

Introduction

Although William James is a world-renowned thinker and as close to being an American culture-hero as any academic philosopher could be, the actual influence of his thought upon academic philosophy in this country is not great. We have the pragmatic tradition, to be sure, but it has usually been other pragmatists who have set the dominant tone and leading problems—at least within the confines of academic thinking. One might be tempted to dismiss this thinking as just confining, but in a world atomized by professionalism, the departmentalized university has a sizable impact on our culture. Besides, some important thinking goes on there. We should seek out the reasons for James's oddly peripheral position.¹

The understandable reserve and caution with which most of us deploy ourselves around the problems of philosophy involves an effacement of personality. Indeed so great may be the feeling of awe that the effacement is pushed to the point of inverted, defensive impersonality or pomposity (or at least dullness, whether ponderous or mincing). But James's personality is intrusive and irrepressible. His style is by turns inspirational and dramatic, blunt and colloquial. He is present as a person in his writing. The tacit question which runs through so much professional response to James in this country is, I think, How could such a vivacious writer and personality possibly be a great thinker? The assumptions and resonances of this question are disturbing.

Second, there is James's not wholly reasonable expectation that professional philosophers would sincerely try to understand what

1. Concerning James's attitude toward the academic, see "The Ph.D. Octopus" in this volume.

he was saying, and that they could understand it. This faith that he would be followed and understood, even if he took leaps in his thought and stretched the senses of terms (not always consistently) in order to catch his vision whole, is perhaps due in part to his early family experience. His gifted father practically took as his vocation the education of his children, and William's brother, younger by less than two years, the novelist Henry, though quite different from William in temperament, was one of the most sensitive and perceptive men to live in the modern world. Indeed, it is almost as if James believed in an Oversoul of mutual understanding. And why might he not? When he was a boy at his own table, he occasionally heard Emerson himself speak of such things, and perhaps he was there to hear that man say once again that mere consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.

But the most important reason for the faulty recognition of James is just that his thought is a new vision of the philosophical enterprise which overwhelms traditional distinctions and terms. The reader firmly ensconced within any tradition will only be confused or angered by him if he allows himself to be moved at all. With a certain pre-Socratic naïveté about him, James saw central philosophical problems as if for the first time. Sometimes James is tripped by his vocabulary—when he cannot jump clear of received philosophical usage. Yet the inconsistencies, wrenchings, and vagueness of certain of his terms cannot conceal a vision of the world which is much more comprehensive and revealing than one would expect in thought of recent times; and it is a vision which has a center. Through a reading of such European thinkers as Husserl, Bergson, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein, we are, somewhat ironically, helped to capture the centered vision of the American philosopher.

James undercuts and reverses the tradition of modern epistemology regnant in various forms since Descartes. The father of modern philosophy (as he has aptly been called) had thought that mind knows immediately only its own mental bits or sensations, and that it is up to judgments like those of mathematical physics to tell us what is out there in the external world. Philosophically important truths are established by clear and distinct ideas interlocked with conceptual necessity—a position developed by the Continental rationalists. As the tradition developed in Britain—

particularly with Hume—only passively received discrete sensations were thought to supply a halfway reliable basis for judgments about the so-called external world.

James repudiates all this. He claims this tradition rests on a blindness to everyday experience of the world as we actually live through it. The tradition plasters over this experience with distinctions that are not true. First, James claims that we do not, in the life we actually live, experience the world as mental; and what the experience is experienced *as* is what the experience *is*. Second, he claims that we do not experience discrete bits of things, but whole “fields” irreducible in their wholeness. Third, our most fundamental experience and knowledge of the world is not in the form of clear and distinct ideas, but rather of ones which are vague to various degrees. (That ideas can be important and true but vague is an extraordinary thought.) Fourth, knowledge of the world requires constant, active interpretation in terms of values or standards set within an ever-present and vague world-horizon, with temporality an essential dimension; thus that sensations are allegedly passively received is not a criterion of objectivity. Fifth and finally, there is no internal or strictly subjective realm inhabited by sensations, feelings, and values which is set over against a realm of brute fact ascertained by the dispassionate methods of mathematical physics; hence there is no fundamental gulf dividing science from ethics or thought from life.

It is the intent of James’s theory of knowledge to do justice to, and to build upon, pre-theoretical experience (in the sense of theory as deliberate theorizing). James thinks it bootless and misleading to construct a theory of truth in ignorance of what the truth is true about—being or reality—and the initial grasp of this is the world experienced pre-theoretically. His theory of knowledge emerges from the center of a putatively pre-theoretical view of reality which also generates from its center an aesthetics, an ethics, a philosophy of religion, and a kind of philosophy of science. It is as pointless to seek for neatly compartmentalized specialties in James as it would be in Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, or Plato: all is entwined in a single world vision. Hence, the all too common approach to James by way of his late statement of his theory of knowledge (*Pragmatism*) is inimical to understanding that theory, for this requires a grasp of his whole

vision, a grasp which is impossible when James is approached from within the assumptions of modern theory of knowledge. Even certain eminent pragmatists ignore or repudiate James on this point; e.g., C. I. Lewis restricts the term "cognition" to theoretical formulations which refer to experience, with the latter a bare "given" which is neither true nor false.² This is a bow to the autonomy and priority of science and theoretical thought which James does not usually make; for him there is a knowledge by acquaintance (and truth) which is presupposed by descriptive or theoretical knowledge.

Critics ignorant of the pragmatic tradition have fumbled into gauche suggestions such as that James is a mere popularizer of the thought of C. S. Peirce.³ In the same month in which Peirce published his notable "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (January, 1878), James published a seminal article portending his whole view, which contains in germ his own version of both the pragmatic theory of meaning and of truth.⁴ The truth is just "the fate of thought," given an experienced world in which events fall out as the thought predicts, with what it predicts being its meaning.⁵ But without an understanding of the center of James's vision—the structures of the experienced world—his later talk about thoughts "verifying themselves" and being true because they "satisfy" must inevitably be misconstrued in terms of Cartesian subjectivism, the very position his philosophy of experience rejects. James does not epistemologize truth so much as ontologize it. To be sure, he thinks that truth pertains to mind, but mind cannot be spoken of independently of the world experienced by it; hence, he rejects traditional empiricism and rationalism, as well as realism and idealism, because they all speak of mind "in itself" as a domain or agency for the cognition of the empirical world. His

2. See John Wild's illuminating book, *The Radical Empiricism of William James* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1969), p. 369. James himself at some points in his later work suggests the same thing as Lewis. See Intro., p. 1 fn.

3. James's talk about his work is much less reliable than the work itself. Thus his words of praise for Peirce ("the founder of pragmatism") do much to conceal his own work in theory of truth. Of course, James was not only impressed by Peirce's work but was trying to boost Peirce's ill-starred career. That important philosopher could not get a regular appointment in a university.

4. "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence," included in this volume.

5. With this proviso: p. xxi.

words comprising the twin epigraphs of this volume are not inconsistent—realism in the first, idealism in the second. Minds are those of embodied beings, and they are in the world and act upon it; the world is knowable only insofar as it falls within their ideal and, in some degree, spontaneous projects. But we embodied minds find ever more and more meaning in the world than we can at any one time predict we will find, and we experience the world as that which exists independently of, and prior to, our projects.

One of the best routes to the center of James's thought is to develop John Dewey's insight⁶ that James attempted to reconcile "nature lore" (science) with "individual fate lore." James was convinced that science had generated a nightmare of alienation for man. In the ordinary nightmare we have motives but no powers; in the scientific nightmare we have powers but no motives.⁷ By that he means that the world as construed by science and by much philosophy since Descartes—i.e., as predictable but purposeless forces describable in the non-human terms of mathematical physics—answers in no way to our desires and emotions. There is no reverberation; we wander detached, our emotions merely subjective. Despite our powers and scientific accomplishments, we often ask, So what? Yes, we have done such and such—we have gone to the moon or whatever—but what's new? Our headlong pace—our dead run—crowds out consummatory experiences. How can life be significant and activity worth the bother if human dreams and emotions are nothing but by-products of systems that are describable, predictable, and controllable without any reference to them at all?

The center around which James's philosophy develops is the conviction that this scientific assumption is not just demoralizing but false. Though there appear no references to human emotions, valuations, and purposes in the formulations of science, that is due merely to the special interests and constricted viewpoint of science itself. Any complete account of what is going on when men do science—any adequate philosophy of science—will reveal a ubiquitous reference to the human element, and in the most significant, though special, sense of reference: as presupposition of

6. *The Problems of Men* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 390.

7. *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1890), II, 313.

scientific descriptions. As banal a description as "precipitation is occurring" presupposes for its sense the use of a standard involving human expectation and sensuous experience; to wit, if one were to walk outside and he were not hysterical, i.e., bereft of selective and purposive attention, he would feel sensations of water drops. Though there be no reference within the scientific description itself to human experience—though only the most technical, abstract, or quantitative notations appear—still these make sense only as progressive refinements of, and abstractions from, a world experienced by all of us in none other than sensuous, valuational and purposive terms. This experienced, or lived, world is the foundation without which human activities—e.g., scientific ones—would be impossible.

Before developing this central point further, we should note that James's terminology sometimes impedes its understanding. For example, he writes that a philosophy "will not be accepted that essentially baffles and disappoints our dearest desires and most cherished powers," and "for a philosophy to succeed on a universal scale it must define the future *congruously with our spontaneous powers*."⁸ But it is the spontaneous powers of the reader that may be baffled. Does James mean by "will not be accepted" a fact of intellectual history, or is he doing philosophy, and saying that it is not acceptable because not true? In fact, he is doing both at once, but not bothering to make the distinction. He is saying that such a philosophy will not be accepted and that it is not acceptable because not true; i.e., not only are our spontaneous powers a part of the world and must be understood if it is to be, but the world is understood in terms of these powers—and the interactions they involve—whether we like it or not. Because he does not always make these distinctions, he may give the impression of being a mere huckster of ideas—concerned with the question of which ideas will sell—and with this conceal the serious and un-sentimental position which lies at the bottom of his thought. Is the failure to make these distinctions due to mere haste and carelessness on James's part? No, because he is trying to work out an incipient and still inchoate ethics which is rooting itself at the cen-

8. "The Sentiment of Rationality," a portion of which is included in this volume, pp. 25 ff.

ter of his view, and which he will not ignore for fear of losing touch with it. This is an ethics which allows for the tragic elements of human life, and which identifies good with personal struggle and self-realization in history.

The best vantage point on James's philosophy as a whole is gained from reading his *The Principles of Psychology*, a two-volume work written at the height of his powers (1890) which is not ostensibly philosophical at all. His aim was to develop psychology as a natural science untrammelled by the questions and perplexities of metaphysics; e.g., is there a soul substance existing beyond the range of sense experience? The pleasant irony of his attempt is that he lays out a vast and fertile breeding ground for his own radically experiential philosophy.

James hoped to protect the autonomy of psychology as a science by adopting a dualistic view of mind and matter. He "supposes two elements, mind knowing and thing known, and treats them as irreducible. Neither gets out of itself or into the other, neither in any way is the other. . . ."9 He presumed that mental states could be specified and identified independently of any philosophical commitment to the nature of the world known by them, and that they could then be correlated contingently to the brain. As it turned out, his attempt to specify mental states involved him in far-flung inquiries into the nature of the world as experienced—the world as presented to mind—an incipient phenomenology. Mind turned out to be non-substantial, and understandable only in terms of relations between objects experienced, with the thinker's own experienced, expressive, and active body a ubiquitous term. Hence an assumed dualism of mental and physical substances becomes an impossibility. Likewise undercut are the presumptions of science to be independent of philosophy.

The best first stroke to sketch James's radically experiential philosophy is to recount Edmund Husserl's acknowledgment that reading James's psychology helped him find his way out of psychologism.¹⁰ That confining view held that since all thought is psychological, what thought is about is subject to psychological laws, and hence the ultimate account of the world is to be given by

9. *Principles*, I, 218.

10. *Logische Untersuchungen*, 3rd ed. (Halle: Niemeyer, 1922), II, 208.

psychology. James observed that because of psychologists' typical presuppositions they tended to systematically misdescribe what is presented in thought—thought's object, what it is about. Unwittingly they substitute what they know about the thought for what the thought knows; e.g., since they know, or think they know, that each thought is psychical and caused by a sequence of intra- and interorganic events linking stimulating object and stimulated brain, they infer that the thought knows (has as its object) its own psychical nature juxtaposed against the particular stimulating object. Nothing could be farther from the truth: the object of ordinary non-reflective thought includes nothing of a psychical nature, and much more than any *particular* object. It always includes objects related in a field which shades off from a focus of sharply defined objects and relations to a margin of those vaguely presented, and which includes the thinker's own lived-body experienced as actively involved and inserted in some way in the world. Psychology properly pursued, then, reveals a world experienced which is not subject exclusively to psychological laws. Psychology is shown to depend upon a phenomenological philosophy—an account of the world-experienced *as* it is experienced, and this includes within itself, for example, a sphere of relations properly studied by physics.

Just as there is no thought or experience which is of a single thing and nothing else (there must always be relations and a background), so there is no experience which is locked into a discrete moment of time, a "now," and experiences only it. What is given is a "specious present," a field of duration or continuity, in which the just past is present as the just past, and the anticipation of the future is present as the anticipation. Nor is this just a psychical matter of slowly expiring sensations or images. A feeling of succession is not a succession of feelings, he writes, and just as there are relations in *rerum natura*, so there are relations in thought by which they are known. That is, physical things really are temporal, what we mean by them is what we take their temporality to be; i.e., a knife really is that which *will* cut if given operations are performed, and thunder really is that which breaks in upon silence. When James says that things *are* their most important characteristics relative to our concerns and purposes, he does not subjectivize the world experienced and leave another

world unknown, or in itself; for our concerns and purposes *are* only relative to the world experienced. Purposes are no mere psychological impertinence. What is given is the mind-world relationship, not one or the other by itself. Hence James's pragmatic theory of truth is rooted in his pragmatic theory of meaning, which is rooted in turn in his philosophy of experience.

Each realm of the world is experienced in terms of temporal standards native to it; e.g., standards of mathematics are peculiar precisely because of their ideal and eternal objects, and the mode of time peculiar to operations upon them; music likewise has its own indigenous standards, etc. These criteria are not derived from mind alone or world alone, but from the relationship which is experience. Experience is a "double-barreled" term: an experiencing *of* an experienced world. James's metaphysics of radical empiricism emerges directly and explicitly from the discoveries of his *Principles of Psychology*, long before the appearance of the essays bearing that title.¹¹ The essential point is that mind and self cannot be specified independently of the world which appears to mind, and world cannot be specified independently of its modes of appearance to mind.¹² Appearances or phenomena are, then, "neutral" between mind and world, the difference between the two being nothing but a difference in the arrangement or context of the experiences. Above all, as we shall see, it is the body which is neutral: as actively lived, or body-subject, it is the non-focal center of the mental context; taken as just another organic object subject to physiological and physical laws (as a physician would take it), it is part of the context which is the physical world.

Concepts for James are "teleological instruments."¹³ That is, the world is sorted into kinds on the basis of the sorts of consequences things are taken to produce in the active train of human experience. But thought for James is not all deliberate and theoretical. Most of it is non-reflective, non-deliberate, and unable to

11. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. See pp. 162 ff.

12. James obviously thinks in a milieu influenced by Kant. Yet James sanctions no sweeping deduction of necessities of thought which are necessities of the phenomenal world. It is up to experience itself to decide which "brain-born," non-inductively learned necessary truths apply to experience; knowing which apply is piecemeal work and always incomplete. See below, p. lviii ff.

13. See "The Sentiment of Rationality" and chap. 12 on conception in *Principles*, portions of which are included below.

give an articulate account of the conditions of its application. Knowledge by acquaintance, as he calls it, is a wash of non-deliberate thought and experience, habitually and essentially vague and ill defined, which is the current which bears our existence, and out of which all deliberate thought takes rise. Moreover, there is always more to any real thing than any set of concepts has as yet revealed, and what will be revealed may correct our previous ideas of the thing.

Real things, for James, are obdurate and inexhaustible. (Even when we destroy a thing, we do not thereby know it through and through.) Water, say, is no more essentially H₂O than it is a slaker of thirst, or an object for a painter, and so on endlessly.¹⁴ Any abstraction is a miserable substitute for the world's concrete richness.¹⁵ We are lodged in a world of facticity (to use a contemporary term) the being of which is not ultimately explainable. We cannot answer why there is any being at all and not rather nothing, James says.¹⁶ And we come upon ourselves as beings opaque at the center, in need of being known.

For James, the self is not identifiable in isolation from the sense and image of self, and this sense of self derives from care and interest in matters which owe nothing to a reflective source.¹⁷ That is, experience is absorbed in objects of the world that are not deliberately chosen as objects of thought, and this absorption, whether friendly, hostile, or matter-of-fact, elicits from us incessant plays of our spontaneity. At least three times, James quotes the aphorism of Kierkegaard, "We live forward but understand backwards,"¹⁸ and it is clear that he wishes to enlarge the boundaries of understanding so as to grasp life as it is lived.

James is involved in a reinterpretation of consciousness and self along non-dualistic lines. When thought reflects and attempts to

14. No doubt James agrees that a painting of water cannot exist unless water does or did exist (or some matter did exist), while the water can exist without the painting. But for him there is no reference to existence without a notion of existence, and the notion is no more essentially a product of research in physics than it is of the expressiveness of painters. Nor is existence exhaustively expressed in any finite set of notions.

15. *Principles*, II, 319 ff. Included in this volume, "On 'Essence.'"

16. See James's *Some Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1948) and "The Sentiment of Rationality," pp. 1 ff. and 25 ff. below.

17. See "The Consciousness of Self," pp. 82 ff., N.B. p. 95.

18. See, e.g., "Is Radical Empiricism Solipsistic?" p. 220.

“catch itself in the act,” it finds not itself, James writes in one passage, but organic feelings of adjustment in the head and throat. A man’s self is “remembering and appropriating thought incessantly renewed”; i.e., the self is all that is appropriated and taken as mine, with the body occupying a peculiarly constant and intimate position, even though vague. But the implication of this passage of James’s *Principles* is that thought never does find “itself,” but only more object, or total field, with the body given, even if peripherally, as present, and given in this case in the peculiar stance of memory (eyes rolled up or unfocused, perhaps, and the body disengaged from tasks in the present world). It is to this body given as present that the body given as past is tied and appropriated. Hence consciousness or thought “itself” is empty—exhausted by its multi-relational object. The implication is that the continuity which is the self requires no inherently subjective seat or source—that one *is* an acting, thinking, remembering body.

James regards attention and will as the core of the self. That is, the kind of person I am is a matter of my behavior, and this is a matter of the patterned turnings of my attention; what I do is a matter of what I “hold before me” as objects of thought. And James is willing to construe will and attention in terms of the experienced body: for example, the consent to an object or project is a release of breath through the glottis—though not just the release of breath, of course, but the-release-of-breath-in-conjunction-with-this-object.

James’s discoveries in the *Principles* shock him, and he shies away from the indicated conclusion that the feeling of subjectivity or selfhood is nothing but a feeling of “the whole cubic mass of the body which we feel all the while.”¹⁹ But room is left for such a conclusion, and indeed it must be seen to follow, I think, when a mode of reflection is developed which does not freeze, atomize, and hence distort the pre-reflective flow of experience, but which grasps the body as lived forward in time; which grasps it as inserted in a world which is systematizable and experienceable only with “reference to a focus of action and interest which lies in the body; and the systematization is now so instinctive (was it ever not so?) that no developed or active experience exists for us at all except in that

19. *Principles*, I, 333. See below, p. 102.

ordered form.”²⁰ The body must be grasped as it is actually lived; e.g., as a rehearsal of action in subvocal speech, or a consummating of it in gestures and acts.

Such a mode of reflection must not turn directly upon the body to objectify it, as would one playing his own physician, but must be an enlargement of consciousness which participates in the flow of experience of the *body-subject*—the body as actually lived, as intentionally related to the rest of the world (cf. the work of Merleau-Ponty). Such participant observation would see as intimately related to the lived-body (or what James calls the spiritual self or “self of selves” with its turnings of attention) the other elements of the world which are mine, other “selves” of our self, as he puts it, the social and material selves. Because other people who are in some way mine—my friends or my rivals, or objects of my sight or my thought—carry with them images of me which I construe in some way and which comprise my social self. And possessions into which I have poured my labor or concern are mine, a part of me, the material self. The *Principles* indicates the need to relate more thoroughly the manner in which our body is involved in, and treated by, others and other things.

Precisely the reverse of what might be expected, the view of the self as the lived-body opens up for James new vistas for the comprehension of spirituality, autonomy, and freedom. Since James considers consciousness functionally, he regards it as a phase in a cycle of interaction with the world which inevitably tends to result in action unless other thoughts, confusing or contrary, cancel each other and prevent it. Hence self-initiated activity—control of action by self, which is the essence of freedom—is comprehensible if one can explain how a thought, possibly unpleasant, can be held before consciousness in a sufficiently enduring and believable way to trigger action. The secret of freedom is the secret of control of mental effort.

Now, James in the *Principles* first tries his programmatic natural scientific and dualistic analysis of the problem. In typical scientific fashion, he poses the question of freedom as whether we can at any time act differently from the way we do in fact act. But how could we ever determine that the amount of mental effort

20. “The Experience of Activity.” See p. 211 fn.

actually exerted (which by hypothesis is decisive of action) was all that could have been exerted, given a chain of prior causes extending back indefinitely in time and out indefinitely in the world? He can conceive of no experiment which would confirm this, hence "indeterminism or freedom" is at least not disproven.

But James is on the verge of a wholly new and much more fruitful analysis of the problem: consciousness and self cannot be understood as a sequence of mental events emerging from the past and unrolling parallel to, or as resultants of, a sequence of neurological events. True, as he says, consciousness brings "a reservoir of possibilities" and ends which were not there prior to its emergence, and which cannot be explained in non-mental or neurological terms.²¹ But it does not follow that what must be thus described is a mental event, stuff or state. That is, the body as an object in the physiological context cannot be spoken of as having ends,²² but the *lived*-body requires another analysis entirely, and is precisely that to which ends can and must be ascribed. Moreover, the conscious, active body must inevitably emphasize or "select" certain aspects of the world and relegate others to the background, if for no other reason than the structure of its functioning organs.

James indicates that the self is a lived-body poised on the brink of several possible futures (appealing or unappealing precisely as futures) which experiences itself as speaking, attending, literally gritting its teeth, perhaps, and commanding one into existence: Be thou my future!²³ Physiological talk about conditions of behavior is not so much untrue as utterly irrelevant and misleading. He suggests that in human existence a rock bottom of conditions has been reached, a kind of unconditioned. The first act of freedom, he says, must be the belief in freedom itself. It is anomalous to think evidence for *freedom* can be *forced* upon us.²⁴ To be free, James decides, is just to act as if one were free: this releases that confidence, initiative, and fitness of action to situation—together with certain unexpected results or novelties which productively

21. "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence." See pp. 22 ff.

22. See *Principles*, I, 140–141.

23. Not just any of the possible things we cannot do counts against freedom. The only possibilities that count are those that we want or need to do.

24. See "The Will," pp. 42–43.

enlarge and enrich the situation—which is simply all that we mean by freedom.²⁵ There are no other conditions requisite for the application of the term, so belief in freedom conditions its own emergence. To the extent that it is not further conditioned, it is unconditioned. Existence is grounded in itself as freedom.

This, now, is at the heart of James's philosophical vision. It is not systematically developed in the sense of axioms or theorems or even extended argumentation, but as in the work of many creative thinkers it is there nevertheless, and without it the rest of James's philosophy does not make sense. His treatment of self-identity and freedom is the locus of his ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, metaphysics, and philosophy of religion. He writes,

When your ordinary Brooklynite or New Yorker, leading a life replete with too much luxury, or tired and careworn about his personal affairs, crosses the ferry or goes up Broadway . . . he [does not] realize at all the indisputable fact that this world never did anywhere or at any time contain more of essential divinity, or of eternal meaning, than is embodied in the fields of vision over which his eyes so carelessly pass. There is life; and there, a step away, is death. There is the only kind of beauty there ever was. There is the old human struggle and its fruits together. There is the text and the sermon, the real and the ideal in one. . . . And that very repetition of the scene to new generations of men *in secula seculorum*, that eternal recurrence of the common order, which so fills a Whitman with mystic satisfaction is to Schopenhauer, with the emotional anaesthesia, the feeling of 'awful inner emptiness' from out of which he views it all, the chief ingredient of the tedium it instils.²⁶

There is no perception of the world without the imposition of teleological standards of interpretation and selection; all perception is art-like, though the perceiver himself be unaware of this. There is no perception without a perceiver to be molded by the total act of perception, whether the perceiver know he is thus molded or not. We help create the truth of the world which we come to know, and we cannot help that. In certain areas—particularly those relating to knowledge of what we can and cannot accomplish in the world and of who we are—the way we choose to know determines what is true and what is known. To believe

25. *Some Problems of Philosophy* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1948), p. 213.

26. See "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," pp. 326 ff.

that one can do something often is all that enables one to do it; the belief creates the evidence that verifies it.²⁷ Truth will always involve satisfaction of the *thought* (to think that there is a thief in the hall, and to go out and find him, is to satisfy the thought that predicts it, though not necessarily the *thinker*, in any but the narrowest portion of his rational nature), but in ethics, aesthetics, and religion part of what we *mean* by the *objects* of belief is that they do have the characteristics which satisfy the *thinker* as well; hence he must be satisfied if his thought be true.

For James, the good life is the progressive realization of "that strange union of reality with ideal novelty" which is possible in the person's situations and in respect to his capacities. James denies that there are any actualities, knowable in advance, which set a clear and determinate limit to human potentialities. Man's ability to reflect with (and upon) signs and to manipulate them in dream, art, and hypothesis involves him in open-ended situations, and developments, and to deny this is to suffer a kind of death in life, a premature crystallization; one becomes an "old fogey at twenty-five."²⁸ The "originals" of value presupposed by all articulable judgments of value are feelings of "excited significance" attending upon encounter with people and Nature, and involving pre-reflectively experienced ideals. These experiences are fundamental, "They tingle with an importance that unutterably vouches for itself."²⁹ (The provocative and beautifully metaphorical example he uses is children walking about in the dusk with lanterns concealed underneath their coats. The excitement of knowing that they each have one is an original of value which vouches for itself.) But this is "the excitement of reality," for as we live it, life is the lived union of real and ideal (if we can but see it), together with the motivating power of the as yet unrealized ideal: moral, aesthetic, cognitive, or whatever. That is, what the world is, is what it is experienceable as being, and it is experienceable only in terms of standards and norms of expectation which are ideals. Hence fact is inseparable from value

27. See "The Will to Believe," pp. 309 ff.

28. *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (New York: Dover Books, 1962), p. 81.

29. "On a Certain Blindness . . . ," pp. 326 ff.

in this minimal sense, and the significance of a life is a matter of freeing the mind to new perspectives on the world (new employments of the ideal) which make possible creative and constructive action, instead of pipe dreams. Still, all values are based on “feelings of excited significance” which magnetize our attention and thus form the core of our lives; it is the reality of which only poets are equipped to speak—hence the “haunting and spectral unreality of ‘realistic’ books. . . .”³⁰

The strongest behavioral motivation, according to James, is the drive for the heroic. There is something wild and heroic at the center of us. Man’s “common instinct for reality” regards the world as “a theatre for heroism” in as yet undecided struggles with evil. “Naturalistic optimism is mere syllabub and flattery and sponge cake.”³¹ For James, most of our problems stem from our inability to cope with this drive: either we try to blink it out of existence or gloss it over with crypto-sophistication in our modern institutions—e.g., educational ones—or we allow it rampant, superstitious, and destructive expression as in wars. Our greatest need, then, is to find a moral equivalent for war.³² The grand, the holy, and the heroic—even if it be only heroic pessimism or skepticism—excite us; this is a fact and we must learn to deal with it. What is our motivation, beyond mere survival, for dealing with it? The dignity of fact.³³

Because James grounds the heroic so basically in the human affective, cognitive, indeed metaphysical, situation, there is an element of universalism in his ethics—a rethinking of natural law. The drive to struggle to realize his capacities in the light of the ideal “slumbers in every man.” James was particularly incensed at the behavior of Americans in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. We suffer from a certain blindness in all human beings which renders us incapable of sympathetically participating in the life as it is lived—basically similar to our own—of foreign peoples. “Little brown men” are only objects for us, not embodied subjects living forward in the light of their future. “They are too

30. *Ibid.*

31. Quoted in Wild, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

32. See pp. 349 ff.

33. Variations on this theme occur over and over in James.

remote from us to be realized as they exist in their inwardness."³⁴

He writes of his philosophy,

The practical consequence of [it] . . . is the well known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality—is at any rate, the outward tolerance of whatever is not itself intolerant. These phrases are so familiar that they sound now rather dead in our ears. Once they had a passionate inner meaning. Such a passionate inner meaning they may easily acquire again if the pretension of our nation to inflict its own inner ideals and institutions *vi et armis* upon Orientals should meet with a resistance as obdurate as so far it has been gallant and spirited. Religiously and philosophically, our ancient national doctrine of live and let live may prove to have a far deeper meaning than our people now seem to imagine it to possess.³⁵

Above all, we must not interpret James's ethics in a Cartesian subjectivist fashion—a manner still ascendant, and by now worked into the underpinnings of popular culture. Human embodiment in a world socialized by language and institutions like the family determines the form that satisfaction in the struggle for the realization of capacity takes. Though he contends that "the facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in. . . . there is no point of view absolutely public and universal. Private and incommunicable perceptions always remain over . . ." ³⁶; still, satisfaction is no mere personal whim or vagary. James rejects full scale cultural relativism and emotivism. The heroic drive is launched within a world characterizable by generic attributes, and out of a human existence the natural propensity of which is continuity and unity.³⁷ Not just any choice really tempts us, nor is worthy to be considered when considering human freedom, but only those choices which open up in line with the continuous maturation of our powers, in a world in which self-identity is possible for embodied beings of the human type. He advises teachers to utilize their capacity to reproduce sympathetically in their imagination

34. R. B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1935), II, 311.

35. *Talks to Teachers*, p. vi.

36. *Ibid.*

37. See John K. Roth's introduction to his *The Moral Philosophy of William James* (New York: T. Y. Crowell Co., 1969).

the mental life of their pupil as the active unity which he feels himself to be.³⁸ Like Nietzsche, James makes sense of an asceticism which puts off short-range satisfactions for long, and like Kierkegaard, who observed that freedom is quietness in continuity, James rejects the equation of freedom and libertinism. Freedom involves novelty, to be sure, and an element of contingency, but freedom is that track on which we cannot help but do what is right for us to do in view of our creative human gifts and constructive capacities. We become selves through synthesizing our past, present, and future. The self requires consciousness of self, and this consciousness requires conscience—a keeping of promises to oneself.³⁹

Given James's philosophical view, there is room enough for the tragic. It is quite inadequate to read the first pages of "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" in which James writes of good as *prima facie* the satisfaction of demand, and to conclude that he adopts a leveling sort of utilitarianism which equates good with trying to satisfy the greatest number of persons' demands. For as James discusses at the end of the essay, the philosopher's job must be to show the priorities of demands in a world in which we must live together in realizing our capacities, and in which not all demands can—nor should—be satisfied. James then concludes that the moral universe he strives for is really possible "only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands," not only for reasons of establishing priority of demands, but because only here would "every sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity for handling life's evils [be] set free in those who have religious faith." But how can an empiricist like James, who roots the self so tightly in the lived-body and space-time, talk intelligently about the existence of God? At this point in his thought, James postulates a Divine Being and then "prays for the victory of the religious cause." He postulates a God and then prays to Him that his postulation is correct. There is an element of the tragic in this, I suppose, or at least the ironic, but it is not the absolute absurdity that the formalist and logician might take it to be. For the resources of James's metaphysics and theory of truth

38. *Talks to Teachers*, p. v.

39. Perhaps certain promises should not be made. James suggests that we can go against our own grain.

are peculiarly applicable to this kind of apparently hopeless inquiry.

In being taxed to their uttermost, his philosophical resources are displayed to their fullest, and this brings us to his second major work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The most obvious feature of James's worldview is its open-ended character, and this is nowhere more important than in his treatment of concepts. He denies that any exhaustive set of concepts adequate to the world is even in principle deducible from a framework of pure thought or logic. The ground of meaning for James, hence the ground of the abstract and fully verbalizable concepts of the intellect, is the vaguely apprehended lived-world, with its pre-linguistic perceptual meanings, its signficatory tendencies of expressive motor behavior, and its vast and diffuse unreflected use of signs—functions of partial purposes and private ends. The ground of concepts is thus open, vague, ambiguous, and changing; concepts arise from this ground, only to be amended, aggregated, and deleted as time goes on and our purposes and insights reticulate new areas of meaning. The ground of meaning is a moving ground—a lived-world-forward. Concepts arise, are tested, are found more or less adequate; concepts are eternal in their several meanings, but are not eternal in their applicability to the world actually experienced.

What is religious experience? James cautions the "theorizing mind" against its occupational hazard—the initial oversimplification of its materials. Let us admit at the outset that ". . . we may very likely find no one essence, but many characters which may alternately be equally important in religion."⁴⁰ "The pretension, under such conditions, to be rigorously 'scientific' or 'exact' in our terms would only stamp us as lacking in understanding of our task. Things are more or less divine, states of mind are more or less religious, reactions are more or less total, but the boundaries are always misty. . . ."⁴¹ We may have to get at religious experience through seeking "its nearest relatives elsewhere"; e.g., states of chemically induced intoxication.⁴² Thus James suggests we return to the ground of meaning in pre-reflective existence, for there we will find those far-flung "familial" relationships which lead us in

40. See "Circumscription of the Topic," pp. 222 ff.

41. *Ibid.*

42. See "Mysticism," pp. 241 ff.

their several ways into the area of religious experience, rather than getting stuck in an initial concept of "the essence" of religious experience which pre-judges its nature with a label, and pastes shut access to the open area in which we actually spend our lives. James's opening up of the ground of meaning anticipates Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblance," and may in part explain Wittgenstein's interest in James.⁴³

It is understandable that James subtitles his work on religious experience "A Study in Human Nature." For his basic point is that sensory experience is not a passive copying of a world, mappable and describable in advance either by mathematical physics or by the pure reason of classical metaphysics, but that it is an art-like interpretation of a vaguely and incompletely presented world-horizon, within which interpretation physics and metaphysics arise, and to which they must return for replenishment and new hypotheses. That is, elemental human life is really mysterious; a greater understanding of man may lead to an understanding of God. Hence James speaks of "the mystery of fact,"⁴⁴ which is mysterious on several levels: not only is the existence of the world as a whole a mystery, but also details.

One need only shut oneself in a closet and begin to think of the fact of one's being there, of one's queer bodily shape in the darkness (a thing to make children scream at, as Stevenson says), of one's fantastic character and all, to have the wonder steal over the detail as much as over the general fact of being, and to see that it is only familiarity that blunts it. Not only that *anything* should be, but that *this* very thing should be, is mysterious! Philosophy stares, but brings no reasoned solution, for from nothing to being there is no logical bridge.⁴⁵

That is, a person can be shocked by the shape and existence of his own body, because he perhaps never bothered to encounter it as just an object there in space. No knowledge of *what* one is, no matter how extensive, can substitute for the grasp *that* one is

43. I have heard it argued that Dugald Stewart is another antecedent of Wittgenstein in this matter. Those interested in intellectual history and tracing influences should know that James describes himself as at one time "immersed" in Dugald Stewart. (See his introductory remarks in Lecture I of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.)

44. See "Mysticism," pp. 241 ff.

45. See "The Problem of Being," pp. 6 ff.

(although whether there is a grasp of “that” without any “what” is left somewhat questionable by James). It is not *just* one’s queer bodily *shape* in the darkness; it is that one has any shape, any being. Familiarity blunts our sense of sheer existence, and conceals whatever pits of insecurity lie at the ontological level of our daily lives. Even if we prescind from the ontological mystery itself (“from nothing to being there is no logical bridge”), and settle at the level of what an individual is, we find as a corollary that fact is mysterious at this level as well: overflowing in significance and never to be grasped completely—dense and interrelated beyond our imagination—it swims in an ocean of ambiguity, of possible conceptual interpretation. Which interpretation it receives depends in part upon our partial purposes and private ends—purposes which are themselves pre-reflectively generated and incompletely known to us. James’s awe in the face of existence, and the reminder he gives us of our finitude, is strongly suggestive of salient aspects of Christianity. In “The Sentiment of Rationality” James writes, “The notion of non-entity may thus be called the parent of the philosophic craving in its subtlest and profoundest sense. Absolute existence is absolute mystery, for its relations with the nothing remain unmediated to our understanding.” He continues in *The Varieties* descriptions of events which ignite this awe:

The simplest rudiment of mystical experience would seem to be that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one. . . . This sense of deeper significance is not confined to rational propositions. Single words, and conjunctions of words, effects of light on land and sea, odors and musical sounds, all bring it when the mind is tuned aright. Most of us can remember the strangely moving power of passages in certain poems read when we were young, irrational doorways as they were through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them. The words have now perhaps become mere polished surfaces for us; but lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch those vague vistas of a life continuous with our own, beckoning and inviting, yet ever eluding our pursuit.⁴⁶

In the daily life we live, walking down a path and kicking a stone, let us say, the experienced world is an enveloping, ill-defined

46. See “Mysticism,” p. 244.

presence; suggestion, reminiscence, and tendril-like tendency are such that reflective thought cannot stop experience, single out each tendency and suggestion, and give a verbal account of it all. For James, we are beings vastly more vulnerable and dependent than most of us care to acknowledge.

Very similarly to Heidegger's notion that the existentialia of mood and pre-propositional speech are ontologically significant, James writes,

Religion, whatever it is, is a man's total reaction upon life. . . . Total reactions are different from casual reactions, and total attitudes are different from usual or professional attitudes. To get at them you must go behind the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious, which in some degree every one possesses. This sense of the world's presence . . . is the completest of all our answers to the question, "What is the character of this universe in which we dwell?"⁴⁷

A 'total reaction upon life' is not a comprehension in formula and in extension of the totality of beings in the world, but it reveals that totality which is one's own world-relationship (and perhaps we can say that it reveals the world as a totality, at least as it can be revealed at that point), and this has its own metaphysical importance. James specifies religious experience more exactly: it is the sense of the primal and enveloping reality to which the individual feels impelled to respond solemnly and gravely, and neither with a curse nor a jest. It is a sense of the holy and the overwhelming. We experience a submission which is not dull or grudging, but serene and glad—solemn but glad. It is a special openness in the world.

Now, it is in these moments of submission, when deliberate purposes and plans and verbal formulations have exhausted themselves, that James believes that the subliminal and usually pre-conscious margins of consciousness may bear the traces of a personality continuous with our own (but concealed and sundered from our ordinary consciousness so habitually as to be more than just our own personality) denominatable as Divine. Whatever it is exactly, it is an expansion and unification of the self which can revivify and redirect a life. It gets work done, James says, hence it

47. See "Circumscription of the Topic," pp. 222 ff.

is real, and we needn't know exactly what it is in order to be able to believe with some reason that it is real.⁴⁸

In what was originally intended to be the first paragraph of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James wrote,

Our words come together leaning on each other laterally for support. . . . Life, too, in one sense stumbles over its own fact in a similar way; for its earlier moments plunge ceaselessly into the later ones which re-interpret and correct them. Yet there is . . . something entirely unparalleled by anything in verbal thought. The living moments—some living moments, at any rate—have somewhat of absolute that need no lateral support. Their meaning seems to well up from out of their very centers, in a way impossible verbally to describe. . . . The moment stands and contains and sums up all things; and all change is within it, much as the developing landscape with all its growth falls forever within the rear windowpane of the last car of a train that is speeding on its headlong way. This self-sustaining in the midst of self-removal, which characterizes all reality and fact, is something absolutely foreign to the nature of language, and even to the nature of logic, commonly so called.⁴⁹

It is only in the light of James's analysis of experience that his later popular lectures on pragmatism can be understood. James says that one can be a pragmatist without being a radical empiricist, and that pragmatism is logically independent.⁵⁰ But, as is the case with many creative people, what James says about his own work is often inferior to the work itself and misleading in regard to it. At the heart of his philosophy of radical empiricism is a doctrine of consummatory experience; its distinctly contemplative aspect renders wildly wrong equations of pragmatism and that which "helps us get ahead."⁵¹ Only here at the center of his

48. James regarded the discovery of the subliminal and unconscious dimension of mind as the most important discovery of psychology in his day. But clearly, for James, it has metaphysical and not just psychological significance.

49. Perry, *op. cit.*, II, 328–329.

50. Author's preface to *Pragmatism* (Lowell Institute Lectures, Boston, 1906). Contrast with his preface to *The Meaning of Truth*. For selections from the latter book see pp. 262 ff.

51. Recall the first epigraph of this volume. They are lines written when James was thirty-one, but as Dewey has wisely pointed out (*The Problems of Men*, p. 395), the early thoughts and experiences of James are fundamental to understanding the later metaphysics, even though the former undergo some modification.

philosophy can we understand what he means by the truth being that which satisfies. For example, faced with the possibility that we experience an immanent God, it is impossible to distinguish clearly between the *thought* of God (or the belief) being satisfied and the *thinker* of the thought being satisfied, and for perfectly good logical reasons. Part of what we mean by an immanent, personal God is that the thinker will be satisfied and vivified in encountering Him, hence not to be emotionally involved in the belief being tested is not to test the belief. By contrast, we do not mean this by other intentional objects of experience, e.g., a pile of rubbish. Another part of what we may mean is that a personal God establishes personal relations with us, hence not publicly verifiable ones (at least not publicly verifiable as would be pointer-readings). When a belief is about persons, we should not hope for facile distinctions dividing logical and psychological consequences of a belief; it would not be logical. It is just these logical points, deriving from his metaphysics, that James does not emphasize in his popular lectures; nor does he reiterate, as he evidently should have on every page, that the concept of the workability of an idea as constituting its truth means that when we hold it, we find our way about in the world rather than colliding in ignorance.

Woe to him whose beliefs
play fast and loose with
the order which realities
follow in his experience;
they will lead him nowhere
or else make false connexions.^{51a}

Henri Bergson wrote to James, "I repeat . . . pragmatism is one of the most subtle and *nuancés* doctrines that has ever appeared in philosophy (just because the doctrine reinstates truth in the flux of experience), and one is sure to go wrong if one speaks of pragmatism before having read you as a whole. . . ." ⁵² The point is that James's theory of truth emerges as an integral part of a

^{51a} *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1947), p. 205. Quoted in John J. McDermott, ed., *The Writings of William James* (New York: Modern Library, 1968), p. xxiv. McDermott sees that James's ostensibly prose lines have the quality of Aeschylean verse, and I follow McDermott's rendering.

⁵² Perry, *op. cit.*, II, 632.

metaphysical view in which the temporality of being and experience is central. James maintains that the traditional "ontological" theory of truth (in which truth is identical with what is the case) is a lazy theory which has the effect of begging most of the important questions in philosophy. It is a simplistic theory which amounts to a superficial equation of reality and truth, and this amounts to a begging of the question of being. For example, according to the theory, the historically real is what has been, so the truth must have been already too: it stands statically in its own realm, awaiting discovery, corresponding point for point with the real. According to James, this ignores the actual situation of inquiry: the progressive but never completed clarification and exposure of an enveloping world which is given vaguely and incompletely in a temporal horizon.⁵³ Because of this oversight, the thinker's account of reality is vulnerable to whatever uncritical and hubristic elements in his theory of truth project themselves into the account; for example, illusions of completeness, definitive form, ultimate clarity, and exhaustive differentiation.

The anatomy of the world is logical, and its logic is that of a university professor, it was thought. . . . But . . . there are so many geometries, so many logics, so many physical and chemical hypotheses, so many classifications, each one of them good for so much and yet not good for everything, that the notion that even the truest formula may be a human device and not a literal transcript has dawned upon us.⁵⁴

Thought is simply an instrument for illuminating one aspect of the world from one angle and from one point of insertion. It is more or less adequate; it is never completely adequate. It is never an exhaustive literal transcript, and notions of absolute truth amount to fanatical reifications of regulative ideals.

James, then, discards the notion of eternally asserted meanings or propositions which state truly and eternally what has been, is, or will be the case, and which await discovery by our intellects. Since his pragmatic theory of meaning requires that any theoretic difference must be "cashable" in a predicted difference in the course of our experience, the notion of eternally true but as yet undiscovered propositions lacks a full complement of meaning.

53. See "Humanism and Truth," pp. 262 ff.

54. *Ibid.*