

2015

# New Insights into William James's Personal Crisis in the Early 1870s: Part II. John Bunyan and the Resolution & Consequences of the Crisis

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## Recommended Citation

Leary, David E. "New Insights into William James's Personal Crisis in the Early 1870s: Part II. John Bunyan and the Resolution & Consequences of the Crisis." *William James Studies* 11 (2015): 28-45.

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# NEW INSIGHTS INTO WILLIAM JAMES'S PERSONAL CRISIS IN THE EARLY 1870s: PART II. JOHN BUNYAN AND THE RESOLUTION & CONSEQUENCES OF THE CRISIS

DAVID E. LEARY

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## ABSTRACT

*This article, the second in a two-part sequence, will cast new light on the strong possibility that John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* played a previously unrecognized role in inspiring James's means of defense against the frightening hallucination and panic fear that characterized his well-known personal crisis in the early 1870s. It will also present an argument about the influence of his defensive measures upon his subsequent views on the nature and importance of attention and will in human life. Along the way, it will identify James's specific, newly discovered copy of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the specific, newly discovered Bible through which he developed familiarity with the scriptural phrases that helped him get through his ordeal. The first article in this sequence presented an argument and evidence regarding the previously unrecognized role of Arthur Schopenhauer's thought in shaping and intensifying the way that James experienced his personal crisis. It also related Schopenhauer's influence to prior issues that had concerned James, and in an appendix it provided an overview of other areas in which Schopenhauer seems to have influenced James, both during and after his personal crisis.*

## **THE DISCOVERY OF JAMES'S COPIES OF THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS AND THE HOLY BIBLE**

Over the past decade I have been engaged in a long-term project to trace some of the more significant influences of literature in the life and work of William James.<sup>1</sup> As part of this project, I have consulted the collection of James's books at Harvard University, read copies of works that he is known to have read, and searched for extant but unknown copies of works that he owned and used, hoping (in this latter case) to find additional texts that he had marked and annotated. My rationale has been that, although his family sold and gave away his "professional books" to former students, colleagues, book collectors, and Harvard University, many of what we would consider his "personal books" (including works of literature) probably remained in the family home in Cambridge or at the family's summer home in Chocorua, NH, and would have been dispersed over the years as various family members departed from one or the other of these homes. It turns out that I was right, and I have found a number of books that have supplemented the already detailed picture that can be constructed regarding James's reading and what he took from that reading. In sum, by systematically going through these books as well as through his previously known books, diaries, notebooks, manuscripts, published works, and voluminous letters, it has been possible to trace, in a remarkably detailed manner, the impact of James's reading on his life and work. But more on that later!<sup>2</sup>

Among the places where sources have been found is a current home of one of the branches of the James family. Understandably, the family does not want strangers – even scholars – showing up without prior notice and permission, so I was fortunate and remain very thankful to have been granted access to the home and what resides therein, including a number of James’s own books, many of which are annotated. This is not the place to discuss what I found other than James’s copy of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678-1684/1869) and one other text, which I will mention later in this section. The discovery of Bunyan’s work was a particularly pleasant surprise since there is no other indication, anywhere else, that James possessed his own copy of this book, nor any mention of the book in the vast literature on his period of depression, even though he alluded to it now and then when he made metaphoric references to being or having been in a “slough of despond” during the 1860s and 1870s. This phrase, drawn from Bunyan’s work, was common parlance at a time (in fact, throughout the nineteenth century) when *The Pilgrim’s Progress* enjoyed a particularly wide readership. Still, I will argue that James’s repeated employment of the phrase after January, 1870, was more than a random or simply habitual use of a currently popular phrase.<sup>3</sup>

Although James did not annotate this copy of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, it bears several significant markings. First, it is inscribed on the first page (just inside the front cover) to “Willie from his mother Jan. 29<sup>th</sup> 1870.” Note that January 29 was just two weeks after James’s well-known “great dorsal collapse” and just days before he “about touched bottom,” according to his diary entry of February 1, 1870 (James, 1868-1873). Second, only one corner of one page in this book is folded over, thus bookmarking a single section in the entire work, a section that is unmistakably relevant to James’s personal crisis and its resolution, as recounted in James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/1985, pp. 134-135).<sup>4</sup>

Among the other books discovered in the James family home was James’s copy of *The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments* (1856). This book was also inscribed on its front flyleaf, this time to “William James / from his affectionate Mother / Christmas 1860.” James indicated his attachment to this particular Bible on September 13, 1868, when he wrote home from Germany, asking that it be brought to him by his aunt, who was coming to Europe.<sup>5</sup> As we shall see and as some might recall, James’s familiarity with Biblical phrases, presumably enhanced through his reading of this particular copy of the Bible, made a difference when he confronted his frightful apparition and related fear, as described in the first installment of this two-part treatment of James’s personal crisis of the early 1870s (see Leary, 2015).

### ***THE RESOLUTION OF JAMES’S CRISIS IN LIGHT OF HIS APPARENT READING OF BUNYAN***

In the preceding article, I quoted at length from James’s account of his personal crisis in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, but there is more to quote from that account. After James noted that the experience was “like a revelation” and that it “has made me sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others ever since,” he went on to say that the “quivering fear” and “horrible dread” that characterized his crisis “gradually faded, but for months I was unable to go out into the dark alone.” In fact, he added, “I dreaded to be left alone” at any time. And then, at the end of his account, he made this significant comment:

I have always thought that this experience of melancholia of mine had a religious bearing....[By this] I mean that **the fear was so invasive and powerful that if I had not clung to scripture-texts like ‘The eternal God is my refuge,’ etc., ‘Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden,’ etc., ‘I am the resurrection and the life,’ etc., I think I should have grown really insane.** (James, 1902/1985, pp. 134-135, bold print added)

James then wrapped up his presentation of documentary evidence regarding “The Sick Soul” (the topic of the chapter in which his personal account appeared) by summarizing the three cases he had covered, namely, Leo Tolstoy’s confession regarding “the vanity of mortal things,” John Bunyan’s account of “the sense of sin,” and finally his own report of “the fear of the universe,” which he had disguised as a communication from a fictitious French correspondent. (It is worth noting that James’s designation of his own case as illustrating *fear of the universe* underscores its connection to his larger Schopenhauerian-inspired concern about the inexorable working-out of the laws of nature that encompassed his more specific *fear of going insane*, as discussed in the previous article.) In all three cases, he concluded, the sufferer’s “original optimism and self-satisfaction get leveled with the dust” (p. 135).<sup>6</sup>

I will return to the question of the “religious bearing” of James’s experience since in my view James’s comment about this “bearing” has been misinterpreted, by some, as an indication of a religious conversion or at least newfound religious belief. I don’t believe that James’s experience led to *this kind* of transformation, though it certainly made him more sympathetic and understanding of religious conversion (the topic of subsequent chapters in *Varieties*), just as it made him more sympathetic and understanding of those who suffered even worse forms of melancholy, “really insane melancholia,” which he had intentionally left out of his survey (p. 135).

So, what can we make of the resolution of James’s personal crisis in light of the discovery of his copy of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and his admission that clinging to Biblical phrases (from Deuteronomy 33, Matthew 11, John 11, etc., in his case) had helped him get through his terrifying experience, which by his own account lingered on, in somewhat attenuated form, for months after his initial hallucinatory confrontation with the greenish-skinned, epileptic lunatic?<sup>7</sup>

The answer lies – or I should say, it *seems very likely* to lie – on that page with a dog-eared corner: the single page in his entire copy of *Pilgrim’s Progress* that bears any distinctive marking (Bunyan, 1678-1684/1869, p. 95).<sup>8</sup> That page, appropriately enough, is situated within a chapter entitled “The Fight” in this revised version of Bunyan’s work, a chapter that represents a critical moment in the pilgrim’s journey to Mount Zion. The pilgrim, Christian, was already “full of fear” when he confronted the “foul fiend,” Apollyon, at the start of this chapter (pp. 80-89), and his fear hardly subsided as the chapter went on and he approached the Valley of the Shadow of Death, where he “was worse put to it than in his fight with Apollyon” (p. 90). At this point, he had a dream (interestingly analogous to James’s apparition) in which he came to the edge of the Shadow of Death, where he was warned by others that the valley ahead was

dark as pitch; we saw there ghosts and imps and fiends of the pit; we heard there howls and yells as of men in great pain, who sat bound in woe and chains; and Death broods it with his wings day and night. (p. 92)

Though terrified, Christian proceeded on and

for miles and miles he saw and heard these dread things, and at last, when he thought he heard a band of fiends, who were on their way to meet him, he stood still to think what he had best do (p. 94)

And here – on that dog-eared page – is where Christian’s tale touches James’s life:

At times he had half a thought he would go back; but then he knew that he might be half way through the vale. He thought, too, of all that he had gone through, and that it might be worse to go back than to go on. So he made up his mind to go on, but the fiends drew near. But when they had come at him, as it were, he cried out with all his might, “I will walk in the strength of the Lord God.” (pp. 94-95)

Then, as Christian made his way forward with his mind fixed on the strength of God, he was comforted by a voice saying, “Though I walk through the Valley-of-the-Shadow-of-Death, I will fear no ill, for thou art with me” (p. 96). And with that, shrouded by his protective set of Biblical phrases (from Psalms 71 and 23), Christian “came to the end of the vale” (p. 98).

The comparison to James’s experience cannot be missed. Full of fear, James confronted his own nightmarish apparition and his own specter of damnation by reciting Biblical phrases, just as Christian did. Although his fear of impending insanity was different from Christian’s fear of punishment by “fiends of the pit” (p. 97), the analogy is easy to see, and James, an astute reader who (prior to his personal crisis) had been engaging his own demons with an indecisiveness similar to Christian’s, would have noted the allegorical parallels. Given that his past responses in moments of difficulty had not been couched in religious phraseology, it seems reasonable to conjecture that it was Bunyan’s work, read just before he confronted his own “shadow of death,” that provided the model that James followed – consciously or not, spontaneously or not – when he found himself on the edge of perdition. Like Christian, he clung to his scripture-texts for protection and comfort. And it worked. By his own report, they got him through and then beyond his vale of debilitating “panic fear” (James, 1902/1985, p. 134).

On May 7, 1870, James wrote to his brother Henry that “I have I think at last begun to rise out of the slough of the past 3 months.” In saying this, he was not only describing his crisis through an analogy to Bunyan’s “Slough of Despond,” he was also indicating, it would seem, that those months of aftereffects – of being afraid to be alone, especially in the dark – were coming to an end. “I mean to try not to fall back again,” he continued, asserting that “all a man has to depend on in this world, is in the last resort, mere brute power of resistance” (James, 1870/1992, pp. 158-159). If the argument in this article is correct, he now had a modified sense of what a realistic form of “resistance” to the pressures and evils of the world would entail – not brute *physical force* but the kind of *psychological force* that Christian and he had exhibited in overcoming their personal crises.<sup>9</sup> In short, it would involve an intensive form of attention (manifested during their crises by focusing on particular Biblical phrases), which would come to constitute the core of James’s innovative and unique view of human freedom within the confines of a largely, but not entirely deterministic world – a world in which James could now say with more

confidence that one need not “blink the evil out of sight, and gloss it over” (p. 159). Like Christian spying Zion in the distance, James now saw how he and others could conduct “the moral business” that had been his ultimate concern since his earlier youth (see Leary, 2015).

### ***SOME OF JAMES’S LATER VIEWS IN LIGHT OF HIS PERSONAL CRISIS***

Almost exactly twenty years later, on May 17, 1890, the day on which he inserted the very last period into his forthcoming *Principles of Psychology* (1890/1981), James expressed his satisfaction that “this big job is rolled off my shoulders like Christian[']s memorable pack” (James, 1890/1999a, p. 34). He was referring, of course, to the “bag of sin” that had burdened Bunyan’s pilgrim on his way to Zion (see James, 1898/2000, p. 460). The analogy held more meaning than James might have realized in the midst of his relief, for some of the central doctrines of his massive and important work – a major portion of the burden of his experience, study, and reflection over many years – had taken seed, or at least seem to have had their ground prepared, through his reading of the book that his mother had given to him on the eve of his personal crisis. In particular, his doctrines of attention and will, as laid out in long chapters in the *Principles*, bore a striking resemblance to his Bunyanesque behavior in the early 1870s. It was as if he had applied his *later* theories in the conduct of that *earlier* time, but of course it actually worked the other way around: What had occurred in practice in the early 1870s had been elaborated, subsequently, into the fully articulated theories that James published in 1890.

It took many steps for James to get from 1870 to 1890, but the key milestones in what we might call *The Psychologist’s Progress* are obvious enough. As early as 1875, having accepted the logic of Darwin’s work, James (1875/1987a) concluded that consciousness “would not have been added to life” unless it “served some useful purpose,” which led him to wonder if consciousness isn’t, in fact, “an economical *substitute* for mechanism” which allows “my experience” to be “only what I attend to” (pp. 299 & 302). This inference – a foundational premise of the distinctive psychology that James was already constructing – clearly echoed what had transpired when he selectively diverted his attention, during his personal crisis, from the frightening specter of the idiotic youth to the Biblical phrases that pushed that specter out of his mind, or at least to the periphery of his consciousness. Through willfully *clinging* to these phrases, as he put it, James had made them and *their* portents more present and more real to his consciousness than the frightening image and *its* portent. Thus had he transformed his experience from one of almost totally debilitating fear to lesser forms of anxiety as the previously dominant experience gradually faded even from the periphery of his consciousness.

The following year, drawing upon Charles Renouvier’s thought, James (1876/1987b) described the common circumstance in which “a representation arises in a mind, but ere it can discharge itself into a train of action, it is inhibited by another which confronts it...till finally one or the other representation recurs with such a degree of reinforcement that the tumult ceases.” During his personal crisis, of course, it had been the representation of Biblical verses that achieved what he called a “stable survival,” thus effectively banishing the representation that had frightened him. This triumph of one set of ideas over another constituted what he now came to consider and to call “volition” (p. 324).

Two years later, in 1879, James (1879/1983a) expressed his disagreement with Arthur Schopenhauer’s deterministic argument that “with a given fixed

character only one reaction is possible under given circumstances” by denying Schopenhauer’s premise that character is fixed. In fact, he argued, “Schopenhauer forgets that, in these critical ethical moments, what consciously *seems* to be in question is the very complexion of the character,” so that “the problem with the man is less what act he shall now choose to do, than what kind of a being he shall now resolve to become” (p. 51). Once again we see that the crucial issue for James had become *psychological resolve* rather than *physical action*. Physical action, he implied, can and at times *should* follow voluntary resolve rather than predetermined character or habit. As he goes on to say, in a passage duplicated years later in *The Principles of Psychology*,

the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities. Consciousness consists in the comparison of these with each other, the selection of some, and the suppression of the rest by the reinforcing and inhibiting agency of Attention. (p. 51)

Quite explicitly, in this passage, we see that selective attention, which proved so effective during his personal crisis, had become a fundamental psychological phenomenon for James.

Then, in 1880, James drew disparate aspects of his emerging views together in an important article on “The Feeling of Effort.” It is in this article that he transformed William B. Carpenter’s narrowly defined notion of “ideo-motor *action*” into his own broadly defined “ideo-motor *theory*,” a much more significant and creative move on his part than has typically been recognized.<sup>10</sup> The claim associated with his new theory was that “*every representation of a motion awakens the actual motion which is its object, unless inhibited by some antagonistic representation simultaneously present to the mind*” (James, 1880/1983b, pp. 103-104). The significance of this claim in relation to his earlier personal crisis is apparent: If the representation of the idiotic youth had been allowed to prevail, it would have led to deleterious consequences, whereas the willful shift of attention to Biblical phrases resulted, as a matter of course, in a very different outcome. “Volition,” James wrote, “is a psychic or moral fact pure and simple, and is absolutely completed when the *intention* or *consent* is there. The supervention of motion upon its completion is a supernumerary phenomenon” (p. 107). In sum, the effort that matters is the psychic effort, the attention, what he now called the “*fiat*”: the will to “let it be.” This *fiat*, he said, is simply “a state of mind which consents, agrees, or is willing.” If there are no conflicting ideas or representations presently in the mind, action will occur of its own accord; but if there is a competing idea or representation in consciousness, the *fiat* will require “effort” against “resistance” (pp. 111-112). So, “*to sustain a representation, to think*, is what requires the effort, and is the true moral act” (p. 113). As if to emphasize the point in relation to his earlier experience, James added that “maniacs know their thoughts to be insane, but they are too pressing to be withstood.” When “sober notions come,” they are unable to say, “let these alone represent my realities” (p. 113). It is up to the individual mind, if it is able, to decide what shall become its “Reality” (p. 112). Having come this far, James admitted that “the surviving idea is invested with a sense of reality which cannot at present be further analyzed” (p. 124).<sup>11</sup>

From here it was a short step to James’s “What the Will Effects” (1888/1983c), a piece that is both a restatement of earlier ideas and an anticipation of James’s subsequent chapters on Attention and Will in *The Principles of Psychology*. Repeating that “what [mental] effort does when it comes to the aid of ideas is...to *hold the ideas fast*, so that *they* may acquire

strength and stability enough to make the machine obey” (p. 226), he went on to say that if sustained, “the moral idea ere long succeeds in calling up its own congenerers and associates, and ends up changing the man’s consciousness altogether. And with his consciousness his actions change” (p. 227). And then he ties all of this back to “the moral business” that he first espoused as a much younger man, asserting (with evidence as well as confidence) that “the men of will...choose their attitude...and hold fast to it in the teeth of the opposite ideas which ever urge them to let go their grasp.” And they not only “find a zest in this difficult clinging to truth” – the exuberance associated with a “strenuous” way of living, as he put it elsewhere (e.g., James, 1891/1979 & 1906/1975); they also become what James, following Ralph Waldo Emerson, called “the masters and the lords of life” (James, 1890/1981, Vol. 1, pp. 233-234).

Elaborating upon this idea in his chapter on the Will in his *Principles*, James (1890/1981) used different terms, regarding “heroes” and “heroic minds,” that came from Thomas Carlyle as well as Emerson: In “the heroic mind,” he wrote, the world finds “its worthy match and mate.” This mind “can stand this Universe” and “can meet it and keep...faith in it in presence of those features which lay...weaker brethren low.” Without “ostrich-like forgetfulness” and through “pure inward willingness,” this mind takes on the world and hence “forms a part of human destiny,” even – and perhaps most notably, as in James’s own experience – “when a dreadful object is presented, or when life as a whole turns up its dark abysses to our view” (Vol. 2, p. 1181).

James says much more than this, of course. He not only goes into much greater detail about the views I have sketched here, he also discusses the possible neurology underlying willful effort. (His speculative neurology, so frequently ridiculed in the past, has recently received corroboration and respect. See Leary, 2014.) And in his chapter on Attention he implicitly answers some questions that a reader of this article might ask. Why, for instance, did he recite *various* Biblical phrases, not just one or two as Bunyan’s fictional Christian had? Why? For the simple empirically grounded reason that, as James had discovered, “*there is no such thing as voluntary attention sustained for more than a few seconds at a time*” (James, 1890/1981, Vol. 1, p. 397). “*No one*,” he asserted, “*can possibly attend continuously to an object that does not change*” (p. 398). And how about those Biblical verses that he rehearsed over and over? Where did they come from? How did they occur to James in the midst of his distress? Essentially, they came to mind because James had established a habit of thinking about them, presumably as he read the Bible that his mother had given to him, so that multiple paths of association had been established. As he put it, “the things we attend to *come to us* by their own laws. Attention *creates* no idea; an idea must already be there before we can attend to it. Attention only fixes and retains what the ordinary laws of association bring ‘before the footlights’ of consciousness” (p. 426).

So what we do in prior times, even in seemingly minor activities, can matter; it can instill a “small voice” that will speak when needed, a voice that can then be “artificially reinforced” by the effort of attention – the essential action of willing, as James now underscored – which can end up making all the difference in the world (James, 1890/1981, Vol. 2, p. 1155). And as we will recall, the hope that humans can make a difference, even just a “nick,” was something James had entertained with emphatic earnestness as far back as his teenage years; it was something Schopenhauer had made him doubt by painting it as a chimera; it was something Bunyan’s book seems to have helped him espouse again by providing a model for free, willful action; and it was something his *Principles of Psychology* ended up validating through its probing exploration of the role of consciousness in the actualization of possible and

novel (as opposed to inevitable and familiar) human achievements. And that probing began, as we have seen, within the context and in the aftermath of his well-known personal crisis in the early 1870s.<sup>12</sup>

Fittingly enough, it was through his *Principles* and other works, dependent in varying degrees upon the foundational insights reviewed in this article, that James was able to fulfill his mission of making a difference in the world. For, as is widely attested and recognized, these works, based in part on evidence provided by his own experience, have instructed, inspired, and motivated untold others, from all around the globe, over the past century.

### CONCLUSION

At this point I can hear some readers saying, This sounds very grand and all, but let's get back to specifics. Did Bunyan actually prompt James to make a Christian-like response during his personal crisis, or is there simply an interesting parallel to be made between their two situations and sets of behavior? And further, was James conscious of building his theories of attention and will upon the defensive measures he took to withstand his personal crisis, whether or not those measures were actually prompted by Bunyan's tale? In short, did James knowingly take a lesson from the way he resolved his personal crisis and then intentionally draw a set of theories from that lesson?

There is, in fact, no proof that *The Pilgrim's Progress* had precisely the impact that has been conjectured here, nor any conclusive evidence that James purposefully used the resolution of his personal crisis as a model for his later theories of attention and will. Clearly, the suggestions made in this article lack the kind of corroboration that supports the claims made in the preceding article regarding Schopenhauer's influence on the origin and nature of James's personal crisis. (I have already admitted as much in Note #8.) But James was an unusually reflective person. It would be surprising if he had no inkling, no intuition, not the slightest awareness of the parallel between the way his crisis played out and his later theories of attention and will. So what I have presented in this second of two articles might best be seen as a "likely story," to borrow Plato's apt terminology, and it seems to me that this story has an exceptional degree of "dramatic probability," to shift from Plato's to James's favored vocabulary.<sup>13</sup> And whether or not others agree – whether or not anyone is persuaded that John Bunyan's chapter on "The Fight" in James's copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-1684/1869) contributed in some tangible, even if subliminal way to James's reconceptualization of consciousness as "a fighter for ends" (James, 1890/1981, Vol. 1, p. 144) – I would like to think that this article's review of James's personal crisis of the early 1870s in light of his possession of Bunyan's work has, in any case, enhanced our understanding of both the resolution of that crisis and the significance of James's later theories.

With the expression of that hope, we are left with one final bit of unfinished business – the question of the "religious bearing" of James's crisis. James's assertion that his crisis had such a bearing and the context within which he made this assertion, following his discussion of Tolstoy's and Bunyan's crises (each of which led to a religious conversion), has made it easy for many to assume that James was indicating that he himself had experienced something like a religious conversion or at least some kind of religious awakening. But, as Paul Croce reports and Linda Simon has observed, "there is nothing in James's correspondence or journal entries...to reveal any religious conversion or epiphany" (Croce, 2009, p. 50; Simon, 1998, p. 127). They are, of course, correct, and this may have spurred doubt regarding the veracity of James's report. But "having a religious bearing" need not be equivalent to "having a

conversion or epiphany.” Despite the outcomes of Tolstoy’s and Bunyan’s experiences, the chapter in which James reported his crisis was concerned with “The Sick Soul” whose maladies make one *susceptible* to religious conversion; it isn’t about religious conversion per se. (As noted earlier, religious conversion is the topic of subsequent chapters in *Varieties*.)

Part of the “manner of memory” that Croce (2009) has attributed to James’s account of his personal crisis has to do with James’s mantra-like recitation of scriptural passages. Croce comments that James “did not ever pray in the style of the French correspondent,” and he points out in addition that James admitted later in life that praying felt “foolish and artificial” to him. Further, Croce notes that James rarely mentioned praying in his youth (pp. 55-56). Even so, there are abundant examples of people who say they never pray (and who don’t believe) but who *do* in fact pray, almost immediately and spontaneously, when confronted with one or another of life’s tragedies (see Tilley, 1991). So even if James’s report was “stylized” in this or that respect, it seems entirely possible that James *did* utter those Biblical phrases, in all sincerity, without undergoing a religious conversion or enjoying any kind of religious epiphany. But what, then, did he mean by the “religious bearing” of his experience? In light of what he wrote later in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890/1981), it may well be that he learned that prayers can be and often are uttered *independent* of any religious belief:

We hear, in these days of scientific enlightenment, a great deal of discussion about the efficacy of prayer; and many reasons are given us why we should not pray, whilst others are given us why we should. But in all this very little is said of the reason we *do* pray, which is simply that we cannot *help* praying. It seems probable that, in spite of all that ‘science’ may do to the contrary, men will continue to pray to the end of time, unless their mental nature changes in a manner which nothing we know should lead us to expect.

To explain what he meant, James continued:

The impulse to pray is a necessary consequence of the fact that whilst the innermost of the empirical selves of a man is a Self of the *social* sort, it yet can find its only adequate *Socius* in an ideal world. (Vol. 1, p. 301)

In times of stress, in particular, people tend to appeal to that idealized Other, that possible “Great Companion,” as James put it. And what prompts us to do so – to pray, if prayer it is – even if we are agnostic or atheistic? To what is prayer or supplication the appropriate response? James gives the answer immediately following his self-report in *Varieties*: It is the deeply human experience of “Help! help!” In this cry for assistance, he says, is “the real core of the religious problem” (James, 1902/1985, p. 135). This may well be the insight, with religious bearing, that James took from his experience. Religion is a response to the experience of helplessness – an insight that Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, among others, shared with James, though James drew different conclusions from it.

James was not explicitly religious, then or later, though he spoke at times of about being vaguely “theistic” and even “polytheistic” (James, 1890/1999b, p. 94, & 1882/1997, p. 195). Still, incomplete and unorthodox as his “overbeliefs” were, he could sense and appreciate the living impulse behind

religion. As he later confessed when speaking about those who give voice to their religious experience, “I have no mystical experience of my own, but just enough of the germ of mysticism in me to recognize the region from which their voice comes when I hear it” (James, 1904/2002, p. 459). And while he reported that he had “no living sense of commerce with a God,” he said he envied those who did, not because he feared damnation of whatever sort any longer, but because he knew that “the addition of such a sense would help me greatly” (James, 1904/1935, p. 350). Indeed, he felt that everyone, sooner or later, is likely to feel the need for help.<sup>14</sup> This was almost certainly the insight, with “religious bearing,” that he took from his personal crisis. Again: “*Here is the real core of the religious problem: Help! help!*” (James, 1902/1985, p. 135, italics added). This realization – indelibly underscored by his need for help during his personal crisis – seems to have made him more sensitive to the experiences, including the religious experiences, of others. So just as Schopenhauer seems to have brought the virtues of sympathy and compassion to James’s attention (see Leary, 2015), so too did James’s turn to simple Biblical phrases seem to expand his virtues of understanding and tolerance. These are virtues that we would all benefit from learning...and making habitual.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Henry and Robertson James, great-grandsons of William James, for permission to study and now to mention some of the books discovered in their home. Their various courtesies have been exemplary, not unlike the legendary hospitality of their great-grandfather. I also thank Bay James and Harvard University’s Houghton Library for permission to quote James’s diary for 1868 to 1873.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I have reported on aspects of this research in invited addresses and presentations to the American Psychological Association (2003, 2004, 2005, & 2007), Cheiron: The International Society for the History of Behavioral and Social Sciences (2003 & 2005), and the European Society for the History of the Human Sciences (2004 & 2009) as well as at San José State University (2005), the University of Chicago (2005), the University of New Hampshire (2006), and the University of Richmond (2007).

<sup>2</sup>By later, I do not mean later in this article, but in the years ahead. (If I may interject a personal note for those who have known about this long-term project as well as the reason that it was interrupted for a number of years, I am pleased to report that the family health issue that interfered with its fruition has been resolved. Hence the project will soon be moving forward once again.)

<sup>3</sup>The popularity of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* during the nineteenth century is a well attested fact. Not only was it republished a good many times, it also served as a model, provided key allusions, and figured prominently in various minor and major works, including Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Celestial Rail-Road* (1843), William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848), and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868). Even Mark Twain, in his humorous way, could assume his audience's understanding when he published *The Innocents Abroad; or, The New Pilgrims' Progress* (1869). As for James's own cohorts, his close friend and colleague Josiah Royce can serve as a stand-in for many others. He recalled that as he grew up in the 1860s "the Bible was always

available, as was John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*," both of which he was reading seriously before he was ten (Hine, 1992, p. 41). In fact, Bunyan's was such an important book for Royce that "he never tired of quoting" it throughout his life (p. 181), and he published a detailed, three-part analysis of "The Case of John Bunyan" in the first issues of the *Psychological Review* (1894), though the analysis in that work was based primarily on Bunyan's autobiographical *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666/1888). The influence of Bunyan, if not *Pilgrim's Progress*, is also apparent in the work of James's student, G. Stanley Hall, who borrowed the concept of "mansoul" from one of Bunyan's other works (see Leary, 2006, p. 209). For general background on Bunyan and *The Pilgrim's Progress* in America and over time, see Greaves (1983) and Smith (1966).

<sup>4</sup>I should note that James's copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-1684/1869) is not the standard version of this classic work. Rather, it is a vastly simplified version – one that appeared in a series of then-popular texts that had been rendered into "words of one syllable." This particular abbreviated and simplified version was produced by "Mrs. Edward Ashley Walker," or less formally, Katharine Kent Child Walker. One might well wonder why James's mother gave him *this* version, surely intended for much younger and less sophisticated readers, not for someone like James who was reading Arthur Schopenhauer (in the original German) at that time. It is possible that this recently published version simply fell into her hands, but the unusual nature of this selection – and the fact that she gave a gift at all – makes it seem that there was more involved in her choice. Especially in a family (like most at that time) that exchanged relatively few gifts, each present was typically chosen with considerable care. So it seems fair to assume that in late January 1870 James's mother felt that her son needed *this particular* gift, and was less concerned about whether or not he read a classic text in its original form than getting him to attend to the unvarnished and unmistakable core message of the work. Ironically, James notes in *Varieties*, in the same passage that describes his personal crisis, that "my mother in particular, a very cheerful person, seemed to me a perfect paradox in her unconsciousness of danger [including possibly inescapable insanity], which you may well believe I was very careful not to disturb by revelations of my own state of mind" (James, 1902/1985, p. 135). Clearly, her gift belies James's supposition about his mother's ignorance, but then, this would not have been the first time that a child – even an exceptionally bright and sensitive child of almost 28 years of age – had underestimated what his mother knew! Finally, it is worth noting that the autobiographical report of the 1844 "vastation" experience suffered by William's father, Henry James Sr., which did not appear in print until 1879, was clearly structured according to motifs drawn from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (Feinstein, 1984, pp. 68-73). Interestingly, James cites his father's report in *Varieties* as representing "another case of fear equally sudden" (James, 1902/1985, p. 135). Indeed, the similarities between their two cases go much further than that. Particularly relevant to the argument that will be advanced in this article is the fact that Henry Sr. reported that it was only "by an immense effort" that he was able to control his fear and remain "determined not to budge" even as he received "no relief from any truth" other than "a most pale and distant glimmer of the Divine existence" (quoted in James, 1884/1982, p. 31). Henry Sr.'s report is so obviously "mannered," to use Croce's (2009) term, that one wonders if he knew about his son's later experience – perhaps even his son's reliance, as I will argue, on Bunyan's depiction of how Christian, the pilgrim, endured a similarly fearful situation in *Pilgrim's Progress* – before he completed his long-delayed account of his own earlier experience. The circle turns!

<sup>5</sup>The key issue regarding the Bible is that James was familiar enough with it to recite various Biblical phrases during his personal crisis. Even without knowing the specific Bible that he read, it would not be surprising that a person of his time – and more specifically, the son of a Christian theologian, however unorthodox – should be familiar with the Bible. In any case, James’s request for his copy of the Bible illustrates not only his inclination to read the Bible from time to time but also his remarkable memory for texts and his delightful and subtle sense of humor. Writing from France, less than a month before he started reading Kant and Renouvier – and purchased Schopenhauer’s *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1859) – he asked his “dear Aunt Kate” to bring “my Bible” to him in Europe, a Bible “which by an ‘unaccountable fatality’ I left behind and have missed ever since” (James, 1868/1995a, p. 336). The allusion, “unaccountable fatality,” is to Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-1766/1979, Vol. 4, Ch. 31, p. 329) and more particularly to an instance in which an eldest son in a family neglected a significant responsibility due to his father’s sending him to mainland Europe, hence William was implicitly (in jest) chiding his theologian father (who would have learned about his request) for having played a role in inhibiting his Bible reading!

<sup>6</sup>A *Confession* (Tolstoy, 1879/2010) provided the basis for James’s analysis of Tolstoy’s “religious melancholy” (James, 1902/1985, pp. 126-131), while *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Bunyan, 1666/1888) formed the basis for James’s assessment of Bunyan’s “different kind of religious melancholy” (James, 1902/1985, pp. 131-133). Because of James’s discussion of Bunyan and his footnoted reference to Bunyan’s autobiography in the middle of his own self-report in *Varieties*, some readers of this article will already associate Bunyan with James’s account, but it is important to note that it is *Grace Abounding*, not *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, that James discusses and cites in *Varieties*. The only reference to *Pilgrim’s Progress* in *Varieties* is an allusion to “the immortal Allegory which he [Bunyan] wrote,” which “has brought the very spirit of religious patience home to English hearts” (p. 155). *Grace Abounding* was a significant text for James, who gave a copy of it to his brother Robertson when Robertson was suffering from his own depression and associated ills (see R. James, 1881/1997, p. 168), but it isn’t the subject of this article. As for Tolstoy, it might interest some to know that his *Confession* left no doubt that the Russian novelist took Schopenhauer very seriously, especially regarding the *intellectual absurdity* of life, as he searched for his own more *emotionally satisfying answer* to the meaning of it all (as noted by James, 1902/1985, p. 130).

<sup>7</sup>Clearly, James’s subsequent fear of being alone, especially in the dark, was not of the same intensity as his fear of going insane, which characterized the encounter with his hallucinatory “other.” Despite the interpolation of comments about his subsequent fears, it seems clear that his report of reciting Biblical phrases refers specifically to his initial confrontation with the image of what he might potentially become.

<sup>8</sup>A lot rides, in this article, on the assumption that it was James himself who folded over the corner of this one page. I must admit that a folder-of-a-page-corner is not as easily identified as a writer-of-an-annotation. James’s handwriting and his ways of marking texts are virtually unmistakable, so that it is fairly easy to identify his signature, annotations, symbols, marginal lines, and underscorings. In this case, however, all I can rely upon is the fact that the dog-eared page is *exactly the right page* to fit the argument in this article – or to put this in another way, *it would be remarkable, though not impossible, that the folding of this particular corner was a coincidence*. Also, the assumption that James bent the corner *helps make sense* of what is known and *is consonant* with

important views that James held in later life. The fact that James *did the same thing* that Bunyan's pilgrim, Christian, did in *his* moment of greatest fear, makes the connection both rationally understandable and empirically grounded...*if in fact the alleged connection is true.* (Here I need to admit that not all things that *seem* to be reasonable are so, and not all things that *seem* to have been provoked by something were so provoked.) And to make the situation even more complicated, in 1910 (perhaps after James died in August of that year), his copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* was claimed by or given to his son William's future wife, Alice Runnells, as indicated by another inscription on the book's flyleaf: "Alice R. Runnells 1910." All I can say about that is that *other* books kept in this same home, owned by this same Alice, are not marked by similar dog-ears. A final possibility – other than the fact that *anyone* with access to the book over 140+ years *could* have turned the page corner – is that James himself turned the corner *later*, perhaps when he recognized a parallel between what he had done during his own crisis, what the pilgrim Christian had done during a moment *in extremis*, and/or what his own (later) views on attention and will would have suggested as a practical means of coping with such crises. And if this is the case, one could ask, isn't it possible that it happened when James read *The Pilgrim's Progress* to one of his children, decades later, as he did to his son Henry (James, 1887/1998, p. 199)? That's entirely possible, of course, though one would expect James to have *done* something with this new insight, as he typically would have done (e.g., writing something in a letter, diary, or notebook), and there is no record of his having done so. In any case, James was *already* committed, by then, to ideas that seem to have been reinforced, at least, by the experience that I will describe as *highly probable*. That's the best defense I can make regarding the vital fact upon which the stronger version of my argument relies. It is, perhaps, as good a defense or explanation as the best historians – or lawyers or doctors – can provide in many instances. Circumstantial evidence is, after all, evidence, albeit less than apodictic.

<sup>9</sup>As discussed in the preceding article (Leary, 2015), James had already reached this conclusion by April 30, 1870, when he reported in his diary that he had determined to "posit life, (the real, the good) in the self governing *resistance* of the ego to the world" (James, 1868-1873). If his personal crisis occurred at some point in the weeks after Minny Temple's death on March 8, as seems likely based on evidence in this earlier article, James was still feeling the attenuated fears of being alone, especially in the dark, when he wrote this diary entry and – one week later – the letter to his brother. But the end of those fears was apparently in sight.

<sup>10</sup>Carpenter, an English physician who did research in zoology and physiology, considered the occasional occurrence of behavior that followed automatically upon the idea of it as one of the "curiosities of our mental life," whereas James argued that it is a universal principle of action: Any idea that has "filled the mind" to the exclusion of any other idea will naturally and necessarily issue into its associated motion. (This assertion is related to James's "teleological" view of the mind and ideas.) On the expansion of Carpenter's notion, see James (1890/1981, Vol. 2, p. 1131) and Leary (2013, especially Note #56).

<sup>11</sup>The reader shouldn't conclude that James didn't care about human conduct, which in fact was a vital concern for him. He simply believed that conduct results from uncontested ideas, or from willful attention to one among alternative ideas, or from instinct or habit. Precisely because habits can be formed as a result of individual resolve – the willful focusing on a particular idea – he urged his readers (including parents and teachers as well as any individuals who might take his advice) to appreciate the importance of

establishing good habits and avoiding bad habits, both of which eventually become *virtually* determined. Once formed, habits account for a great deal of human conduct. Since they are performed for the most part without explicit decision-making, they allow an individual to reserve consciousness for dealing with problems and novelties rather than the ordinary business of life. See James (1890/1981, Vol. 1, Ch. 4 & 1899/1983d, Ch. 8) and Leary (2013). This leaves much to be said regarding James's view of indeterminacy; his valued concepts of interest and possibility; the role of chance, novelty, and the unexpected, both in the universe and in human life; and the practical equivalency of ideas, thoughts, visions, feelings, and representations in his discussions of mind and consciousness. Visions and feelings are particularly relevant to his discussions of values and ethics (see Leary, 2009).

<sup>12</sup>To be clear, James's assessment of the nature and role of attention, effort, and will, as expressed in his *Principles*, involved more than what he had personally experienced. Besides the work of William B. Carpenter, he used research and observations by Sigmund Exner, Gustav Theodor Fechner, Johann Friedrich Herbart, George Henry Lewes, Henry Maudsley, and Wilhelm Wundt, among others, to develop views that were consonant with the resolution of his personal crisis. This article is focused only on what might be called the living core of his assessment.

<sup>13</sup>In Plato's *Timaeus* (ca. 355 BCE/1965), Socrates accepts Timaeus' statement that "on many matters concerning the gods and the whole world of change we are unable in every respect and on every occasion to render a consistent and accurate account" and therefore we "should not look for anything more than a likely story" (p. 41). James had a similar sensitivity to the imperfect nature of empirical knowledge, and he often referred to the "dramatic" aspects of natural events as well as human experience (e.g., James, 1902/1985, pp. 390-393). These aspects lend themselves to narrative accounts that have more or less "dramatic probability" (e.g., James, 1909/1986, p. 391). More specifically, accounts typically compel at least tentative assent if they accord with our sense of how things ought to have happened, given what James called "the whole drift of [our] education" (James, 1902/1985, p. 408) or, stated otherwise, what "allies itself best with the whole body and drift of all truths in sight" (James, 1906/1975, p. 125). "Dramatic probability" is a useful concept for understanding and assessing much of what counts as human knowledge.

<sup>14</sup>James's positions in relation to religion were complicated and nuanced, and they shifted somewhat over time. But all in all, his *general* perspective remained fairly constant. Here are three touchstones: (1) In 1876, he told his future wife that "my attitude toward Religion is one of deference rather than of adoption. I see its place; I feel that there are times when everything else must fail & that, or nothing, remain; and yet **I behave as if I must leave it untouched until such times come, and I am driven to it by sheer stress of weather**" (James, 1876/1995b, p. 547). "Weather" was Chauncey Wright's term for the unexpected, seemingly random events of nature and life – *events like the personal crisis that sparked James's need for help!* (2) In 1882, James wrote to his friend Thomas Davidson that "it is a curious thing, this matter of God! I can sympathize perfectly with the most rabid hater of him and the idea of him....But as an Ideal to attain and make probable, I find myself less and less able to do without him. He need not be an *all-including* 'subjective unity of the universe,' as you suppose. In fact there is nothing I clasp hands with you so heartily in, as in defying the superstition of such a unity....**In saying 'God exists' all I imply is that my purposes are cared for** by a mind so powerful as on the whole to control the drift of the Universe. This is as much polytheism as monotheism. As a matter of fact it is neither, for it is hardly a speculative position at all but a

merely practical and emotional faith which I fancy even your Promethean Gemüth [soul] shares....Once think possible a primordial pluralism of which he may be one member and which may have no single subjective synthesis, and piety forthwith ceases to be incompatible with manliness and religious 'Faith' with intellectual rectitude. In short **the only theism I defend is that of simple unphilosophic mankind**" (James, 1882/1997, pp. 194-195). (3) In the same 1904 questionnaire on his religious views in which James remarked that "I can't pray – I feel foolish and artificial," he also admitted believing that "something exists," though "not powerfully" and only "dimly," and that "**the social appeal for corroboration, consolation, etc.**" and for "**a more powerful ally of my own ideals**" were the most significant aspects of his very tentative belief. Asked if he had ever experienced "His presence," James responded with a simple, unambiguous "Never" (reprinted in H. James, 1920, Vol. 2, pp. 212-215). (The bold print throughout is my doing.) All in all, I see James's comments in the foregoing letters and 1904 questionnaire as being consistent with my view that religion, for him, represented some sort of connection with an "other" or "force" or "more" that could potentially *help* him and others, especially by affirming their individual identities, purposes, and ideals.