

2022

The Psychological Roots of William James's Thought

David E. Leary

University of Richmond, dleary@richmond.edu

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Recommended Citation

Leary, David E. "The Psychological Roots of William James's Thought." In *The Jamesian Mind*, edited by Sarin Marchetti, 33-48. London: Routledge, 2022.

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THE JAMESIAN MIND

Edited by Sarin Marchetti

First published 2022
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Marchetti, Sarin, 1983– editor.

Title: The Jamesian mind / edited by Sarin Marchetti.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY :

Routledge, 2022. | Series:

Routledge philosophical minds | Includes bibliographical references
and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021032056 (print) | LCCN 2021032057 (ebook) |

Subjects: LCSH: James, William, 1842–1910.

Classification: LCC B945.J24 J36 2022 (print) | LCC B945.J24 (ebook) |
DDC 191—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021032056>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021032057>

ISBN: 978-0-367-14000-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-15979-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-02963-9 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9780429029639

Typeset in Bembo
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

3

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ROOTS OF WILLIAM JAMES'S THOUGHT

David E. Leary

In late August of 1911, one year after William James's death, the Spanish-born philosopher George Santayana depicted the American philosophical scene with more acuity than any native-born philosopher could have mustered. American philosophy, he said, had consisted of a distinctive sort of Calvinism wrapped in idealistic trappings. More vital in years past, this "genteel tradition" (as he called it) had grown stale over time. If its "hereditary spirit" was not entirely "high-and-dry," it was at least "becalmed" by the time of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was "too keen, too perceptive, and too independent" to be satisfied with its abstract character and thin veneer. Unable to escape this tradition altogether, Emerson had taken meaningful steps toward a new approach, enlivened by a deep love and abiding respect for Nature, which his philosophical predecessors had lacked. But it was William James, Santayana argued, who more thoroughly "burst those bands" that had held this tradition together, liberating himself and his countrymen from a dying heritage through his own "personal spontaneity" and "vitality." James, Santayana said, "had a prophetic sympathy with the dawning sentiments of the age." In fact, "his way of thinking and feeling represented the true America, and . . . in a measure the whole ultra-modern, radical world." He had pointed the way forward, not only for American philosophers, but for many others in those "parts of the world" where "his scattered words" had "caught fire" (Santayana 2009: 527–35).

Santayana's assessment underscored his conviction that James had placed his finger squarely upon the pulse of America and provided an accurate measure of the spirit that was emerging there and elsewhere throughout the modern world. That spirit was manifested initially, for James, in his own body and mind. For if the inherited philosophy had tended toward the abstract and impersonal, toward the idealistic and systematic, his own inclinations gravitated from the start toward the concrete and personal, the realistic and indeterminate. Not rational conceptions but emotional feelings, not static absolutes but shifting relations, not theoretical conclusions but practical inquiries fed his inner life and prompted his intellectual work.

In the final decade of his life, James wrote about the temperamental foundations of philosophical reflection. In doing so, he had to look no further than his own experience to illustrate his point. His distinctive philosophy, he observed, was "only partly got from books." More directly, it came from his own individual way of "seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos" (P: 9). This mode of comprehending reality was significant because it resonated with the experience of untold others. So, when Santayana emphasized James's

“personal spontaneity” and “personal vitality” rather than, say, his unusually creative intellect or his wide range of knowledge as the sources of his tradition-breaking impact upon philosophy, he was simply echoing James’s own conviction about the psychological roots of his philosophical thought. And beyond Santayana’s and James’s shared belief in the relevance of James’s temperament and personal experiences to his philosophy, not to mention his psychology, others who knew James well (Perry 1935) held similar beliefs, as have scholarly commentators right up to our own time. The philosopher Owen Flanagan, for instance, has testified that James is his favorite philosopher because he is

the best example I know of a *person doing philosophy*; there is no hiding the person behind the work, no way of discussing the work without the person, no way to make believe that there is a way to do philosophy that is not personal.

(Flanagan 1997: 47)

The example that James provides for Flanagan (and for many others) is that of a philosopher who is “absorbed” and even “obsessed” by problems of a deeply personal nature (47). In short, philosophy for James was a deeply personal enterprise. And as Ludwig Wittgenstein put it, James’s philosophy matters because it comes from “a real human being,” a full *person* and not just an agile *intellect* (Monk 1990: 478).

But how exactly did James’s personal characteristics, experiences, and concerns impact upon his philosophy?¹ To answer that question we will need to look further back, well before he started publishing the works for which he is best known within philosophy: before, that is, *Pragmatism* (1907), *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), and the posthumously collected *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912). Before and behind these works was the work that Santayana (among many others) called James’s greatest achievement (Santayana 1920/2009: 585); namely, his monumental *Principles of Psychology* (1890).² So the questions we need to ask are: (1) What were the personal characteristics, experiences, and concerns – the *personal psychology* – that shaped James’s thought? (2) How was this personal psychology manifested in his *professional psychology*? and (3) How was his *philosophy* rooted in his psychology, both personal and professional? We will find that these questions are stated too simply, since the formation of James’s philosophical views was under way from the very beginning. But with appropriate qualifications along the way, this division of labor and progression – from the personal context of James’s life to the development of his psychology and thence to the articulation of his philosophy – will provide an effective means of elucidating the personal nature of James’s thought.

1. Personal context

James’s choice of topics, the way he handled those topics, his use of personal examples, his unusually penetrating perceptions, his antipathy to unwarranted precision, and his wariness regarding linguistic conventions can all be seen as expressions of deeply rooted personal qualities and experience. Interestingly, though he was remembered most frequently by students and colleagues for his exceptional “vigor” and “manly” characteristics – the same personal spontaneity and vitality that Santayana underscored – those characteristics were not prominent during James’s crucially formative decades leading up to the publication of *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890.³ To the contrary, during much of that period, James manifested a distinctly non-vigorous, even “unmanly” set of characteristics, marked by hypersensitivity and inability to decide and act. The hypersensitivity took the form of neurasthenia and melancholy, with associated physical ailments (tiredness, poor eyesight, insomnia, digestive disorders, fevers, etc.) that often seemed

to be psychosomatic in nature and were almost certainly magnified by hypochondriacal worries. James's related inability to decide and to act led to protracted periods of unproductive and emotion-laden idleness from which he sought escape.⁴

These traits – the hypersensitivity and inactivity – constituted important aspects of the personal context surrounding James's creative work on the emerging science of psychology. They were traits that he worked *against* in both his life and work. His often debilitating experiences explain why, even though he was later seen as “an irresistible gust of life coming down the street” (Brown 1948: 47–48), those who knew him best were always mindful that he had undergone the equivalent of psychological death and resurrection. And even after his resurrection, there remained, as one friend put it, a note of “sadness” behind his typical “playfulness,” the same sort of melancholic reflectiveness exhibited by other “sensitive people” who desire to be “agents of truth and happiness” in a world that often frustrates their attainment (Chapman 1996: 56). In short, James was “twice-born,” as he later described individuals with similar experiences. Though able for the most part to live in a more “healthy-minded” way in the decades after he recovered from his darkest and most dysfunctional period, he never lost his consciousness of having been a “sick soul.”⁵

In retrospect, James's “dark period” can be seen as beginning with occasional breakdowns in the early 1860s, but it wasn't until 1866 that the symptoms he experienced reached a critical level of intensity, with graver and more sustained manifestations. These debilitating manifestations persisted thereafter, with brief respites, until mid-1878, when he married Alice Howe Gibbens. After that time, his symptoms became less severe and more intermittent, and they faded even more (without ever completely disappearing) after 1884, when he published an important draft of his major psychological ideas.⁶ It was during this extended period of “unmanliness” that James developed the crucial insights that undergirded his innovative version of psychology. The darkness had obviously stirred his psychologically relevant concerns, interests, and aversions. Clearly, discovering how to comprehend and cope with his hypersensitivity and his inability to decide and act – how to understand his state of mind and return to his more temperamentally characteristic, active way of being – contributed directly and significantly to the development of his psychology.⁷

The underlying problems during James's dark period revolved around his difficulties dealing with “the moral business,” as he called it: the business of determining whether or not human beings, particularly himself, were (or can be) active, individual agents capable of making a personal difference in ameliorating the world's shortcomings. This concern was foreshadowed by his assertion in 1858, at the age of 16, that it “ought to be everyone's object in life” to be of “as much use as possible.” Indeed, he asked a childhood friend, “which of us would wish to go through life without leaving a trace”? “We must all lead an active life and live for others, not for ourselves. You and I must fight . . . for the common good” (C4: 11–13). Ten years later, in the midst of his dark period, James feared that his earlier belief in individual agency and his related hope to make a difference in the grander scheme of things were chimeras. The specter of materialistic determinism associated with scientific understanding paralyzed him, even prompting thoughts of suicide. If he wasn't able to make a “*nick*, however small” in human history, and thereby assert his “*reality*,” he could see no reason to live and no way to escape his resulting depression and inaction. What would be the point of it all if “the thought of my having a will,” which is to say, individual agency, were utterly delusional? (C4: 248–50).

In the months and years immediately following these comments, James worked his way, slowly and painfully, through severe doubts about the existence of personal agency. As he did so, his distinctive psychological inclinations came to the fore *in direct reaction against* the forces that oppressed and depressed him. Those forces were revealed all too starkly in his diary. Just four

months after expressing his desire to assert his own agency, for instance, he was complaining about “the dead drifting of my own life” and about the “horror of waste[d] life.” He yearned, he said, for “an end to the idle, idiotic sinking into *Vorstellungen* disproportionate to the object” – in other words, the kind of unproductive, unrealistic, and excessively protracted thoughts that filled his days. Instead, he wrote, he needed to “keep sinewy” and cling to his belief in “humanity” (James 1868–1873: May 22, 1868). By July of 1868, frustration regarding his continuing failure to do so led him to record the following thoughts in French: “So, you want to die, because in you there are so many things that lead to nothing and that are merely disgusting? So die!” (July 22, 1868, my translation). Seven months later nothing had changed; his difficulty, he wrote, continued to be how “to act without hope” (February 1869). Almost a year later, he admitted that he was still unable to “study, make, or enjoy” anything (December 21, 1869). And then came a pivotal moment, a “great dorsal collapse” in which he “about touched bottom” and realized, at last, that

I must face the choice with open eyes: shall I frankly throw the moral business [of believing and acting as an independent agent] overboard, as one unsuited to my innate aptitudes, or shall I follow it, and it alone. . . ? – I will give the latter alternative a fair trial. . . . Hitherto I have . . . deceived myself. . . . I was cultivating the moral int[erest] only as a means, & more or less humbugging my self. Now I must regard these useful ends only as occasions for my moral life to become active.

(February 1, 1870)

This important moment was followed by a decisive if still not final step. Inspired by Charles Renouvier’s voluntaristic philosophy, James resolved that “my first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.” Putting a stop to his obsessively introspective musings, he would now “voluntarily cultivate the feeling of moral freedom.” He would act *as if* he were free and observe the results. If they were good, if his depression and inaction became things of the past, he might one day be able to “return to metaphysic study & skepticism without danger to my powers of action.” But he needed to keep in mind that “only when habits of order are formed can we advance to really interesting fields of action.” For “not in maxims, not in Anschauungen [opinions], but in accumulated *acts* of thought lies salvation.” Rather than seeing “suicide” as “the most manly form to put my daring into,” as he had before, he would now believe “in my individual reality and creative power,” positing “life, (the real, the good) in the self governing *resistance* of the ego to the world” (April 30, 1870). James’s resolution to resist, to push back, to stand up and act on his own was effective on a personal level only on and off over the next seven years, but it characterized his personality over the later years of his life as it had during his earlier ones. And, crucially, the positive, active, consequential attitudes represented by his pushing back against the pressures of the cosmos came to characterize his psychology, which he developed in the years following his declaration of personal freedom.

2. Psychological thought

What forms did James’s psychology take, and how did it reflect the hypersensitivity, desire for personal agency, and loathing of inaction that typified James’s dark period? First, his persistent introspection made him an especially acute observer of consciousness in all its subtle variations. This stood him well as he began to explore the intricacies of consciousness and the interactive dynamics of thinking, feeling, willing, and acting. In particular, his astute observations uncovered the simplification and surprisingly non-empirical nature of then-current empirical

psychology. Consciousness is *not* composed of preexisting, separate parts (“ideas”) that are conjoined *post hoc* through the mechanical operation of universal laws of association, as empiricists claimed; rather, James pointed out, it arrives already all together in our experience. It is only subsequently, as each mind parses the continual flow of consciousness, that certain parts are abstracted, identified, and emphasized according to that mind’s individual interests, active attention, and selective discrimination. This fundamental realization of the initial togetherness of consciousness led James to give a devastating critique of passive associationism as early as 1878 (EPh: 7–22) and to propose, in 1879, a preliminary draft of his own contrasting portrait of consciousness, not only as unified in the first instance but as active, selective, and individuating over time (EPh: 32–64).⁸

This distinctly Jamesian view of the mind was apparent almost from the start of James’s work in psychology, long before its culmination in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890). In an early review of contemporary psychology, for instance, James asserted – again against the tide – that “my experience is only what I agree to attend to.” More concretely, it is “only by selective attention and recognition” that the chaotic “mass of impressions” in consciousness becomes “orderly,” regulated according to the “interests” of the individual’s “emotional constitution” (ECR: 300). And this mental regulation shows, James inferred, that once consciousness is “superadded to life,” it serves as a “substitute for [biological] mechanism” (ECR: 303). It makes a difference, effecting real change, which emanates from within rather than without. As James put it in an article two and a half years later: “There belongs to mind, from its birth upward, a spontaneity, a vote. It is in the game, not a mere looker-on” (EPh: 21). His entire psychology was premised on this activist view of mind, central to which was his famous analysis of willing as the result – or more precisely, the equivalent – of directing one’s attention to one particular action–precipitating idea over another. Any dominant idea, held in the center of consciousness, is naturally propulsive, or impulsive as James put it. Using this conviction as a basic postulate, he worked out his theory of the will in two articles, one published in 1880 and the other in 1888, before writing his classic chapter for *Principles* (EPs: 83–124; EPs: 216–34; PP: ch. 26).⁹

James’s treatment of consciousness offered other innovative insights, similarly based upon his unusually perceptive observations, such as his well-known differentiation of substantive versus transitive aspects of mental dynamics. The former are the more solid or enduring aspects of consciousness – sensations, images, percepts, and concepts – while the latter are the more fleeting, typically evanescent relations between them. Having evaded description and discussion by earlier psychologists, these “feelings of relation,” as James called them, were shown by him to be extremely important in the establishment of meaning (PP: 236–62). They are also a significant means by which emotional factors, rooted in biology, have their tangible but often overlooked sway in mental life. Though sometimes substantive, emotion-related phenomena are frequently transitive in nature, but in either case they motivate and orient a person’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

In “The Sentiment of Rationality” (EPh: 32–64), at once a psychological and philosophical article, James made it clear – as he knew so well from his long bout with depression – that thoughts are always invested with emotional significance, just as emotions have varying degrees of cognitive import.¹⁰ It should not be surprising, therefore, that intellectual inquiry tends to address emotionally relevant topics, while the suspension of intellectual inquiry typically occurs when a feeling of emotional ease is attained. In fact, thoughts and feelings are so intertwined in experience that James later refused to posit any definitive distinction between them (PP: 185–86). Humans depend upon both in their pursuit of a proactive life.¹¹

Although James valued an active life and was always open to new experiences in our ever-changing world, he also knew the value of relative stability. He had indicated this when he

observed, in the midst of his darkest days, that it is “only when habits of order are formed” that we can “advance to really interesting fields of action” (James 1868–1873: April 30, 1870). What he meant, and what he conveyed more explicitly in his later chapter on habit, is that to achieve anything worthwhile, one needs to establish relevant habits of both thought and action. Habit, in short, is the crucial counterbalance to freedom. Without it, there would be excessive randomness and contingency, a continual need to decide and assert one’s will. By routinizing basic aspects of life, one’s consciousness is able to attend to novel challenges rather than be distracted by every passing stimulus or situation. The establishment of good habits, James believed, thus transforms what would be a virtual chaos into productive order. As he put it in *The Principles of Psychology*: “The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own proper work.” Then, speaking from personal experience, he asserted that

there is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of express volitional deliberation. Full half the time of such a man goes to the deciding, or regretting, of matters which ought to be so ingrained in him as practically not to exist for his consciousness at all. If there be such daily duties not yet ingrained in any one of my readers, let him begin this very hour to set the matter right.

(PP: 126–27)

In the same chapter he also admonished his readers to be sure to “discharge” any emotional arousal by allowing it to spur action of some kind, for “there is no more contemptible type of human character than that of the nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer, who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotion, but who never does a manly concrete deed” (PP: 129). This too was a hard-won lesson from his own life, which had led him to pursue – and encourage – active rather than passive living.

Finally, James’s psychology incorporated not only an activist view of mind, a related emphasis upon will, a special place for emotions (though not a passive soaking in them), and an acknowledgment of the importance of habit, but it also foregrounded the centrality of the self. In fact, James claimed that “the personal self rather than the thought might be treated as the immediate datum in psychology,” for “the universal conscious fact is not ‘feeling and thought arise,’ but ‘I think’ and ‘I feel’” (PP: 221). This self-consciousness is fundamental not just to psychology but also to life and to all of reality as we experience it. Our personal selves are at the core of experience, inextricably bound to our bodies and to the world around us (including especially significant others). In a famous formulation, James divided the self, conceptually, into three intertwined aspects, designated as the bodily, the social, and the spiritual (PP: 279–88). His explication of each aspect drew upon his own introspective experience, as did his discussion of alternative selves and of those dimensions of the self that extend beyond the margins of typical consciousness (PP: 352–78). He was, after all, intimately familiar with the relation between physical conditions, on the one hand, and mental states, on the other. Who we are depends, as he knew, upon our physiological constitution as well as the way others see and treat us – and how we value or dismiss their attention (PP: 281–83). Our deepest sense of self is far from ethereal; it is tied not to *thoughts* but to our *bodies* – to such subtle yet tangible experiences as the “peculiar motions” that we feel within ourselves as we think, whether “in the head” or somewhere “between the head and heart” (PP: 288), and to the feelings of “warmth and intimacy” that pervade our own thoughts as opposed to the thoughts and feelings expressed by others.

(PP: 314). James himself, after closely monitoring his own self-consciousness, reported that “the opening and closing of the glottis” and “the movements of the muscles of the brow and eyelids” always accompanied his own thinking (PP: 288). Such sensations supplemented the feelings of warmth and intimacy that were more than sufficient, in his estimation, to account for the sense of personal identity (PP: 316–18).

In claiming that “the central part of the *me*” – of the self as known – is literally “the feeling of the body” (PP: 351), James anticipated by a full century our contemporary emphasis upon the embodiment of the self. Similarly, his discussion of other possible selves (PP: 300–301) augured recent psychological and philosophical explorations; and here again, his sensitivity and insights were triggered by his own experience, this time regarding what he called his “murdered” self – the possible artistic self that he rejected and set aside in lieu of his scientific and philosophical ambitions.¹² As he put it in *Principles*, one might wish to be (and even be capable of entertaining) a variety of contradictory selves, but such alternatives “could not well keep house in the same tenement of clay,” since “to make any one of them actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed” (PP: 295). One might argue the point, but the argument would be made in terms that James provided, based on firsthand knowledge.

3. Philosophical thought

The sense of possibility – of authentically alternative selves, conceptions, and future realities – was a central feature of James's philosophical worldview. His advocacy of possibility was rooted in his personal struggle with “the moral business” discussed above. An important early expression of his concern can be found in his 1884 article on “The Dilemma of Determinism” (reprinted in WB: 114–40). Though offered as a criticism of unbending belief in scientific determinism, this article presaged his later criticism of idealistic monism. Both, he felt, presented a picture of a “block-universe,” as he later called it (PU: 147): a universe in which everything has its inevitable, predetermined, unchanging, and unchangeable place. If everything happens due to an unavoidable cause or ineluctable reason, he pointed out, then there are no “real, genuine possibilities in the world” (WB: 135). Everything is and always will be as it must be. As we have seen, he found this conclusion morally repugnant. So he cast his lot, primarily for this personal reason, on the side of “indeterminism,” even as he admitted that “from any strict theoretical point of view, the question [of determinism] is insoluble” (WB: 24). But if so, why should anyone accept the determinist conclusion that leads to pessimism rather than the indeterminist alternative that allows optimism, however guarded, regarding “the chance that in moral respects the future may be other and better than the past has been”? (WB: 137). It is only the existence of possibility, he argued, that “gives the palpitating reality to our moral life and makes it tingle” (WB: 140). If nothing can be changed, if everything is as it must be, then any feelings of regret – any disapproval we may feel regarding senseless murders, horrific tragedies, and terrible social conditions – are inexplicable and irrational (WB: 126). Why and how should one regret or even imagine an alternative to what could not have been otherwise? So he opted to accept evidence that the world is, “to a great extent, plastic” (WB: 115), which led him to conclude that we live in “a pluralistic, restless universe, in which no single point of view can ever take in the whole scene,” since novel decisions and unexpected events may occur at any time, inside or outside the purview of any particular observer (WB: 136).

Much of James's mature philosophy is drawn from beliefs and conclusions like these, which empower hope over resignation (VRE: 414) and imply that “things” are always and everywhere “in the making” (PU: 117). The dynamic, morally sensitive, non-dogmatic, and practically oriented aspects of his philosophy are among the major reasons that his thought has remained

as relevant and popular as it has. As suggested here, his emphasis on these aspects came from, and satisfied, his own temperamental inclinations, his personal craving for free will and for the related ability of individuals to make a difference, and conversely, from his personal experience of anxiety and depression when he *didn't* believe in these things. As he put it, he simply felt more “at home” in the open-ended world that he had come to accept and describe.¹³ Of course, others with different temperamental inclinations, including many philosophers, have preferred more order, rules, and bureaucracy than James, who always took the side of individual freedom over social organization.¹⁴ He delighted in novelty, surprises, and even the suspense entailed in the unfolding of what he called “dramatic” possibilities and probabilities.¹⁵

The sense of possibility and probability is a psychological phenomenon, as James well knew and as he emphasized in his own psychology, in which he insisted that “the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities” – of different sensations, perceptions, and conceptions – among which the mind selects and suppresses “by the reinforcing and inhibiting agency of attention” (PP: 277).¹⁶ He illustrated his point with a metaphor drawn from the arts, saying that the mind

works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. . . .
Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone! . . . My world is but one in a million alike embedded, alike real to those who may abstract them.

(PP: 277)

Even as he was just beginning to elaborate his views on the selective nature of consciousness, James was already applying it to philosophy, which he defined in 1876 as “the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again, of imagining foreign states of mind.” In short, he said, philosophy is and depends upon “the possession of mental perspective” (EPh: 4). James held on to this view to the end of his life, when he argued that philosophy “is able to fancy everything different from what it is,” thus seeing “the familiar as if it were strange, and the strange as if it were familiar” (SPP: 11). Philosophizing in this way entails not only noticing previously overlooked sensations and perceptions, including (James hoped) sensations and perceptions of the kind his expanded form of empiricism acknowledged, but also conceptualizing and adjudicating alternative concepts in innovative ways. It depends, in other words, upon the psychological ability to see and understand things in new ways and the philosophical commitment to evaluate these alternative ways in relation to appropriately unfettered experience. Two key aspects of James’s mature philosophy were essential manifestations of his distinctive approach: (1) the radical empiricism that served as his ideal means of gathering the sensational and perceptual foundations of philosophy and (2) the pragmatism that represented his ideal means of weighing both old and new concepts.

James’s radical empiricism was a scrupulous, thoroughgoing expansion of traditional empiricism. It refused to omit and explicitly valued anything and everything that occurs in experience, including subjective states, properties, and qualities of mind that had been typically overlooked and often devalued in the past, especially by scientific positivists. In 1897 he described his approach as treating all facts of experience as “hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience” (WB: 5). This accorded with his psychological conviction that the perception of facts is always perspectival and hence always liable to change, which led him to align his radical empiricism with pluralism. Pulling together much of what we have reviewed above, he argued that

there is no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact. Real possibilities, real indeterminations, real beginnings, real ends, real evil, real

crises, catastrophes, and escapes, a real God, and a real moral life . . . may remain in empiricism as conceptions which that philosophy gives up the attempt either to “overcome” or to reinterpret in monistic form [either materialistically or rationalistically].

(WB: 6–7)

Such conceptions are simply hypotheses awaiting confirmation or disconfirmation in the course of further experience. Anticipating his later discussions of pragmatism, he argued that the “truest” religious hypothesis, like the “truest” scientific hypothesis, is “that which, as we say, ‘works best’ in relation to the rest of our experience (WB: 8), always understanding that what works best now may not work best in the future. As he said on a number of occasions, “ever not quite” is the appropriate byword (EPh: 189–90; WB: 6; P: 258). As for the constitution of experience, it is important to note that it includes, for James, all our concepts, beliefs, values, needs, and emotions as well as our sensations and perceptions (see Leary 2018: ch. 13).

What made James's empiricism even more radical was its insistence upon the dignity, so to say, of *all* facts, however small or seemingly trivial. The emotion one feels in looking at a painting is, in James's view, just as real and possibly even more consequential than the painting itself. Looking back to psychology, feelings of transition in the stream of consciousness are just as notable (if not as noticeable) as the more substantive thoughts within that stream. No a priori rules, past experiences, or inherited conceptual structures can predetermine the significance of any fact. What may seem significant from a particular point of view or within a particular context may be irrelevant in another. And going beyond mere epistemology, all the pragmatic questioning of conceptual frameworks and conclusions that follows from radical empiricism led James, in 1904, to hypothesize a distinctive kind of neutral monism, a metaphysical belief that from the ongoing flow of experience different individuals will abstract different “things,” including “minds” and “bodies,” some of which are experienced as “mine” and some of which are attributed to “others” (ERE: 3–19, 21–44). The distinction of mind from body, however, is simply tactical or instrumental since there is no experiential warrant for positing any *essential* separation between them. This was a radical claim then as now.

The pragmatic weighing of concepts, as first formally proclaimed by James in 1898 (reprinted in P: 257–70), was a direct result of, and totally dependent upon, the psychological function of cognition, as James had spelled it out in 1885 (reprinted in MT: 13–32). Even earlier, in 1878, he had written that

the knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth which he helps to create. Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, so far as they are bases for human action – action which to a great extent transforms the world – help to *make* the truth which they declare.

(EPh: 21)

Twelve years later, in *The Principles of Psychology*, he summarized the point by saying that “the pursuance of future ends and the choice of means for their attainment are . . . the mark and criterion of the presence of mentality” (PP: 21). Concepts, for James, are among our chief means for the attainment of goals, which include both adequate comprehension and appropriate action. Some concepts will prove, with experience, to be more adequate just as some actions will prove to be more appropriate. When they do, their greater utility should lead us to prefer them to extant alternatives. This is the basic and simple core of pragmatism, of the

very practical approach that James proposed for establishing the relative worth of our ideas and actions. Indeed, he felt that this is what we do naturally, if not typically with fully conscious intention. It is the feedback that we receive from using our ideas that provides our best assurance of their value.

This approach to testing concepts, definitions, intuitions, and related behaviors against further experience, noting how well they work in comparison with alternative possibilities, was to be a hallmark of James's later philosophy.¹⁷ It did not promise *the* truth or perfect outcomes, but it produced sufficient empirical evidence that a particular cognition or action was warranted, at least in a particular context and at a particular time. In this way it suited James's radical empiricism, with its assumption that new facts, or new ways of seeing facts, can arise at any time, and that there are multiple ways of conceptualizing and acting, some better for one purpose but possibly not for others. James's emphasis upon the relative utility of ideas underscored his belief that the mind has evolved to serve very specific purposes in the lives of organisms that possess mentality. It fit his Darwinian view of nature without conceding, as Tennyson did, that such a view entailed being "red in tooth and claw" (Tennyson 1850/1989: 399). Human interests, James insisted, extend well beyond any reductive struggle for survival (PP: 313). Selecting appropriately among ethical options, among different ways of comprehending and responding to the human situation, was crucial for James. Transforming the world for the good was and still remains an option that interests many individuals. Indeed, as we have seen, it was James's own original interest, his sustained hope, and the personal goal that his psychology and philosophy were meant to serve.

4. Final thoughts

When we acknowledge that James's philosophical thought is rooted in his personal as well as professional psychology, are we thereby reducing his philosophical thought to a form of *subjectivism*? Do his philosophical views represent simply what he *had* or *wanted* or *wished* to believe? No! James always insisted upon *openness* to whatever *might* be possible, whether or not it accords with what we are inclined to believe, and this radical openness, he argued, should always be accompanied by a search for *verification*. Even here, however, we need to acknowledge James's distinctly psychological understanding of verification. What do we take to be true? to be warranted? to be worthy of our belief? to be a sufficiently firm basis for our action? Not only what may have *empirical evidence* in its favor, though such evidence should be sought, carefully considered, and never ignored. But since different opinions – even different explanations – sometimes have comparable empirical support, we often need to use additional means to separate the wheat from the chaff. In this situation, James wrote:

That theory will be most generally believed [and *should* be most generally believed] which, besides offering us objects able to account satisfactorily for our sensible experience, also offers those which are most interesting, those which appeal most urgently to our aesthetic, emotional, and active needs.

(PP: 940)

We are, in short, creatures who try to maximize the satisfaction of our various needs, not all of which are narrowly cognitive in nature. Some explanations and descriptions are more elegant than others, some more pleasing, some more consistent with what we already know, more consonant with our hopes and ideals, and more relevant to our practical concerns. We may like simplicity, when it can be had, but we also want our simple descriptions and explanations to account for as rich a diversity of facts as possible (EPh: 35–41). But even here, we see

temperamental differences in emphasis, as the rationalists among us settle more readily for a “skinny outline” while the empiricists show more interest in “the rich thicket of reality.” Ultimately, the issue is not what *pleases* but what *works* for us, what helps us get from one situation to another in a way that is “progressive, harmonious, satisfactory” (P: 38–39, 97).

This psychologically grounded approach to verification – to the warranted acceptance, however temporary, of what fulfills our aesthetic, emotional, and practical needs *in addition to* more purely cognitive requirements – will not satisfy those who are committed to “the quest for certainty,” which John Dewey (1929) saw as a hallmark of past philosophical rumination. But it will appeal to and provide a supportive and corrective framework for those who live and think and act, like James, in vibrant awareness of the ever-ongoing and ever-changing experience of modern life, replete as it is with unanticipated surprises and possibilities.¹⁸ To live and think and act in *this* moment – in our own time and place – is what concerned James. His determination to do so, to the best of his ability, was at the center of his personal and professional life, and this might well be the best way to conceive his legacy to us. The *genteel* tradition of old, we might say, has given way to a more *genuine* tradition of today, characterized by a commitment to being both personally and professionally honest. Such honesty has its limits, its own forms of fallibility, as all things do, but James would have us live, as he did, within those limits, with as much integrity as we can, always aware, as he put it, that “you can’t weed out the human contribution” to all that we experience, believe, and do (P: 122).¹⁹

Notes

- 1 Since James explicitly stated that “temperament” is “to a great extent” responsible for one’s philosophical orientation (P: 11), my focus here on personal characteristics, experiences, and concerns rather than temperament per se needs to be explained and defended. I provide that explanation and defense in “William James’s Use of Temperaments and Types” (Leary 2021). The key point is that, for James, personal characteristics, experiences, and concerns were the *practical* equivalent or result of temperament, whereas temperament as a *theoretical* concept, in his time, lacked the kind of physiological, neurological, or genetic substantiation or stipulation to which it seemed to refer. In short, no one knew exactly *which* biological factors were associated with *which* psychological characteristics, though some (including James) assumed that there were intimate connections between and among them.
- 2 Other major works by James included the psychological *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and the philosophical *Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897) as well as the incomplete, posthumously published *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911).
- 3 James’s vigor and manliness were highlighted by many of his students, colleagues, and friends as well as family members. His student Gertrude Stein, for instance, wrote that James was “truly a man among men” whose “strong sane personality” was both gentle and balanced (Miller 1949: 146–47). Lest this seem the mere gushing of an enthralled student, the same point was made by such ultra-sober and long-acquainted colleagues as George Herbert Palmer and George H. Howison. Palmer, for instance, averred that when James’s “alert figure comes to mind . . . there always comes with it the adjective “manly.” In every tense fibre of his being James was a man” (Palmer 1996: 30). Howison went even further, asserting that James’s “unaffected manly vigor has hardly been surpassed, perhaps not even equaled” (Howison 1916: 241). These last two posthumous testaments were all the more remarkable given James’s physically weakened, sometimes incapacitating condition over the final twelve years of his life, which suggests – as we shall see – that James’s “manliness” was something other than the mere physical vitality associated with this heavily gendered term. Townsend (1996) has discussed the ideal of “manhood” at Harvard in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, paying particular attention to James. Lears (1981: ch. 3) has discussed the related “martial ideal” of the time, also referring to James.
- 4 The difficulties that James experienced in his twenties and thirties have been well documented by Allen (1967), Croce (2018), Feinstein (1984), Richardson (2006), Simon (1998), and others. My own discussions of his difficulties include Leary (2013: 177–84), Leary (2015a), and Leary (2015b). The latter two articles include previously unknown information about the roles played by Arthur Schopenhauer and John Bunyan in the onset and resolution of James’s primary period of personal crisis.

- 5 See *The Varieties of Religious Experience* for the origin and fuller meaning of these terms, which are used here in a secular rather than religious sense (VRE: 4–7).
- 6 By the time he published this draft, “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology” (EPs: 142–67), James had already published eight other articles that, together with “Omissions,” formed a very sturdy foundation for his *Principles of Psychology*.
- 7 Although James’s later “manliness” might be seen as a form of reaction formation or compensation for his drawn-out period of hypersensitivity and relative inactivity (characteristics considered “unmanly” in the gendered terminology of that time, by James and most others), in fact it represented a return to his earlier personality, captured by his brother Henry’s description of him as “always round the corner and out of sight” and his sister Alice’s comparison of him to a “blob of mercury” upon which you couldn’t keep “a mental finger” (H. James 1913/1983: 8; A. James 1889–1892/1999: 57).
- 8 The classic expression of James’s views on consciousness (PP: ch. 9) builds directly upon these earlier accounts.
- 9 In his first article on the will, James asserted explicitly that “to sustain a representation [or idea], to think, is what requires the effort, and is the true moral act” (EPs: 113). The conscious initiation of an action always involves a choice, making it a moral act. As he said in two prominent places, “Will you or won’t you have it so?” is “the most probing question we are ever asked” (PP: 1182; BC: 394).
- 10 This 1879 article prefigured his later argument about the temperamental basis of philosophical reflection (PU: ch. 1), as did an 1884 article in which he argued that the “divining power” of philosophers depends upon “all our faculties, emotional as well as logical” (reprinted in ERE: 137–43).
- 11 For an analysis and discussion of James’s intertwined treatment of cognition and emotion, see Leary (2018: ch. 9) This book also treats other interconnections in James’s *Principles of Psychology*, e.g., between mind and brain, habit and thought, perception and conception, imagination and memory, consciousness and unconsciousness, attention and will, and self and others.
- 12 James introduced the concept of a “murdered” self in an 1880 article (reprinted in WB: 163–89, 171). Feinstein (1884: ch. 8) elucidates the context of James’s turn away from an early interest in art, interestingly in 1861, around the time James’s unhealthy symptoms began to manifest themselves. In fact, Feinstein concludes that James’s “painterly self, the alternative ego that he stifled, did not fade away. Instead it insistently reappeared through symptoms that plagued him for the remainder of his life” (Feinstein 1884: 145). I have traced James’s later emphasis upon sensation, perception, and perspective, including importantly his appreciation for the role of alternative perspectives, to his experience as an apprentice painter (Leary 1992). In turning from art, James was following the dictates of his father, which also played a role in his decision not to enroll in the Union Army in 1862, another source of inner conflict, which left him feeling “very small and shabby” (C4: 82).
- 13 James recognized that the sense of homesickness is a deterrent to human flourishing (PP: 941). Feeling at home – reasonably comfortable with the world in which we live – was important to James, who felt that humans have a natural desire to live in an environment in which their “powers” seem to be “a match” for its perceived “demands” (WB: 108). “We crave alike to feel more truly at home with it [the universe], and to contribute our mite to its amelioration” (PU: 11). The moral basis of his acceptance of free will and hence of all that follows from it is clearly indicated in his chapter on “Will” in *The Principles of Psychology*. Admitting that “the question of free-will is insoluble on strictly psychologic grounds,” he explicitly stated that the grounds of his opinion were “ethical rather than psychological” (PP: 1176).
- 14 James often spoke of the “wildness” of nature, and contrasted his own view of it to that of his colleague Hugo Münsterberg, to whom he wrote in 1906, saying that “I am satisfied with a free wild Nature; you seem to me to cherish and pursue an Italian Garden, where all things are kept in separate compartments, and one must follow straight-ruled walks” (C11: 241). Still, he insisted on his “fixed belief” that “the world is wide enough to sustain and nourish without harm many different types of thinking,” thereby illustrating his pluralistic contention that the world can be understood and dealt with in a variety of ways. As he put it in a lecture a few years earlier, “I want a world of anarchy, M. [Münsterberg] one of bureaucracy, and each appeals to “Nature” to back him up. Nature partly helps & resists each of us” (ML: 326). His insistent focus on individuality and the pluralistic views associated with it was fully apparent in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (TT: 132–49); his leaning toward anarchism (maximum freedom barring harm to others) in politics and social life has been convincingly documented by Cotkin (1990) and Coon (1996); and his acceptance of antinomianism in ethics (Marchetti 2015) was perhaps best expressed by his acceptance of the Augustinian imperative, to love and do what you will (VRE: 72). In short, James put the onus of responsibility – of decision-making – on the individual. Anticipating situational ethics, he felt that each person must determine what actions best

accord, in the here and now, with love and concern for the world and others in it. A key element of his moral thought is that it starts with profound respect for the individual – *every* individual (TT: 132–49). It is how one *sees* and *values* others as well as the world that leads to moral action (Leary 2009). Rondel (2017) has given a succinct reading of James's "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (reprinted in WB: 141–62), contrasting James's moral thought to the two dominant ethical traditions of the past two centuries.

- 15 This notion of "dramatic" possibility, probability, and reality was a favorite and telling metaphor for James. It is both conceptually and methodologically related to the recent development of narrative psychology (as I have argued in Leary 2018: 328–31). It appears in a wide variety of his works (WB: 131; VRE: 390–92; EPR: 283–85, 361–73; MT: 49). His own sense of dramatic *probabilities*, James suggested, came from "the whole drift of my education," which is to say, from all of his prior experience (VRE: 408). He allowed that others have different experiences and hence different expectations about what is likely to occur. None of us can live very effectively without expectations of what lies ahead, though we can never rule out unexpected occurrences. "The world is full of partial stories that run parallel to one another," he wrote in *Pragmatism*. "Whoever says that the whole world tells one story utters another of those monistic dogmas that a man believes at his risk" (P: 70–71).
- 16 According to James, the senses select from among many possible sensations in the ambient environment; some of those sensations are then selected for perception; some of the resulting perceptions are selected for conceptualization; some of those conceptions are selected as more aesthetically, morally, or practically attractive than the others; and of the remaining conceptions some draw attention, hence selection, by the will. In short, selection occurs all the way up the hierarchy of psychological functions (PP: 273–77).
- 17 James's pragmatism is articulated most fully in *Pragmatism* (1907) and *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), but it was illustrated throughout his writings (see esp. WB and VRE).
- 18 Of course, no single person can perceive every fact, surprise, or possibility. James was deeply aware that each of us depends upon the observations, conjectures, and verifications of others (WB: 87). We are continually exchanging truths (P: 100).
- 19 To sum up: when James insisted that any given philosophy can provide only a "summary sketch, a picture of the world in abridgment, and foreshortened bird's-eye view of the perspective of events" (PU: 9), he was acknowledging that philosophy is necessarily partial, perspectival, personal, and definitely *not* "a view from nowhere," to steal Thomas Nagel's (1986) useful terminology.

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