

Before I move on to a discussion of James's views on religious and academic communities, I want to make some observations about his defense of the right of individuals to believe. It is important to note, first, the restrictions James puts on this right. In "The Will to Believe" James defends the individual's right to base beliefs on passional decisions only in the case of genuine options that cannot by their nature be decided on intellectual grounds. James's defense of the individual's right to believe, like his defense of the individual, is qualified.

Although James's defense is of a restricted right to believe, it is also important to note that he extends this restricted right to all individuals. Geniuses and non-geniuses alike have the same right in this regard. Although he describes differing social roles for these two classes of individuals, geniuses do not form a privileged class of persons with more individual rights than others. James's view of the individual's right to believe, like his individualism in general, is impartial.

James's defense of individual freedom of belief in the face of oppressive and illegitimate scientific encroachments is not merely of theoretical significance for him. Instead, his defense of the right to believe is motivated by his own bout with long-armed scientific doctrines that refuse to leave room for his spiritual needs and that even threaten his sanity. There are two scientific doctrines in particular whose unlimited extension threaten James's spiritual well-being.

The first of these scientific doctrines is determinism. James's fight against determinism is one of the most familiar parts of his biography. After completing his medical degree in the summer of 1869, James began to sink into a deep depression. Whatever the complex combination of its causes,<sup>8</sup> we can tell by its cure that it was caused, in large part, by a deterministic threat to his moral freedom. James describes the turning point of his depression in the following way:

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second *Essais* and see no reason why his definition of free will—'the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts'—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will. (LWJ, 147)

Thus, although determinism is a fruitful doctrine in many scientific pursuits, it is essential for James to keep it out of his moral life. Only with freedom of choice does he believe that life can be meaningful. Because the quest for meaning is so important to him, he fights vigorously to defend his right—and that of others—to believe in freedom.

The second scientific doctrine James fights against is materialism. Like determinism, materialism is a fruitful view to adopt in certain sciences, but it is poison to many temperaments if allowed into the spiritual realm. Materialism is especially dangerous, not only because it, too, threatens meaning, but also because it eliminates the possibility of being on intimate religious terms with the universe.

While freedom is the basis of the moralism that is so attractive to James when he is strong, nonmaterialism is the basis of the religion he needs when he is weak. When strong, James craves meaning; when weak, intimacy (see ERM, 61–3). Because both of these needs are threatened if determinism and materialism are not kept within their scientific limitations, we can see why James is so ardent in his fight against those who claim that either or both of these doctrines must be applied to all areas of life.

James's fight against the unlimited application of determinism and materialism—or, put positively, his defense of meaning and intimacy—leads to another problem to which we will return in chapter 3. The problem is that, early in life, James believes that meaning and intimacy, and the respective moralistic and religious views of the world that are based on them, are at odds. At one point, he writes, "The accord of moralism and religion is superficial, their discord radical. Only the deepest thinkers on both sides see that one must go" (ERM, 63). It is only toward the end of his life that James sees a way past the radical discord between moralism and religion and is able to integrate his needs for both meaning and intimacy. Before this integration, however, this discord results in severe tension both in James's life and in his writings.

With this examination of the personal and practical motivations for James's attacks on scientism, I will leave his discussion of the appropriate relation between individuals and the scientific community and turn to his discussion of three other communities within society: governmental, the religious, and the academic. The discussion of these three communities will bring up the question of the appropriate role of institutions in social evolution. Institutions often furnish the stage on which the roles of geniuses and non-geniuses are played. James has very specific ideas about how institutions should facilitate the drama of social change that takes place largely on their stage, and he has no tolerance for institutions that forget that this social drama is more important than their own prestige. Turning now to a discussion of James's writings on the government, the church, and the university will help shed light on what James takes to be the proper relation between individuals and institutions. This, in turn, will help us understand more deeply his views on the nature of individuals and their role in society.

#### THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE GOVERNMENT

Although James wrote relatively little about the government in his academic works, he did express important views on the relation between the individual and the government in various letters. Some of these were private letters to friends; others were public letters to the editor printed in various newspapers. For our present purposes, I would like to focus on two particular issues on which he expressed his opinions in this way.

The first is the issue of medical licensing. In 1894 and 1898, there were bills before the Massachusetts legislature requiring persons en-

gaged in medical practice to be licensed. James realized that this would render illegal the work of many alternative healers who would not consent to take the examinations required for the licenses. He saw this move as misguided for several reasons, one of which was that the state of medical knowledge was far too limited for anyone to know with certainty which types of practice were truly effective. By dismissing out of hand the novel work of a host of practitioners, legislators might be cutting off a vital source of new suggestions necessary for the evolution of medical practice. On James's evolutionary model, it was better to have a rich variety of options on which experiments could be made to determine which were most effective. Geniuses in the medical world needed to be free to develop and suggest their novel ideas just as much as geniuses in any other endeavor. James felt so strongly about this that he mailed off letters to the editor in 1894 and actually went before a committee of the legislature in 1898 to make his case.

The second issue is the American imperialism that arose in the course of the Spanish-American War. Begun with the intention of liberating Cuba from Spanish imperial control, the war ended with the United States exerting imperial control in the Philippines. James was deeply disturbed by this turn of events. The United States liberated the Philippines from Spanish control, only to become the new imperial masters of the islands. American forces quelled Filipino attempts at self-government, arguing that the Filipinos simply wouldn't be able to govern themselves effectively. James saw this argument as nothing more than a thinly veiled imperialism, all the more pernicious because of its misleading moralistic whitewash. He tried to fight this imperialism by making his views heard publicly, both by publishing letters to the editor on this topic and by joining the Anti-Imperialist League.

James's defense of individual Filipinos and of their right to govern themselves brings out another important aspect of James's social individualism. James's arguments here arise less out of a concern for staying out of the way of social evolution and more out of a deep respect for concrete individual experience. James understands how difficult it can be for human beings to respect the inner experience of others, particularly of others who are significantly different from them. James develops this point in "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," emphasizing that it is the joy we feel in our inner experience that makes life precious. But this joy is not always correlated with external success. In fact, it often seems to make itself felt under conditions that to an outside observer would seem full of boredom or suffering. James concludes that we must not presume to judge the

inner worlds of others based on our own abstract and external observations. Instead, we must respect those inner worlds (as long as they do not arise by harming others), however meaningless they may appear to us to be. James's anti-imperial position on American policy in the Philippines is a particular application of this commitment to respect the concrete experience of others.

James's responses to the medical licensing issue and to the Spanish-American War illustrate his view that individuals are important both in their own right and for the purposes of social evolution. For James, governments are institutions that should value and protect the rights and interests of all individuals, including those not under their jurisdiction. Furthermore, governments should give individual geniuses the freedom necessary to develop their ideas, protecting them against overzealous professionalisms that would seek to rule their contributions out of bounds. Indeed, James writes, "The best commonwealth will always be the one that most cherishes the man who represents the residual interests, the one that leaves the largest scope to their peculiarities" (MS, 103).

#### THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE CHURCH

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James discusses the roles of individuals and institutions in religion. He writes little about institutional religion, and the little he does write is not positive. Early in the book, he distinguishes between what he calls institutional religion and personal religion (VRE, 32ff). He holds that the former, which he defines as an external attempt to win the favor of the gods, is a secondary and derivative form of religion; he holds the latter, by which he understands an internal and individual relationship between a person and the divinity, to be the primary form of religion. James announces that his discussion in *Varieties* will ignore institutional religion, with its ecclesiastical organization and systematic theology, and will concentrate, instead, on personal religion.

In arguing that personal religion is more fundamental than institutional religion, James points out that religious sects are founded by individuals who have had great personal religious experience. The relation between churches and religious geniuses does not depart from the pattern of variation and selection, of innovation and imitation. Religion begins in the private lives of geniuses such as the Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Luther, Wesley, and Fox, who have striking religious experiences. As they relate these experiences to those around

them, their personal type of religion is either confirmed or rejected. When it is confirmed, a church or sect is often founded. This organization grows large or stays small, depending on how well it meets the needs of the larger social environment. But once the religion passes to this institutional phase, it loses James's interest and, apparently, his respect. He seems to consider churches to be largely inessential for religion. In fact, he holds that religious institutions that emphasize external and public worship may distract an individual from the primary, private experience, thus actually stunting the growth of religion.

Although James rejects the communities that tend to gather around great religious leaders, he does not leave religion merely in the hearts of individuals. There is an important public side of religion, although it is not in the church that this public side is addressed. James calls, not on the church, but on philosophy to distill from the various religious manifestations what he calls the "science of religions." To do this, philosophy must give up a rationalistic and deductive method for an empirical and inductive one. It must not dabble in dogmatic metaphysics, but must take as its starting point the actual experiences of religious persons. By comparing these experiences and eliminating from them the local prejudices and historical sedimentation, philosophy can distill the essential characteristics of religion. These characteristics can be turned into hypotheses for testing to try to arrive at a system of beliefs that even nonreligious persons might accept as authoritative.

James emphasizes that this science of religions is not itself to be understood as a religion. It is a theoretical foundation for the interpretation of religion. As theoretical, it is a public attempt to understand the personal. As public, it must allow for the construction of various "over-beliefs." That is, each individual must have the freedom to build his or her own idiosyncratic religious structure on the universal foundation. Individuals as diverse as Emerson, Whitman, Wesley, and Moody must all be allowed to build on this foundation. Only in this way is it possible to maintain the fullness and variety of the human experience of the divine.

James goes on to suggest what the theoretical foundation of religion might look like. From his study of firsthand accounts of religious experience, he concludes that religion is basically about an uneasiness and its solution. The solution involves an identification with a higher part of the self and a distancing from a lower part. To explain how this occurs, James offers a hypothesis to be tested by the science of religions. James's hypothesis is that the subconscious self mediates between the shallower and the deeper parts of the self.

Whether the subconscious *is* the deeper part of the self, or whether the deeper part of the self merely communicates *through* it to the shallower part of the self is beyond the scope of the science of religions to decide. On this question, individuals have a right to their own opinions in correspondence with their particular experience and over-beliefs.

Although this is as far as the science of religions can go, James—speaking as an individual with his own over-beliefs—has much more to say on the question. In the third chapter, I will come back to this point and take up James's over-beliefs in detail. For the present, it is sufficient to note his estimation of religious institutions. He seems to have little interest in or respect for the church and for institutional religion in general. Although he suggests an institutional, or at least a rational, function for the science of religions, it is important to understand that this function lies outside of religion proper. Interestingly, in his treatment of academic institutions, James is still quite critical but not as dismissive.

#### THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE UNIVERSITY

If the role of a genius is to develop a creative possibility and the role of society is to choose between this possibility and those created by other geniuses, what can social institutions contribute to this process? In the case of education, James argues that the university has a dual role to play. In several lectures delivered toward the end of his life and reprinted posthumously in *Memories and Studies*, James contends that the university should be both an aid to geniuses and a training ground to enable non-geniuses to discriminate wisely among geniuses. James further cautions that the university should never pretend to be more important than the individuals associated with it. A careful reading of these lectures reveals not only the details of what place James thinks the university should occupy in a society, but also what seem to be James's mature views on the proper relation between individuals and institutions in general.

In the spring semester of 1906, James was a visiting professor at Stanford University. On Founder's Day of that year, he delivered an address entitled "Stanford's Ideal Destiny." In this speech, James formulates some of the conditions for an ideal university and encourages Stanford to strive to meet those conditions. He argues that the quality of a university depends less on its facilities, boards, regulations, teaching methods, or funding than on the individuals who are there. He quotes favorably a New England quip that "a log by the roadside with

a student sitting on one end of it, and Mark Hopkins sitting on the other end" is a university (MS, 361).<sup>9</sup> In fact, James claims, the organization of the university is largely superfluous, given the presence of a few such geniuses. The cultural and even economic value of a genius cannot be overestimated. It should, therefore, be the task of the university to invite geniuses to its faculty and to give them all the support they need to expedite their work.

A few years before his address at Stanford, James had given a speech at a Harvard commencement dinner after receiving an honorary degree. In this speech, he contrasts the "club feeling" at Harvard with what he calls the "true Harvard." The true value of a university cannot be judged by its club qualities, he contends, since students' loyalties in this respect are formed according to the school they happen to attend. Nor can a university be judged by the activities of its graduates, since its alumni can be found on every side of public debates. Rather, James argues, the most admirable university is the one that best nourishes the geniuses among its students. He writes that the university "most worthy of rational admiration is that one in which your lonely thinker can feel himself least lonely, most positively furthered, and most richly fed" (MS, 354).

James believes that the value of a university must be assessed, in part, by how many geniuses it has among its faculty and students and by how successful it is in creating a supportive environment for them. But he also believes that a university's responsibility extends beyond its duty to its geniuses. A university must also take care to educate well those of its students who are not geniuses.

In a lecture delivered to a meeting of the Association of American Alumnae at Radcliffe College in 1907, James considers the purpose of a college education for non-geniuses. According to James, the purpose of such an education is that it should "help you to know a good man when you see him" (MS, 309, italics deleted).<sup>10</sup> James compares a college education to vocational training. At a business, technical, or professional school, students learn concrete disciplines. More than that, however, they learn to judge the quality of work in their field. They learn what separates the work of an expert from that of a novice. The essence of a college education, James argues, should be the study of biographical history, of the successes and mistakes of great thinkers in the quest for human perfection. This study allows students to discover the standards of human excellence and to differentiate between good and mediocre thinkers.

Human progress, James continues, occurs through the initiative of geniuses and their imitation by the community. Economic, political,

and intellectual circumstances serve only as the background to the human drama between a people and its leaders. In a democracy, James points out, the role of the people is all the more significant. Through their political and economic choices, the people select certain leaders and reject others. To do this effectively, the people must be skilled in knowing the difference between a good leader and a bad one. What better way, James asks, to develop this knowledge than through the study of biographical history conducted at college? For James, those with a college education in a democracy must play the role that the aristocracy plays in a monarchy. Just as the aristocracy is to preserve a taste for the more refined and noble of human achievements, so, too, college graduates must lead the people away from mediocrity and toward higher, more lasting ways of development.

In light of these arguments, it is clear that James considers the university to have a most important role to play in human progress. Ideally, it is a place where professorial geniuses can work to develop their theories untrammelled by financial cares and limitations of resources, where gifted students can educate themselves in an environment that supports them but leaves them free to do their work, and where the rest of the students are taught how to choose the best geniuses to follow. Unfortunately, universities sometimes fall far short of this ideal, especially when their leaders consider their primary purpose to be an institutional one. When the growth and prestige of the university become its ultimate goal, then it is less likely to be successful in its important function of aiding human progress. The university's proper function is vitiated when the institutional policy of the university becomes more important than the individuals who fill its posts.

As an example of a misguided institutional policy, James cites the abuse of the Ph.D., a recent arrival on the American academic scene. During his career at Harvard, James saw the tendency of the Ph.D. to be used, not as a spur to greater scholarship, but as an institutional stamp of approval. In "The Ph.D. Octopus," he speaks out against what he considers to be the abuse of higher degrees. He begins with an account of a brilliant man who had studied philosophy at the Harvard Graduate School and who acquired a position teaching literature in a small college. When it was discovered, however, that he had not completed his Ph.D., the president of the college informed him that, unless he earned his degree from Harvard before the beginning of school, he would forfeit his position. Consequently, instead of preparing to teach his literature classes in the fall, the student devoted his time to completing his philosophy degree. Upon submitting a brilliant and original thesis, he was told that it lacked the necessary scholarly

apparatus. His work was provisionally rejected until he could supply the appropriate secondary references. It was only with the utmost difficulty and with the greatest assurances of his academic competence that the student's professors were able to convince the president of the college to allow him to teach that year. The next spring, the student submitted his revised thesis, passed his exams, and received his Ph.D.

For James, this is a quintessential case of the abuse of higher degrees. Far from advancing the scholarship of those involved, the Ph.D. was a great obstacle to it. It is quite obvious that the candidate's instruction in literature must have suffered from the necessary concentration on his dissertation in philosophy. And it is not clear that the candidate's ability to teach literature was in the least improved during the whole process. The whole point of the requirement was so that the college could advertise that all of its instructors possessed the Ph.D. This is a case, James concludes, in which the interests of the individuals—students and instructor alike—were sacrificed for the alleged good of the institution.

James points out that higher degrees were originally established in order to stimulate scholarship, especially original research. Although the degrees themselves are nothing more than "adventitious rewards" (MS, 335), they often spur students on to levels of work that they otherwise would not attain. The sole and valuable purpose of the degrees is the motivation of individuals. But there is a real danger when degrees begin to

interfere with the free development of talent, to obstruct the natural play of supply and demand in the teaching profession, to foster academic snobbery by the prestige of certain privileged institutions, to transfer accredited value from essential manhood to an outward badge, to blight hopes and promote invidious sentiments, to divert the attention of aspiring youth from direct dealings with the truth to the passing of examinations. (MS, 336)

James singles out for special consideration two specific negative effects of the Ph.D. requirement. First, James calls the refusal to consider for a teaching position applicants who do not have the Ph.D. a case of "pure sham" and "academic snobbery" (MS, 337, 339). The Ph.D. does not in the least guarantee that its possessors will be good teachers. Nor does it guarantee that teachers will be competent in their field of instruction, since often—as in the case of the account with which James begins—they are teaching in a field other than the one in

which they earned their Ph.D. The real reason for the requirement, James argues, is to enhance the marketability of the institution. The more Ph.D.s a college can count among its faculty, the more likely it is to attract good students.

A second negative result of the system of higher degrees, James observes, is the damage it does to certain individuals. Some Ph.D. candidates are not sufficiently gifted academically to pass the rigorous requirements for the degree. They are hard workers, often poor, and need the degree to find a teaching position. These students either fail the program and in the process have their spirits broken, or else pity is taken on them and they are passed by a committee whose members acquire bad consciences in the process.

James is further concerned by the fact that once certain titles are well established in a society, it is very difficult to eradicate them. Because he detests the European fashion of allowing titles to make the scholar, he wants his country to be one in which individual merit continues to stand on its own, and not one in which an individual "count[s] for nothing unless stamped and licensed and authenticated by some title-giving machine" (MS, 346–7).

These last points show that James's approval of the university is not without qualification. He realizes the power institutions have and the damage they can inflict on society if that power is abused. For this reason, he wants to make sure that universities—and all other social institutions, as well—are guided by the needs of the individuals constituting them. Institutions guided by this policy can play important roles in facilitating the growth of geniuses and non-geniuses and in stimulating their interaction, both of which James considers to be essential elements of social evolution.

Comparing James's discussion of religious versus academic institutions, we can see he is much harder on the church than on the university. Part of this disparity may be due to anti-ecclesiastical views James inherited from his father, a liberal and independent-minded theologian who broke quite radically with the Calvinism of *his* father. James's father had little time for organized religion and its institution the church. Part of this disparity in James's treatment of the church and the university may also be due to the fact that he wrote about these institutions at different times in his life. In Part II, I will argue that James undergoes a gradual conversion in his thinking between the time of his writings on the church and those on the university. Had he written more about the church after this conversion, he might have had more favorable things to say about it. He might have seen ways

in which it, too, could have been a guardian of social evolution. This is a point to which we will return in chapter 4.

For now, it is crucial to note James's general view that, important as institutions can be in the process of social evolution, it is individuals who are at the center of it. Individuals are the ones ultimately responsible for the introduction of novelty, for its selection, and for its assimilation by the traditional. In the next chapter, we will turn to James's psychological study of the individuals who are so central to social evolution. In the individual psyche, we will find a process similar to the social one of the presentation, selection, and assimilation of novelty. This psychological process will take us a dialectical turn deeper into James's individualism.