William James and the Moral Will

Jeff Polet
Malone College

Richard Rorty has characterized William James as an "aesthetic ironist" whose orientation was away from philosophy and toward an artistic pose that addressed itself contemptuously toward dominant modes of discourse. In his view, James taught us what it is like to live in a world without metaphysical comforts, one where our notions of truth were no longer operative or relevant, and one where our beliefs were judged purely in terms of their utility.[1] Due to such interpretations, James has largely been considered a figure whose writings leave little room for traditional philosophical thinking or religious belief.[2] For Rorty, the most important category of thought is contingency, and any mode of thinking (or believing) which attempts to supercede the contingent state of affairs is necessarily guilty of useless philosophizing. Rorty takes this approach for the very good reason that ahistorical forms of thinking tend to undermine proper ethical decision-mak-

[1] See, for example *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 46; *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Vol. I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 63. In general, Rorty sees James as a hero of American leftist thought. See *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[2] Rorty does qualify his view in his essay "Religious Belief, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance" in Ruth-Anna Putnam, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), where he suggests that James wanted to leave space for a privatized religious belief, as long as it didn't lead to the formation of churches.

ing. The proper result of ethics, according to Rorty, is to minimize cruelty as much as possible (though he is quick to point out that he can't defend this belief, only assert it). Since the American Left has long been opposed to cruelty, and the American Right embraces it, any truly ethical person will be a leftist and seek to expand the power of the state as the vehicle that "protects the weak from the strong" and insures equality.

Rorty misses purpose of James's suspicion of absolutes.

Taking contingency seriously, however, also means attentive analysis of thinkers' historical circumstances and how their writing is a response to the world around them. Analyzing James in this fashion shows a thinker not simply dismissive of metaphysics and religion, nor one necessarily hospitable to leftist agendas, but a person who was deeply concerned that without religious belief and philosophical truth, individual freedom would be in grave danger, and human action would be misguided. While Rorty correctly identifies James's suspicion of absolutes, his analysis misses the main purpose of these suspicions: the development of the moral will.

Way sought to exercise meaningful freedom in a mass society.

The context for the emergence of James's thought was the development of science, the nineteenth-century belief in infinite progress, and the boredom accompanying the formation of mass society. Sensitive to the attenuation of religious spirit, given to fits of despair, and concerned about meaningful human action in a mass age—attempting to navigate between the Scylla of action without purpose and the Charybdis of purpose without action—James sought in the religious experience the resources to ward off civilizational ennui. In affirming not only the reality but also the efficacy of the moral will, James opened up a philosophical path that justified the attempt to exercise meaningful freedom. The pursuit of philosophical and religious thinking, as a means to effect the development of the moral will so that freedom could be meaningfully exercised, was the great struggle and result of James's reflections. To achieve this end, James de-absolutized the truth to service the de-socialization of individuals, in the sense of freeing them from the coercive forces of mass civilization. This twin process of de-absolutization and de-socialization is reflected negatively in his response to science and religion, and positively in his development of pragmatic philosophy. In this article, I will examine James's contribution to the development of the idea of a moral will by looking at three issues: (1) the response to the problem of particularity, relating James's thought to philosophical monism

and American Puritanism; (2) the response to positivism and subsequent claims about the nature of knowledge; and (3) James's analysis of religious experience and its relation to ethical action. I will conclude by looking at the political ramifications of his analysis, which demonstrate the connection between moral experience and action—the crux of the pragmatist impulse. My main thesis is that the moral will requires for its grounding a rejection of ahistorical absolutism as well as a suspicion of non-philosophical historicism. James demonstrates how this can be accomplished.

Scientific and Religious Absolutism

Offhand, the relation between science and Puritanism is not obvious, but they constituted for James the two social realities at the core of his philosophical struggle. In modern science he saw the tendency to reduce knowledge to technique and mechanize the social sphere, and in Puritanism he saw the tendency to dogmatize. In both, he felt the tendency to subordinate experience to systematized knowledge; he saw them as truncated types of existence which could not do justice to the complexity and depth of our experience. In other words, he believed they both operated with improperly absolutist notions of truth.

Modern science and Puritanism both tended to dogmatize.

Modern science assumes the separation of the self from nature and the belief that if reason, narrowly defined, can be brought to bear on any complex of problems, it will provide workable solutions. In short, rather than viewing nature as a revelatory text, it views nature as material substance to be controlled and manipulated. The sciences reach their apogee in the attempt to control not only nature, but also human nature. Science sets itself up as the cultural touchstone of any legitimate knowledge claim. It occupies the authoritative position at the center of our culture and recognizes no *a priori* or more embracing knowledge claim. Faced with the deterministic proclivity of science, the philosopher, as a human being, becomes concerned about the status of human freedom.

Kant faced the problem of scientific determinism squarely. Given the disturbing sense that scientific knowledge rendered talk of human freedom meaningless, Kant sought to protect the most cherished experiences of life from the claims of science. The purpose of the First Critique, as he notes in the Second Preface, is to determine to what degree, if any, scientific knowledge intrudes into the realm of metaphysics, here concerned with the experi-

ences of immortality, freedom, and God. Kant's famous division between the phenomenal and the noumenal was designed to protect these experiences from the claims of science by engaging in a critique of scientific knowing which would subject it to strict limits. The Second Critique follows not just chronologically, but ontologically as well, for Kant wants to argue that "pure" reason must in some ultimate sense be subordinated to "practical" reason. In this way, Kant can rightly be regarded as the first pragmatist, though at the cost of gutting moral experience of its noetic content. No longer can these experiences have any relation to reason—they are rather a projection of a felt moral need. The Kantian attempt to protect metaphysics from science failed; by the end of the century the subordination of science had been reversed to the point of disaster, leaving religious ideas and experiences in a most precarious position. James sought to right this balance again.

The relationship of James to Puritanism fascinates not least because of James's troubled relationship with his father.[3] Steeped in a non-doctrinaire Calvinism, James kept many of the formal traits of Calvinism, even if he rejected particular content. In his famous analysis of Calvinism, Max Weber stressed its element of "intramundane asceticism," working within the world without a particular love of it. Rather than seeing themselves as participants in the order of being, Puritans saw themselves either as strangers within the world, or beings endowed with the power to transform the world. Working within the world was a means of actuating the intense self-discipline required by faith and working out one's tenuously held salvation. In addition, the Puritans believed they had received a special commission from God, that they had been insured with a glorious trust and had received a glorious promise. As a laborer in God's vineyard, the Puritan sanctified work as a divine mandate. The doctrine of predestination promulgated this belief, for the Puritan saw it not as determinism of acts but as the guarantee of a *telos*. Nonetheless, the act of faith enacted itself dogmatically, leaving little room for disagreement.

The absolutist tendency of faith often masked the paradox of

---

[3] Any analysis of James must include reference to Ralph Barton Perry's *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little Brown, 1935). At over 1600 pages, Perry's work is a testament to careful scholarship, filled with references to James's published writings and many of his letters. Any quote from this source will be assumed to be James's words unless otherwise noted.

the Puritan, who found freedom to be as much a burden as a blessing. Without liturgical comforts or natural theology, the lonely soul was left face to face with the elusive will of God. This will could not be contemplated, but only served directly through practice (a foreshadowing of pragmatism). Calvinism took the greatest virtue to be humility (to the point of abasement), and the greatest vice to be pride.[4] In emphasizing humility, James, like the Puritans, attempted to create the condition for the recognition of the sublimity of—in the Puritan case—transcendence, and in James's case something closely approximating it. James notes, for example, that describing a Beethoven string quartet as dragging a horse's tail across a cat's bowels would hardly do justice to the beauty which transcends mere physical material and movement.[5] The following description of the Puritan sheds light on James.

> Briefly characterized, the typical Puritan, in 1630 or 1930, reflected ideological assurance but was, at least in most areas and when at his best, open to new ideas. He was very much a moralist, a political activist, and an often repressive reformer who believed in the possibility of progress toward an ever more righteous social order. He venerated the rule of objective laws or principles, but he just as insistently believed in congregationalism and local democracy. He usually reflected a sense of mission, even of a peculiar destiny, and an atmosphere of seriousness and self-importance. Yet he was, or wanted to be, pious, ever mindful of his dependence upon an overarching but never quite fathomable reality, which he loved even without fully understanding. Although he sought redemption above all else, he had a wholesome respect for the instrumentality of both material goods and scientific knowledge, trying always to keep either from usurping ends. He demanded a conscientious stewardship of all men and wanted all to have a useful and fulfilling calling or vocation. Finally, and contrary to most stereotypes, he was acutely sensitive to beauty, but only beauty fully integrated with the moral quest and with a just social order.[6]

Likewise, James generally attempted to balance extremes, work-

---

[4] See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols, ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960); Book II, ch. 2: "So if you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third, and always I would answer, 'Humility.'" See also Bk. IV, ch. 1.

[5] *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 76.

[6] Paul Conkin, *Puritans and Pragmatists: Eight Eminent American Thinkers* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1968), 3-4.

ing often with an overly dichotomous logic: light and dark, unity and pluralism, reconciliation and alienation, science and religion, commonness and heroism. His particular genius, however, was the uncanny ability to appreciate both sides of the argument, to seek a middle that would do the greatest justice possible to the complexity of our experience.

Absolutism and the Particularity of Experience

Monism and absolutism negate individual willing and acting.

For James, as for Plato, the great philosophical problem was that of the One and the Many. He saw in positivist science, philosophical idealism, and orthodox religion the predilection for resolving the tension in favor of oneness. James's own tendency was always to stress plurality and individuality. His motivations here were complex, but at bottom his interest was religious.[7] His belief in religion (note, not religious belief) was instrumental in defending and deepening his conception of concretely experienced freedom as the inward significance of life. More than just the significance of life, though, he sought the significance of each life. Monism and absolutism abstracted from, and ultimately negated, individuality.

The experiential source of monism reaches its highest expression in Hegel. There the question of why individuality must yield to necessity is raised with great clarity. The touchstone of the issue evolves from his reflections on disorder in history. "But even regarding History as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized—the question *involuntarily* (my emphasis) arises—to what principle, to what final aim these enormous sacrifices have been offered."[8] Hegel asserts that the principle is Reason, expressed in freedom. But it is a freedom that finds its identity, its union with its object, by bowing humbly to the laws of necessity in a dialectically unfolding consciousness. Thus speculative philosophy cannot do without the idea of necessity, which trumps all individual concerns. The philosophy of the Spirit is the philosophy of the Spirit, Hegel reminds us, precisely because it is

---

[7] "Religion is the greatest interest of my life." Perry, Vol. I, 165 (from a letter written in 1897).

[8] *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991), 21.

Jeff Polet

able to rise above all that is finite and transitory. Conversely, all finite and transitory things can participate in the philosophy of the Spirit only when they cease to be concerned with their own interests and their own protests, which are insignificant and of little concern.[9]

Hegel's absolute knowledge thus makes the claim of science for itself—absolute necessity—a claim which is developed from the principle of universally expanded self-consciousness. James argues, however, that in doing this Hegel effects the negation of individual existence, a process that renders individual action and willing meaningless. It also provided the basis of Hegel's theodicy. Any theodicy, James argued in contrast, attempted to subsume individual existence into an absolute, thus negating the integrity of individuality. A notion of "a world already saved" is, according to James, "too saccharin to stand," for it tries to preserve everything into a higher unity, thus dusting over the reality of suffering and finitude. James would rather accept that there are "real losses and real losers, and no total preservation of all that is," for it aids individuals in the belief that they have freedom in determining the course of their lives and responding to their privation.[10]

Any science, James argued, cannot handle the extreme diversity of reality. It can't be the final adjudicator of knowledge claims because too much of importance falls outside the realm of its competency. The problem of truth, he believed, was ultimately not a problem of either epistemology or science. The measure of truthfulness was constructed by relating conceptualization to the real desires of individuals and their perceptions of reality. In relating truth positively to the desires of individuals, James hoped to exempt the self from physical or conceptual necessity and to create conditions under which moral willing was justified. He relativized absolutist knowledge claims, arguing that any explanation that assumed unity and coherence and wholeness was based on a cheap sentimental preference for order. James sought to undermine the claims of science and idealism not to conceptualize freedom and

James hoped to exempt the self from physical or conceptual necessity.

---

[9] Consider how Hegel treats the problem of irony which, he states, "is evil, in fact evil through and through and universally," for it substitutes individual caprice for laws which are universal and objective. In order to remain universal and objective, they must be kept "abstract and elevated." See *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1981), 101-104.

[10] *Pragmatism*, Lecture Eight, "Pragmatism and Religion."

the moral will, but rather to create "a speculative position without any operational guidelines for verification,"[11] which would support the free development of the moral will.

Truth found in concrete experience, not abstract concepts.

James, beginning already with his landmark *Principles of Psychology*, constantly engaged in the search for the ground of pure experience. This murky ground resisted conceptualization, for James believed that truth lay hidden within percepts (the raw data of experience) and not concepts (our mental imaginings). He preferred the percept because it was the realm of actual experience. "The intellectual life of man," he wrote, "consists almost wholly in his substitution of a conceptual order for the perceptual order in which his experience originally comes."[12] Although he recognized the need for concepts, his inclination favored the percept. He believed that concepts did little to help solve actual problems in life—they were checks we wrote to reality. Percepts were the money in the bank which made them good. After all, as he noted, "the concept 'dog' does not bite."[13] Investing reality in concepts falsely removes one from the hardness of the "flux" of reality—immersion in a finite world filled with pain, suffering, and privation, but also with love, joy, and goodness.

The Experiential Origins of the Moral Will

Ideas are valuable if they produce morally desirable action and reality.

Rather than trying to *handle* the flux, James's brand of pragmatism sought not only to understand, but to live positively within it. James always looked for the immediate payoff, but was not blind to long-term concerns. In ascertaining the "cash value" of any given idea, James attempted to show how that idea might produce action and a reality that was morally desirable. In willing a moral action we in fact change the nature of reality itself. For example, in facing the problem of evil, we can try to explain it, the approach of Hegel, or work to get rid of it, thereby creating in reality what we have uncovered first in our moral intuitions. In a classically Jamesian analogy, he writes:

> Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by

---

[11] Conkin, 309.

[12] *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 51.

[13] *Problems*, 85.

Jeff Polet

a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of *maybes*, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you roll in the abyss. In such a case (and it belongs to an enormous class), the part of wisdom as well as of courage is to *believe what is in the line of your needs*, for only by such belief is the need fulfilled. Refuse to believe, and you shall indeed be right, for you shall irretrievably perish.[14]

There is, James wrote, no place on this "moonlit and dream-filled planet" where we might find a certain guide for our actions. We stand on a mountain pass "in whirling snow and blinding mist," and all our paths are obscured. If we stand still, like Buridan's ass, we die from exposure, and if we move we risk taking the wrong path and being dashed to pieces. We are better off, James argued, taking the path and dying in a display of courage or perhaps surviving, then staying put because we did not dare make a mistake. He believed that absolutism was born of the "stay put" spirit, that it was more interested in avoiding error than finding truth—and he saw this as an emotive quality rather than a rational one.

The moral will finds its provenance in the experience of facing the abyss. On June 28, 1896, James wrote to Benjamin Paul Blood: "I take it that no man is educated who has never dallied with the thought of suicide."[15] Freedom becomes real to us after having gone through privation or danger, *in extremis*. The question of freedom turns into a cry for help, the attempt to crawl forward, simply and slowly, in life-and-death situations. James often clarified his meaning by employing the analogy of an alcoholic struggling to regain control of his life. Freedom is movement out of the abyss, and he related his own in the chapter on "The Sick Soul" in his masterpiece *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Gripped by a "horrible fear of my own existence" James had a vision of an epileptic he had once seen in an asylum, and he identified the vision as himself. He was filled with such horror he "awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of insecurity the like of which I have never known before, and that I have never felt since." He experienced it as a revelation

---

[14] *Will to Believe*, 59.
[15] Perry, Vol. II, 231.

which created in him a greater sympathy and capacity to understand.[16]

Because of the centrality of this revelation, James constantly defended the right to believe against the claims of scientists and absolutists. The world, he believed, can only be expressed hypothetically, not categorically. He championed a "radical empiricism" (radical because it challenged typical empiricist assumptions) which was always open to modification, but also resistant to monist conceptualization. Dualities, such as the conceptual vs. the perceptual, unity vs. diversity, monism vs. pluralism, rationalism vs. empiricism, identity vs. novelty, abstraction vs. concreteness, and speculation vs. experience were, in his mind, irresolvable tensions. He believed, however, that thinking which sought to avoid error, or which thought the universe was complete, or which believed actions did nothing to alter reality, while understandable in the sense of their existential appeal, could in the end not ground a moral will that would comport more fully with our experience. Thinking and willing must ultimately give us an answer to the question of suicide, of what makes life worth living. For James, this was the only philosophical question that really mattered. James constantly sought to navigate the tension between "believing too little and believing too much"; attempting to develop a faith that maintained "a practical, and not a dogmatic attitude."[17] By casting all knowledge claims in the subjunctive, James was able, in a way reminiscent of Kant, to limit reason to make room for faith.

James and Religious Belief

James believed that the advantages and risks of belief outweighed the cautious cowardliness of those who would not believe because they could not verify it empirically. James asserted that any belief had to satisfy one's desires, but also had to seek the conditions under which such desire might be demonstrated to be correct (in terms of both the end pursued and the means by which we determine those ends), and in the social sphere it had to be inclusive and non-dogmatic enough so that one moral will

---

[16] *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Random House, 1999).

[17] *Will to Believe*, xi; *Problems*, 225.

would not compromise another.[18] Toleration became a high virtue in his analysis of religious belief.

James saw dogmatic religion as the attempt to sanctify the human flux. His belief, which sought a path between optimism and pessimism, dogmatism and scepticism, he called meliorism, or the belief that the world could be made better through human action resulting from the affirmation of belief itself. "Meliorism treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become."[19] James's natural scepticism and his sensitivity to the contingency of human life rendered him unable to hold to a view of the universe where everything naturally turned out for the good and the end was already decided. His was a "tough-minded" faith that took into account the bewildering accidents of experience and gave up any claim of a final reconciliation.[20] Any amelioration requires sacrifice and no attempt to reconcile can be final, for "something permanently drastic and bitter always remains at the bottom of the cup."[21]

At the same time, James believed that only the desire to be perfect could in fact make the world less imperfect, and so emphasized the role of the moral will in limiting imperfection. Reason was subordinate to will, for even the attempt to determine everything by reason was a willing of reason, and was often an excuse for the not-willing of anything else. Since one must will, the question had to be how willing related not to abstract concepts, but to concrete existence. It involved effort, desire, and the affirmation of a truth that satisfied the fullness of the imagination and our moral impulses. "If your heart does not want a world of moral reality," he wrote, "your head will usually never make you believe in one."[22] Truth is made by us and for us as a way of giving direction to the moral will. "Our belief in truth itself," he wrote, "that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each

Belief in moral reality follows upon willing its existence.

---

[18] Perry, Vol. II, 212.

[19] *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 137.

[20] "The pragmatism or pluralism which I defend has to fall back on a certain ultimate hardihood, a certain willingness to live without assurances or guarantees." *Pragmatism*, 290.

[21] *Pragmatism*, 141.

[22] *Will to Believe*, 19.

other,—what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up?"[23]

While affirming the right to believe, James still had both to analyze the nature of belief and attempt to set up a measure for comparing and analyzing competing beliefs. How could we affirm belief in the midst of our scepticism, and at the same time develop criteria for judging belief that were neither dogmatic nor ahistorical? This was the great Jamesian problem. He fully recognized the capacity of the will to will badly or falsely, to create illusions that were more harmful yet than the effects of scepticism. Indeed, as Claes Ryn has written:

> . . . the imagination can also draw man into illusory views of existence. It can hide from him his real predicament and what he needs to do in order to find happiness and peace. It may ignore the duality of human nature and draw the individual into utopian or otherwise questionable expectations. Indeed, men often deliberately seek pleasing illusion. They wish to be deceived. As long as this is merely for temporary relaxation, the effect may not be entirely unhealthy. But such moments of imaginative extravagance may begin to acquire an aura of profound experience . . . . In this manner, men may drift further and further away from the central facts of their existence, although their imagination may at the same time contain fairly accurate views of some particular dimensions of life.[24]

To counter these dangers, James began analyzing religion by examining his own experience. Part of James's fascination with religious experience may stem from the fact that he had no powerful experience himself. He was intrigued by religion already at an early age, and took it to be the crux of all his interests. His greatest works all studied the problem of religious belief. Perhaps the main reason he grounded religion in desire was that he desired a religious experience, but seemed incapable of achieving one that was genuine. Unable to mimic the movement of the mystics he admired so much, James even turned to recreational "drug" use as a mechanism for finding the divine. After having read Benjamin Blood's *The Anaesthetic Revolution and the Gist of Philosophy*, James became interested in the use of nitrous oxide to achieve consciousness-altering states. While intoxicated, James began to perceive the

---

[23] *Will to Believe*, 9.

[24] Claes Ryn, *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*, 2nd expanded edition (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1997), 153.

Jeff Polet

"depth beneath depth of almost blinding evidence." While under the spell, he began to experience the reconciliation of all opposites, to see the eternal substance behind all life. As an experiment he picked up a pen and jotted down whatever entered his head after he inhaled the nitrous oxide, and the notes are filled with word plays ("what's mistake but a kind of take?"), biographical information ("Medical school; divinity school, *school*! SCHOOL!"), and religious fervor ("Oh my God, oh God; oh GOD!").[25]

Although religion must ultimately deal with the "best things" and reconcile us to reality, it starts in a profound sense of mystery. Deeply influenced by the thought of Henri Bergson, James saw the vitalism and mysticism of religion as derived from a reality that can be known only in immediate experience. Never a mystic himself, James at least had an intimation of the mystical experience, and this was enough to generate in him not only an appreciation for the experience of others, but some capacity to understand them. He gave us a clear picture not only of the inchoate core of his religious experience, but also why he believed it to be essential for the development of the moral will.

Religious experience essential to development of the moral will.

> My personal position is simple. I have no living sense of commerce with a God. I envy those who have, for I know that the addition of such a sense would help me greatly. The Divine, for my active life, is limited to impersonal and abstract concepts which, as ideals, interest and determine me, but do so but faintly in comparison with what a feeling of God might effect, if I had one. This, to be sure, is largely a matter of intensity, but a shade of intensity may make one's whole centre of moral energy shift. Now, although I am so devoid of *Gottesbewusstsein* in the directer and stronger sense, yet there is something in me which makes response when I hear utterances from that quarter made by others. I recognize the deeper voice. Something tells me:—*'thither lies truth'*—and I am sure it is not old theistic prejudices of infancy. Those in my case were Christian, but I have grown so out of Christianity that entanglement therewith on the part of a mystical utterance has to be abstracted from and overcome before I can listen. Call this, if you like, my mystical *germ*. It is a very common germ. It creates the rank and file of believers. As it withstands in my case, so it will withstand in most cases, all purely atheistic

---

[25] See "Subjective Effects of Nitrous Oxide" in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, ed. Skrupskelis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press). For an analysis of the relation of this to James's thought see Dmitri Tymoczko "The Nitrous Oxide Philosopher," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1996.

criticism, but *interpretative* criticism (not of the mere 'hysteria' and 'nerves' order) it can energetically combine with.[26]

We see here the Jamesian frustration with encrusted dogma and his tendency both to look for what is common in experience and his capacity to sympathetically engage with the experience of others. It is this gift, not a gift for detachment (the scientific position) but one for attachment, as manifested in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which makes that work a classic. There, James moves through despair to a desire for faith.

James believed the imagination was the human capacity to move beyond sensory evidence to an entirely different kind of order and to trust that order. The movement of the soul begins with the act of rebellion manifesting itself as a speculative melancholy, an inability to trust in anything. Then we see the evil in the world around us, and are unable to reconcile ourselves to it with any theodicy. Instead of thinking evil something to be explained, we experience it as something to be overcome. We then seek the spiritual resources by which we develop the will so we can score minor victories over evil, which in turn create in us the sense that the universe is morally ordered. Once our trust in order is reestablished, we perceive the spiritual order of the universe and thus establish "ultimate healthy relations" with it. Trust brings with it enough assurance to make life worthwhile, and faith therefore validates itself.

In acts of faith we bring about the spiritual order.

There is no measure outside of faith by which its truth can be ascertained—in other words, the veracity of faith is revealed in its pursuit. One measure is its ability to satisfy our spiritual longings, and its capacity to turn those longings into positive action. We can have no intuitive knowledge of this order, we can only experience it animating our actions from within our rebellion. The spiritual order is not a thing in reality that can be known like any other thing; it is the movement in life that transcends knowledge and interests and makes life worth living. Banking all we do on "maybes" and "yesses," our actions alone can testify to this deeper and greater order. In the act of faith, we bring that order about. James concentrates on the concrete movements of the soul and its own attempt to call into being an order greater than mere existence.

If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of

---

[26] Letter to James Leuba, April 17, 1904, in Perry, Vol. II, 350-351.

private theatricals from which any one may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem; and first of all to redeem our own hearts from atheism and fears. For such a half-wild, half-saved universe our nature is adapted.[27]

Faith is therefore to thinking and theory what courage is to action. The proof of moral belief can only be found in moral action—that is the essence of James's pragmatism. As in during war, one cannot be neutral. To be sceptical about morality is to promote immorality, just as refusing to fight Nazis or terrorists gives them free rein to wreak their evil. Pushing the analogy, James could see in war the development of characteristics essential to the moral life: redeeming life from "flat degeneration"—"fidelity, cohesiveness, tenacity, heroism, conscience, education, inventiveness, economy, wealth, physical health and vigor—there isn't a moral or intellectual point of superiority that doesn't tell, when God assizes and hurls the peoples upon one another."[28]

Proof of moral belief only found in moral action.

James sought moral heroism, but recognized its rarity. He believed, however, that religion could develop in the person unexpected resources such as courage, endurance, fidelity, and energy. Even though there are within James clear tendencies toward aggression, militarism, and romanticism, these are balanced by equally clear tendencies toward conciliation, peace, and practicality. The key to holding these conflicting impulses in balance is a recognition of the sacredness and ineffability of individuality in its freedom. In this sense, James is a classic liberal inasmuch as he believes in the worth of each individual while simultaneously asserting principles of development that would create social inequalities.[29] James saw a fundamental tension within the self between self-assertiveness and sympathy: the former breeds heroism while the latter breeds toleration. Both are necessary to the development of the moral will as the basis of the democratic self.

---

[27] *Will to Believe*, 61.

[28] "The Moral Equivalent of War," in *Essays in Religion and Morality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 169.

[29] Joshua Miller in his *Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998) argues that James is a radical democrat and that his emphasis on heroism and social inequality are embarrassing but inessential moments of excess. I believe Miller badly misconstrues James on these points, for Miller wants to resolve this tension in favor of a radical egalitarian-

James's thought moves in two directions, which we will now explore: (1) the sympathetic understanding of other points of view, most clearly manifested in religious experience; and (2) creating conditions for individuality in mass society, resulting in self-assertion and inequality.

Religion and Society

In exploring religious belief, James wanted to look at religious experience before we had the opportunity to develop a doctrine about it. He was not interested in its institutional structure, but in its reality within the person, taking it to refer to the "feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude." The criteria for a religious experience were simple: there had to be an immediate luminosity about the experience, it had to be philosophically "reasonable," and it had to be morally helpful. At the root of all religious experience is "accepting" the universe as given, developing a sense of something external to ourselves—be it evil or good—which convinces us as to their externality. We recognize we cannot be the measure of all things.

The first type of religious experience James examined was "healthy-minded" religion.[30] James argued that, based on a type of hedonism, it never engages the reality of evil, diverting our attention through conscious oblivion. It is the experience behind religious liberalism which saw progress as inevitable and desirable. The difference between God and man is one of degree, not kind. The second experience is that of the "sick soul." This experience has little sense of the goodness of God, and its adherents have little capacity to experience pleasure. They possess a sense of unreality, are anomistic, and see little meaning in human action. Within the melancholy of the sick soul, however, James hears the

---

ism which would manifest itself in a plebiscitary democracy. Not a page of Miller's book goes by in which he does not offer some paean to direct popular participation in politics or to the denial of any difference between persons. Indeed, James had an inordinate gift for toleration and sympathy, but not an uncritical one. To Miller's credit, he acknowledges his prejudice in favor of political activism and leftist agendas in the Preface to his book. But rather than attempting a complete portrait of James, Miller notes that "in writing about James on political consciousness I have drawn on my own political experience."

[30] The following discussion tracks James's argument in *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

cry of legitimate questioning. "No prophet can claim to bring a final message unless he says things that will have a sound of reality in the ears of victims such as these." Religion for the sick soul must promise deliverance.

Between these two extremes reside most types of religious experience, with its emphasis on the recognition of moral and personal failing, a loss of will, but also of a kind of redemption that strengthens the will and expands the field of consciousness.[31] The everyday world seems somehow new, worries disappear, and one begins to perceive new truths. It can often be accompanied by a sense of ecstasy.

After examining religious experience, James turns his attention to particular religious states. He begins by looking at the condition of saintliness, which is marked by the spirit of piety and charity. Saints have infinite confidence in God, a severe view of the self, and tenderness towards others. They live in a special kind of grace and experience a unique kind of elation and freedom. Practically, they tend toward asceticism, purity, and charity. They possess an expansive affection which embraces their enemies and "might conceivably transform the world." Saintliness teaches us much about the nature of religion. It refuses to divide human beings neatly into rational and physical natures. It breaks through the dogmatism of religion and brings it back to its origin in the affections of the self. But James also identifies what he calls "theopathic saintliness" (St. Teresa is an example), a condition "where devoutness is intense and the intellect feeble." He sees in it too much heightening of the ego, an excess of purity whereby the pietist attempts to leave this world and start another. Although James sees the saint as a positive corrective to the excess of scepticism and rationalism, he expresses concern about its tendency to "leave the general world unhelped," to expand the ego beyond its proper proportions and leave morality inattentive to the reality of evil.

I have already remarked on James's appreciation for mysticism. He recognized with the mystics that at the center of any genuine religious experience was a moment of great illumination that was ineffable and untranslatable. One cannot share the experience or communicate it in such a way that people will be moved accordingly. All one can do is live in light of it and hope that the inner

---

[31] James has in many ways a Pauline conception of the will which does what it would not and does not what it would. See Perry, Vol. I, 632.

illumination might ultimately shed some light on the darkness of others.[32] The mystical experience is discontinuous with ordinary consciousness, and it creates great intellectual enlightenment and a heightened moral sense. The mystical experience is authoritative first of all and absolutely for the person who experiences it. It cannot, however, provide reasons why anyone else should believe it, for it has no intellectual content of its own. What it can do, however, is place limits on the claims of rationalists, and for this reason James sees it providing a function of utmost importance.

Religious practice brings desirable outcomes. James saw many desirable outcomes of religious practice. Religious belief insisted that the visible world is part of a more spiritual world from which it draws its own significance; it created harmonious relations with that higher universe; it demonstrated that contact with the spiritual background of reality produced effects within this world; it created for most of its adherents a new zest for life and a preponderance of loving affections. We know it is real because it produces real effects. Outside of these effects, however, how can we verify the religious claim to truth? James's answer is that we can't; religious and epistemological certainty are not possibilities for us. James was more interested here in defending the idea of religion and the right to believe than in providing an apologetic for any particular religion.

That said, he did not leave the issue there. While unable to provide a definitive measure for adjudicating the competing claims of different beliefs, James did believe in partial measures. As mentioned, religion had to be luminous (the source of mysticism), philosophically reasonable (the source of pluralism—in the sense it is acceptable to those of contending viewpoints), and morally helpful (the source of pragmatism—the development of the moral will). In looking for a stable, coherent moral system, James stressed three factors: the psychological question, which dealt with the origin of our moral ideas; the metaphysical question, which dealt with the meaning of our moral ideas; and the casuistic question, which dealt with the measure or order of our moral ideas and actions.[33]

Like Nietzsche, James sought to be a genealogist of morality, locating our ideas concretely within basic physical and psychological stimuli. He first emphasized the role of pleasure and pain, but quickly added that this simple calculus did not adequately ac-

---

[32] *Cf.* Plato's *Seventh Letter*.
[33] "The Moral Philosopher and Moral Life" in *Will to Believe.*

count for the complexity of our moral actions. While vital as a source of morality, it could not give a comprehensive explanation of moral ideas. James also stressed the role of intuitions, our sense of how our moral ideas fit together and fit the world around us. Finally, he pointed to the self-referential quality of a moral idea, the sense that it is superior to others.

Reflecting on the metaphysical basis of the moral will, James first sought to demonstrate how it could possibly exist in a purely material universe. He insisted that the will be grounded in human consciousness and its own movement toward a more ultimate ground.[34] The problem arises here, though, of moving the will beyond individual sentiment; that is, evaluating what is willed on a basis beyond preferentialism. James thought we could handle this problem in a number of ways. First, we could simply ignore each other and deal with conflict through avoidance. This strategy in part is a uniquely American idea, premised on an expansive wilderness. Second, we could try to set up a transcendent standard of adjudication. James believed, like Plato, that human knowing could barely approximate divine knowing, and wrote:

> Our ordinary attitude of regarding ourselves as subject to an overarching system of moral relations, true 'in themselves,' is therefore either an out-and-out superstition, or else it must be treated as a merely provisional abstraction from that real Thinker in whose actual demand upon us to think as he does our obligation must ultimately be based. In a theistic-ethical philosophy that Thinker in question is, of course, the Deity to whom the existence of the universe is due.[35]

At the same time, James thought it both imprudent and tyrannical to legitimate our actions through self-apotheosis.

He emphasized, third, that there cannot be an abstract "nature of things" prior to the concrete thinkers and willers themselves. Because we are dealing with concrete historical entities, empirically accessible, we can compare them. Moral ideas are not anchored in Being, but in living minds. Because these minds exist spatially and temporally alongside one another, it opens up the realm of an ethical community and ethical judgment. James

---

[34] His thinking here is equivalent to Voegelin's triad of consciousness, reality, and language and reflecting how consciousness is the site where reality becomes luminous to itself. See *Order and History, Volume V: In Search of Order* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1985).

[35] *Will to Believe*, 194-195.

stressed our need both to count on our fellow humans for ethical guidance, and to respect the role of history and tradition in the formation of ethical insights.[36] James acknowledged that a variety of traditions may be able to support moral action, but not all can do it equally well.

The casuistic argument is based on James's idea of a pluralist universe. Though reality possesses no single abstract principle, it does possess historically developed principles. Once made concrete, however, some aspect of these principles must always be "butchered." James conceived "the good" not as a thing to be contemplated but as an action to be performed. That moral action is "best" which satisfies as many of our demands as possible. It must be performed with an eye toward awakening the least amount of dissatisfaction. We choose morally not between right and wrong but between better and worse, choosing the least objectionable option. We know from our own moral experience how true this is: often there seems to us no right thing to do in a given situation, only less bad things. No one likes bombing foreign nations (or at least, ought not), but may nonetheless recognize it as the best course of action to take, all things considered.

In making these concrete ethical judgments, we must seek out certain principles. We have the demand of comprehensiveness, including as much information as possible in our judgment and directing it with an eye toward "the greatest good for the greatest number." We should seek to minimize the amount of protest our action is likely to generate. We must be willing to experiment, to use methods of trial and error to see what works best. Along those lines, we should develop a strong historical sense, looking to the laws and the customs of the best communities. We must, however, be willing to break ethical rules when they become too narrow and constrictive to provide guidance in a given case. James thus advocated a principled but flexible moral casuistry.

---

[36] See "The Sentiment of Rationality," in *Will to Believe*, especially 108; see also "Pragmatism and Religion," in *Pragmatism*; finally compare with Ryn, who writes (sharing a Jamesian sentiment): "The moral effort of individual men is likely to be aided by their ability to work in the context of sound tradition. The individual is never saved from moral perplexity by such favorable conditions; he has to create his own moral synthesis out of the universal imperative experienced by him and the unique situation he faces. Still, that synthesis is helped along by the general directives contained in the inherited norms of the civilized society, which carry forward the insights of generations." *Will, Imagination and Reason*, 35.

Above all, we must not think of ethics as finalized, as providing an ultimate solution to the riddle of existence or guide for action. Human beings continue to struggle within the tension of a moral universe that reveals its secrets grudgingly, whose mysteries remain inscrutable. Given our colossal ignorance, James warns us not to take a "tender-minded" approach which would narrow the scale of moral possibilities by looking only for the immediate payoff. Instead, he admonishes, we ought to take a "tough-minded" approach which opens up a broader scale of values through a willingness to endure hardships now for a bigger payoff later. The tough-minded approach, he argues, is awakened by religious consciousness, opened up by belief in God. Divinity stands as a sort of guarantee of completeness, validity, and stability.

> Every sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity for handling life's evils, is set free in those who have religious faith. For this reason the strenuous type of character will on the battlefield of human history always outwear the easy-going type, and religion will drive irreligion to the wall.[37]

Along with his metaphysical pluralism, James advocated a politics of toleration and sympathy. Although his sentiments often drove him toward supporting unpopular causes, these sentiments were grounded in a personal predilection to oppose bigness and grand schemes in any form. He tended to root for the underdog, and this tendency was born of his respect for the sacredness of individuality. A staunch critic of American action in the Spanish-American war, he opposed imperialism because it imposed ideas, actions, and institutions on people for whom they were not native. He saw imperialism as a passion for power masking itself as benevolence. In a letter to the *Boston Evening Transcript* written in 1899, referring to Cuba, he noted that America was in the process of "crushing out the sacredest thing in this great human world— the attempt of a people long enslaved to attain the possession of itself, to organize its laws and government, to be free to follow its internal destinies according to its own ideas."[38] He believed it was important to look at each nation individually and not assume that the ideas and culture of one were easily transferable to others. He opposed large-scale organizations of international governance and centralized bureaucracies because they were unable to deal mean-

Large-scale governance unsuited to complexities of life.

---

[37] *Will to Believe*, 213.
[38] Perry, Vol. II, 310.

ingfully and fairly with the complexities of political life. He saw in them the tendency to moral abstraction and the abrogation of concrete moral and political activity. "The bigger the unit you deal with," he wrote, "the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed." James's emphasis on the moral will had a primary effect of limiting large corporate politics by stressing the freedom of individuals from historical determinism and responding to a reality they helped create.

In mass society, people become sheep and government their shepherd.

He saw in our culture's tendency toward "bigness," manifested philosophically in monism and rationalism, the hostility to individuality, a hostility which would attempt to regulate and regularize human existence. He feared the formation of mass society, where we would become timid and industrious sheep with government as our shepherd, satisfying our material desires, but spiritually dead. He believed freedom would become impossible in such a society of last men flailing constantly against their boredom. In a famous incident, James lectured at the Chautauqua Institute, where he was struck by the mediocrity of the masses. He experienced it as a place where "sobriety and industry, intelligence and goodness, orderliness and ideality, prosperity and cheerfulness, pervade the air." But he saw in these people no will, no heroism, no individuality. They behaved themselves, but had no inner spark of freedom or spontaneity, no strength of will. He felt himself longing "for something primordial and savage" to bring energy to the gathering. He concluded that "this order is too tame, the culture too second-rate, this goodness too uninspiring."[39] Sharing a similar experience, Rudyard Kipling wrote to James that:

> Half your trouble is the curse of America—sheer, hopeless, well-ordered boredom; and that is someday going to be the curse of the rest of the world. The other races are still scuffling after their three meals a day. America's got 'em and now she doesn't know what she wants but is dimly realizing that extension lectures, hardwood floors, natural gas and trolley cars don't fill the bill. The Chautaquan 'civilization' is to my mind precisely on the same plane as the laborious, ordered ritual of drum, dance, and sacred pollen that the Zuni (and other races) has evolved to fence off his bored soul from the solitude and loneliness of his own environments.[40]

---

[39] "What Makes a Life Significant?" in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 154.

[40] Perry, Vol. II, 276.

Jeff Polet

To respond to the problems caused by the loss of meaningful freedom in mass society became one of James's great tasks. His critique of philosophical rationalism and determinism was in large part motivated by his attempt to free the individual from the "herding and branding, licensing and degree-giving, authorizing and appointing, and in general regulating and administering by system the lives of human beings." The individual, in his analysis, supercedes the collective unit, for it is more concrete and real. Systems ultimately do violence to our interests and destroy our freedom whenever they touch us. "The best commonwealth will always be the one that most cherishes the men who represent the residual interests, the one that leaves the greatest scope to their particularities."[41]

The best commonwealth allows greatest scope to men's particularities.

James advocated the representative filters of the Constitution as the best way of fragmenting the mass tendencies of society and the authoritarian bigness of government. He endorsed a complex system of checks and balances, including localism in government, and believed that intellectuals have an important role to play in cooling the passions of the populace at large. He believed one should never sacrifice individual concreteness for abstract principles. He was, in short, a democrat in the best sense: one who believed that politics cherished freedom, respected the life and contribution of each individual, and encouraged the formation of the ethical will. To these ends, he sought to defend religious belief against the arguments of its cultured critics.

James's pragmatism, therefore, was not infused with a Rortian irony which rejected all attempts to grasp transcendence as meaningless or futile, resulting in social policies whose main goal is to limit cruelty. Neither was it a mode of thought that stipulated moral or religious absolutes which restricted morality. By reflecting on the historicity of moral ideas, James sought to restrict the religious, philosophical, and political forms that rendered moral freedom impractical or meaningless. Rather than destroying these forms, however, he redefined them in more modest terms so they would allow for the expression and development of the moral will. His approach suggests that paying close attention to the exigencies of history and its evils serves to invigorate, not attenuate, morality. It is tonic for absolutists and relativists alike.

---

[41] Perry, Vol. II, 276.