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# William James on Human Nature and Evolution

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An active–passive dualism is present in the writings of William James, insofar as his earlier works tend to emphasize individual freedom and self-determination through personal choice and action, while his later works manifest a commitment to self-fulfillment through receptive openness to the wider, spiritual aspects of reality. The terms “promethean pragmatist” and “antipromethean mystic” have been coined to designate, respectively, these contrasting emphases. Scholars disagree about how to explain or otherwise resolve the tension generated by this dualism. This dissertation argues that James’s thought on the question of the evolution of man contributes to a resolution of this tension. While it may be fair to say that James himself was not a mystic, it is quite evident that he was a thoroughgoing pragmatist. Precisely as a pragmatist, James both affirms the immaterial, spiritual dimensions of human nature associated with the mystic, and develops his thought on evolution in a manner that carefully respects and integrates these elements.

Chapter 1 considers Jamesian pragmatism and the notion of truth possible within it. Chapter 2 surveys his understanding of human nature, and with chapter 1 serves as grounding for understanding how the development of his thought on the evolution of man is an application of his pragmatism. Chapters 3 details James’s thought on the evolution of man, and chapter 4 completes the discussion by considering his thought on the “pluralistic” nature of the universe, itself the setting for evolution. Chapter 4 also

considers the thought of Henri Bergson as an important source for James's pluralism. Drawing together seemingly disparate areas of his thought, this treatment provides a comprehensive view of texts from the full span of James's career. Throughout, the pragmatist and the mystic are represented but never truly at odds. In consequence, we understand James's thought to be coherent and unified.

This dissertation by Elizabeth C. Shaw fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in philosophy approved by Jean De Groot, Ph.D., as Director, and by Jude P. Dougherty, Ph.D., and John C. McCarthy, Ph.D., as Readers.

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Jean De Groot, Ph.D., Director

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To my parents  
and Jude P. Dougherty,  
with gratitude

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## INTRODUCTION

Over a span of more than forty years, William James published writings representing a range of subject matter and contexts that might seem to defy collection under any unifying principle other than his authorship. In addition to his well-known volumes *The Principles of Psychology*, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, *Pragmatism*, *The Meaning of Truth*, and *A Pluralistic Universe*, which themselves traverse a vast intellectual terrain, he produced numerous shorter essays, reviews, lectures, and letters covering topics on anatomy and physiology, aesthetics, ethics, socio-political affairs, psychical research, and the paranormal, among other things.<sup>1</sup> This wide range of subject matter alone might prove perilous for anyone attempting to systematize his thought. Yet this diversity of themes and issues pales in comparison with a deeper tension present in the Jamesian corpus.

Scholars generally agree that there is an active–passive dualism of sorts to be found in James’s writings; for his earlier works tend to emphasize individual freedom and self-determination through personal choice and action, in stark contrast with his later commitment to self-fulfillment through receptive openness to and union with the wider, spiritual aspects of reality. Though scholars agree that this active–passive dualism

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<sup>1</sup> For a sense of the breadth of his work, see, for example, William James, *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, ed Frederick Burkhardt et al., *The Works of William James*, vol. 17 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); and William James, *Collected Essays and Reviews* (1920; Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994).



constitutes a tension in the Jamesian corpus, they disagree about how to explain or otherwise resolve it.

Richard Gale helpfully coins the terms “promethean pragmatist” and “antipromethean mystic” as handles for what he argues are fundamentally opposed personae of James himself, from which spring the tensions in his thought.<sup>2</sup> This distinction is already in use in the literature, and here I shall appropriate it in order to enter into the scholarly discussion. As I analyze the span of James’s works, I offer the following thesis: a close study reveals that throughout James’s career the pragmatist and the mystic are both represented in his writings, but that they are never truly at odds. In consequence, we understand James’s thought to be coherent and unified.

Before proceeding, I offer a brief word on terminology. The pragmatist is called “promethean” because of his creative activity, which flows from personal choice that is undetermined and original, and which is the source of novelty in the world. The mystic, by contrast, may be called “antipromethean” because he is primarily characterized by his receptiveness. Also, it bears noting at the outset that the term “mystic” is used here in a secular sense that may be compatible with, but need not imply, religious mysticism. Again, the essential feature of this secular mysticism is a passive, receptive openness to all elements and dimensions of reality that may be experienced—in contrast to the active, take-charge, self-determining approach to reality associated with the pragmatist. The mystic might say, “It comes to me, and thus I know it”; but the pragmatist’s motto would be something like, “I dive right in, and thus I make it.”

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<sup>2</sup> See Richard M. Gale, *The Philosophy of William James: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

While it is clear that James *writes about* both the pragmatist and the mystic, I think it may be saying too much to claim that he himself *was* both a pragmatist and a mystic. Without endorsing Gale's interpretive thesis, I shall use these terms to investigate more closely the dualistic dynamic present in the Jamesian corpus—the existence of which scholars seemingly uniformly concede, but the sources of or reasons for which are the subject of extensive discussion and debate. James O. Pawelski offers a detailed survey of the variety of interpretive methods that have emerged in the secondary literature as attempts to resolve, or at least understand, the tension between the promethean pragmatist and the antipromethean mystic.<sup>3</sup> He notes that in response to the vagueness, inconsistency, and apparent changes in James's thought, two basic camps have emerged. For the first camp, the tension in James's writings is taken as a simple, fundamental fact that is either accidental or intentional. Among those who argue it is accidental, some attribute it to an overabundance of insight together with a lack of mental clarity or perhaps even sheer carelessness.<sup>4</sup> Others, however, read the disconnectedness as not accidental but intentional, and indeed a virtue—the presentation of James's thought is antisystematic and antirationalistic, and to be appreciated precisely for this

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<sup>3</sup> See James O. Pawelski, *The Dynamic Individualism of William James* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 95-113.

<sup>4</sup> James's contemporary Charles Peirce is noted to have espoused this view. For comments of Peirce, Pawelski cites *The Correspondence of William James*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkley (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992-2004), 11:568, 612-13.

reason, for it is consistent with a broader pluralistic vision that emphasizes the incapacity of concepts and conceptual explanations fully to grasp or present reality.<sup>5</sup>

The second camp of scholars views the tension between the promethean pragmatist and the antipromethean mystic as merely apparent or superficial, and they argue an inner coherence lies somewhere, perhaps very deep, below the surface. They seek unity in James's thinking by accounting for its dualistic character variously—as a function of the consistent application of his philosophical methodology of pragmatism,<sup>6</sup> as tracking with his own personal development and biography,<sup>7</sup> and as the outgrowth of a fundamental dualism in his own temperament.<sup>8</sup> Another approach resolves the textual difficulties through bifurcation, organizing James's works as either scientific or metaphysical: within each group his thought is internally consistent, but compatibility does not necessarily obtain between the scientific and the metaphysical writings.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Frederick J. Ruf, *The Creation of Chaos: William James and the Stylistic Making of a Disorderly World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); and William Joseph Gavin, *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> See Ellen Kappy Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> See Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> As already mentioned briefly, Richard Gale takes this tact. The upshot of his "Divided Self Thesis" may be summarized: the two personae, promethean pragmatist and antipromethean mystic, are irreducible, never reconciled, and maintained "synchronically" throughout James's career. Julius Seelye Bixler also traces the tension back to James's temperament, arguing that James's own personality is split into a moralistic part that desires "meaningful action" and a religious part that desires "intimacy," and that the different branches in his thought emerge as attempts to satisfy these parts. See Bixler, *Religion in the Philosophy of William James* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1926).

<sup>9</sup> For the full development of this point of view, which has been dubbed the "Two-Levels View," see Wesley E. Cooper, *The Unity of William James's Thought* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002).

Pawelski insightfully notes that all of these commentators “each suggest ways of understanding why the textual difficulties are present in James’s work more than they do ways of resolving those difficulties.”<sup>10</sup> By contrast, his own interpretive thesis is that the tension between the promethean pragmatist and the antipromethean mystic dissolves, so to speak, as the pragmatist and the mystic grow more integrated in James’s later thought. Pawelski argues that the key to such resolution lies in understanding the significance of the reflex action theory, a physiological model that influenced James throughout his career. According to the theory, the nervous system is modeled dynamically as an arc, composed of three interrelated elements—sensory nerves, nerve centers, and motor nerves—which correspond to the activities of perception, conception, and volition. As a dynamic system, each element is essential to the function of the others and to the system as a whole. In this manner, the reflex action theory unites the active and passive elements of the system. Likewise, the model serves to integrate the promethean pragmatist and antipromethean mystic. Pawelski adduces evidence from the full breadth of James’s body of work to support the claim that this physiological model was a significant influence throughout James’s career, and that James’s thought, in turn, is fundamentally unified and coherent.<sup>11</sup>

I am sympathetic to Pawelski’s interpretation, for I agree that James’s thought is unified and coherent. I arrive at this view, however, having approached James from a different perspective. In this dissertation I argue that the development of James’s thought

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<sup>10</sup> Pawelski, *The Dynamic Individualism of William James*, 99.

<sup>11</sup> See especially Pawelski, *The Dynamic Individualism of William James*, chapters 4 and 5.

on the question of evolution, particularly the evolution of man, is an angle of approach to his work that permits us to see how the tension between the promethean pragmatist and the antipromethean mystic may be resolved. While I think it is fair to say that James himself was not a mystic,<sup>12</sup> it is quite evident that he was, in nearly every sense he enumerated, the sort of pragmatist he spent countless words describing. Moreover, precisely as a pragmatist, James is nondogmatically open to acknowledging the authenticity of mystical experience. Thus, when we examine his thought on human nature and evolution, it is not just the case that we see no tension between the pragmatist and the mystic in James's corpus. Indeed, this examination reveals James both (a) affirming the immaterial, spiritual, religious dimensions of human nature most often associated with the mystic, and (b) developing his thought on evolution in such a manner that carefully respects and integrates these elements. As we shall see, these activities are consequences of the fact that James himself practices the pragmatism he preaches.

Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* were published in 1859 and 1871, respectively, and from very early in his professional life James sat in a privileged position to observe and reflect on Darwin's thought and the variety of scientific and social issues related to Darwinism. He was a student at Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School from 1861 to 1863. He entered Harvard's Medical School in 1864 and earned an M.D. in 1869. After a period of poor mental and physical health, he began teaching anatomy and physiology at Harvard in 1872. In 1875 he taught his first course in psychology, and in 1879 he began teaching philosophy. Among the

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<sup>12</sup> This is clear from his presentation in Lectures 16 and 17 of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

first generation of thinkers to be engaged with Darwinism, James was thus approaching it from both the scientific and the broader philosophical perspectives.

James was taught by prominent scientists who themselves disagreed about evolution. When he entered the Lawrence Scientific School, its most famous faculty member was the charismatic Swiss naturalist Louis Agassiz, a pious and staunch anti-Darwinian who argued tirelessly for the fixity of species as an essential component of God's plan manifest in nature. Agassiz was well known and highly regarded as a researcher and lecturer throughout Europe and the United States. He was an icon of an older generation that believed scientific inquiry would yield rational support for their religious convictions. Henry James, Sr., William's father, was among those interested in such scientific support of religion, and no doubt encouraged his son to study under Agassiz. In 1855-56, the younger James even accompanied Agassiz on a research trip to Brazil, where the latter intended to collect geological evidence to support his own theory of the diversification of species, which was very different from what Darwin eventually articulated. But despite the influence of this respected and important figure, Agassiz, the younger James and virtually all of his peers at Harvard tended to favor Darwinian theory.<sup>13</sup>

James's scientific attitudes were more akin to those of two other teachers at the Lawrence Scientific School, Asa Gray and Jeffries Wyman. Both Gray and Wyman sought to ease the tensions between science and religion that Darwin's thought provoked. Gray, for example, endorsed the commonsense religious objection to atheistic

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<sup>13</sup> See Paul J. Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James: Eclipse of Certainty, 1820-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 112-24.

evolutionism: “How can we suppose Chance to be the author of a system in which everything is so regular as clockwork?”<sup>14</sup> He himself admitted that scientific inquiry lead to a picture of the natural world that is too well ordered and predictable to be the product of blind forces, and he supported the view of disengaged divinity that was the ultimate source of the cosmos—a really existing being, yet one that need not be a concern or object of scientific inquiry. Darwin’s theory, according to Gray, did not require atheism, and it is at least hospitable to a theistic interpretation. Like Gray, Jeffries Wyman preferred to a compromise of sorts that assigned science and religion to separate spheres; while personally religious, he was not concerned with squaring his religious beliefs with his scientific work. This measured approach of Gray and Wyman appealed to James and is evident in the development of his own thought on evolution.

It is a fact that by the mid-nineteenth century many scientists already subscribed to evolutionist ways of thinking about the development of species. Darwin was innovative, then, not so much for proposing an evolutionary account of the emergence of species, but for proposing one that hinges on two independent and equally influential principles, namely, variation and natural selection.<sup>15</sup> According to Darwin’s model, variations occur within organisms, and those organisms that are, precisely because of their variations, better equipped to inhabit their particular environments are naturally selected to survive and to propagate further generations that retain the same variations. In this way natural selection “explains *how* changes occur in nature—by the relative

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<sup>14</sup> Asa Gray, “Remarks on Darwin,” *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 4 (1 May 1860): 424, quoted in Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, 131.

<sup>15</sup> See Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 120-1.

reproductive success of the marginally better adapted. But [it] does not dictate *what* those changes may be.”<sup>16</sup> As I shall argue, this particular way of modeling evolutionary change is especially appealing to someone like James. It is hospitable to a nonmechanistic, nondeterministic interpretation of the progress of evolution—and by extension a nonreductive view of human nature in which the fullness of man exceeds his material dimensions—insofar as the variations that drive evolutionary change arise within individual organisms themselves and are not the resultants of external, environmental forces.

Briefly, the plan of this dissertation may be summarized as follows. Chapter 1 closely considers the nature of Jamesian pragmatism. As the chapter shows, pragmatism for James entails a notion of truth that is germane vis-à-vis the development and acceptance of new theory. For this reason, and given that James himself is a practicing pragmatist, a proper understanding of pragmatism is requisite for a careful consideration of his thought on evolution. Chapter 2 surveys his thought on human nature and together with chapter 1 serves as the grounding for understanding how the development of his thought on the evolution of man is an application of his pragmatism. Chapters 3 details James’s thought on the evolution of man, and chapter 4 completes the discussion by considering James’s thought on the broader nature of the universe that is the setting for such evolution. This treatment provides a comprehensive view of texts from the full span of James’s career, allowing us to see how the question of evolution draws together what might otherwise be judged disparate areas of his thought. Moreover, as the discussion

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 123.



progresses it is evident that the promethean pragmatist and the antipromethean mystic are both represented but never truly at odds in James's writing. As a result of this study, we understand James's thought to be coherent and unified.

To sketch in a bit more detail how the pragmatist–mystic dynamic is relevant with respect to James's thought on evolution: Chapter 1 examines what Jamesian pragmatism is in general, with the ultimate intent of understanding its eponymous practitioner. Here we clarify two key uses of the term, namely, as it refers to a temperament and as it refers to a theory of knowledge and truth. As we shall see, it is important to note that the promethean pragmatist is not one who wantonly bends the world to his wishes, offhand caricatures notwithstanding. Quite the contrary, a central feature of the pragmatist's thought is that it develops “concretely,” not abstractly. This is to say, first and foremost, it is responsive or reactive to the world; it is ever measured in terms of how well it enables one to live and conduct oneself in the world, a world which independently places limits on the pragmatist's thought. Further, for the pragmatist, thoughts accrue or build upon one another, consistently and compatibly with previously accepted truths. For this reason, it is proper to understand that pragmatist thinking is rigorously constrained and never freewheeling. We highlight these features of pragmatism here, for later we shall see how they are put into practice by James as he develops his thought on human nature and evolution.

The chapter is also attentive to a feature of James's elaboration of pragmatism that is distinctive yet problematic for some critics, namely, its so-called humanistic character. James insists that truth, as humanistic, is something we “make”; moreover, it is a function of personal temperament. This claim troubles some interpreters, for it

suggests that pragmatism is akin to (or perhaps identical to) full-blown relativism. Gale, for example, summarizes what he calls the “ontological relativism” of James: “all reality claims *must be* relativized to a person at a time.”<sup>17</sup> In my view, this sort of language is troubling, for it seems to imply that pragmatism entails a notion of “reality” that is nonobjective and thus begets an imperative to judge all claims about it as purely subjective and relative. Alternatively, I suggest that this humanistic notion of truth is better stated as a simple, declarative statement: All reality claims *are* relative to those who make them at the time. That is to say, all reality claims are made by particular persons in particular places at particular times; every reality claim is a function of a person in his circumstances. This clarification paves the way for the following defense of James.

First, his humanistic view of truth is intellectually honest. Perspective and temperament are unavoidable, insuppressible factors in the development of thought. Moreover, the humanistic view of truth is valuable insofar as James uses it to expose the conceit of mainstream science, which falsely lays claim to exclusive objectivity, insofar as it too is ever colored by temperament and reliant upon undemonstrated first principles, including among other things a materialist worldview. Finally, as the chapter details, the pragmatist claim does *not* entail that no objective world or knowledge thereof exists or is attainable. With respect to the larger argument of the dissertation, this chapter prepares us to understand the development of James’s thought on the evolution of man, and to appreciate it as pragmatism “at work” or “in practice.”

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Pawelski, *The Dynamic Individualism of William James*, 104 (emphasis added).

Chapter 2 considers James's thought on human nature and develops an understanding of his nonreductive view of man. The two pillars of this view are human freedom—man's ability to choose and act in ways that somehow clearly transcend his material being—and human spirituality, for want of a better term—the capacity for continuity with a wider, immaterial, spiritual environment. These serve as pillars inasmuch as a being that is free and somehow spiritual must indeed comprise more than just its matter. In this chapter we see James developing an anthropology in which the pragmatist—the active persona who best embodies human freedom—and the mystic—the passive persona who best embodies spirituality—both come to the fore, not as rivals, but as dual supports for his nonreductive view of human nature. Thus, instead of interpreting them as two opposed personae, as is typical in the literature, we see them from a perspective that actually unites them. In another sense, I argue that the pragmatist and the mystic are integrated insofar as James, though himself not a mystic, affirms the mystical persona as a function of his own pragmatist temperament, which strives to abide by empirical standards but at the same time is not closed off to immaterial dimensions of experience. The goal of this chapter is properly to grasp James's convictions regarding the immaterial dimension of human nature, for these serve as the foundation for his “concrete,” pragmatist discourse on the evolution of man.

Chapter 3 considers the development of James's thought on evolution, and the central questions are: Has man evolved? If so, how, and in what sense? The chapter explains how the development of James's thought on the evolution of man develops in light of his prior commitment to the nonreductive view of human nature. For this reason, I argue, the development of his thought on evolution is an application of his pragmatism.

He develops his thought with deference to the nonreductive view, for he accommodates and indeed integrates in his evolutionary thinking the key features of freedom and spirituality—and this integration and accommodation are precisely pragmatist moves. To the extent that these key features of nonreduced human nature—spirituality in particular—are characteristic of the antipromethean mystic, here we see the pragmatist James operating with due respect for the mystic as he develops his thought on the evolution of man, much as we saw him do in chapter 2. Unlike many other strains of evolutionary thinking which entail a materialist view of man, James's view, precisely qua pragmatist, cannot and does not set aside these aspects of humanity. He thus avoids the tendency, not uncommon in evolutionary thinking, to reduce human nature to its material elements. Herein lies the distinctive and valuable character of his thought on evolution.

Insofar as the nonmechanistic sort of evolutionary thinking to which James subscribes incorporates the elements of indeterminism, spontaneity, and indeed human freedom, it foreshadows the pluralistic universe he articulates in his later thought, which is the subject of chapter 4. At this final phase of his career, James is devoted to executing his program of “radical empiricism,” which is really an extension of his pragmatism, and to developing his metaphysical vision of the universe as open and pluralistic. I argue that this pluralistic vision serves as the fulfillment of his thought on evolution insofar as such a universe is the proper setting for evolution to unfold in the manner we see described in chapter 3.

James articulates his pluralism in response to the shortcomings of philosophical monism that he observes. His critique of conceptualization is central to his argument against monism and, moreover, to the development of his pluralism, for the pluralistic

universe is one that eludes rigid concepts. In this regard Henri Bergson is discussed as a source and confirmation of much of James's thinking. Both James and Bergson deny that human intellect and the concepts it forms can adequately grasp the pluralistic universe; in fact, reality is such that fully grasping it requires transcending the limits of intellect and conceptualization. Science and intellectual conceptualization are suited for grasping only the static, material dimensions of reality, and they are eclipsed by philosophy and metaphysical attunement, the proper modes of grasping the whole. It is in this activity of transcendence that we see the antipromethean mystic coming to the fore. While it is unclear whether James himself ever embodied this persona, it may be safe to say at least that he most closely approached it at this point in his life.<sup>18</sup> Such speculation aside, it is at this phase of his career that we observe James's clear and sustained affirmation of the worthiness of mystical experience. Moreover, without question he is evidently at work as a promethean pragmatist, for inasmuch as this articulation is an aspect of his program of radical empiricism, it bears the humanistic mark characteristic of all pragmatist thinking. So, again, here we see the pragmatist and the mystic are not opposed; at the very least, here we see clearly James qua pragmatist arguing for the legitimacy and value of the mystic's approach to reality.

To summarize, the thesis of this dissertation is that the development of James's thought on the question of evolution, and particularly the evolution of man, shows a fundamental unity and coherence in his thought. Precisely as a pragmatist, James both arrives at a nonreductive view of human nature and integrates this prior commitment with

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<sup>18</sup> There is no first-hand evidence to support this claim; it is an inference, rather, based only on the amount of effort he spent defending the worthiness of the mystic's perspective.

his thought on evolution. This study affords a comprehensive view of the Jamesian corpus by clarifying the meaning of pragmatism, developing his thought on human nature, considering his measurement of evolutionary science, and tracing his metaphysical vision of reality. Throughout, we observe that the promethean pragmatist and antipromethean mystic, though meaningfully distinct personae, are neither in tension nor in contradiction. James himself is a thoroughgoing pragmatist, and he duly defends that temperament and methodology. Precisely as a pragmatist, moreover, he acknowledges and advocates for a mystic's experience of reality.

## CHAPTER 1

### JAMESIAN PRAGMATISM

*Who is the “promethean pragmatist”?* If we are to argue, using Gale’s distinction of the promethean pragmatist and the antipromethean mystic, that these two personae are not at odds in James’s thought, we may begin by clarifying who the pragmatist is. Pragmatism may be the aspect of William James’s thought for which he is best known, both within and outside the philosophic community. Ironically, however, James’s pragmatism may be among the most misunderstood doctrines of the past century, due at least in part to the fact that a number of other thinkers have appropriated the term for their own very distinct purposes.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the terms “pragmatic” and “pragmatism” are often used in common parlance, which perhaps leads amateurs and professionals alike casually to assume that they know what Jamesian pragmatism is all about—it’s a simple doctrine that identifies truth with expediency, they gather, that dismisses any notion of truth as universal or fixed, and that merely assigns the label “truth” to those ideas or beliefs that produce subjectively good results in the real world. Such generalizations about Jamesian pragmatism may be accurate, to a point, but they do not tell the whole story. Moreover, they lend themselves to serious distortions of James’s thought.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Susan Haack and Robert Lane present a collection of the main strands of “pragmatism” in their volume *Pragmatism, Old and New* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, 2006). Louis Menand also provides a sense of the breadth of the term’s usage in *Pragmatism: A Reader* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

Jamesian pragmatism deserves to be more carefully studied, and the generalizations about it made more precise, at the very least because its present distortions constitute a grave injustice to a man who spent many years trying to clarify his thought for the public. Moreover, inasmuch as James is a pragmatist himself, a careful study of Jamesian pragmatism is relevant to my concerns in this dissertation, for his treatment of the question of evolution is aptly read in light of his pragmatism. In order properly to understand his thought on the specific issue of evolution, one would do well to understand his broader pragmatist perspective. To this end, I shall begin with a survey of some of James's early essays as well as his later works *Pragmatism* and its sequel, *The Meaning of Truth*.

This chapter traces the development of Jamesian pragmatism from its earliest articulations through its fullest positive exposition. As will become clear, there are many meanings or uses of word "pragmatism," even within James's own corpus. For the purposes of this dissertation, however, three of these are most germane: (1) pragmatism as a temperament,<sup>2</sup> (2) pragmatism as a philosophical method,<sup>3</sup> and (3) pragmatism as a "humanistic" and "concrete" theory of knowledge and truth.<sup>4</sup> As a *temperament*, pragmatism steers a middle course between the hard-nosed empiricism of professional science that insists on material, sensory evidence and the religious sensibility that is open to immaterial, spiritual realities but that often flies off into metaphysical schemes and

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<sup>2</sup> See pp. 34 ff. below.

<sup>3</sup> See pp. 42 ff. below.

<sup>4</sup> See pp. 50 ff. below.



abstractions not grounded in or justified by concrete experience. As a *method*, it measures terms and propositions in terms of their the concrete, experiential “cash value,” and it gives rise to the humanistic and concrete *theory of knowledge and truth*, which maintains that truth is something made by us and that it is therefore both a function of our personal temperament and in some sense characterized as that which satisfies us. On the basis of these notions of truth as made and truth as that which satisfies, critics have tended to infer that pragmatist truth is relative or subjective. This chapter concludes with a consideration of James’s responses to such critics, in clarification and defense of his thought. Though he maintains truth is something both made and satisfying, he just as clearly affirms that as it develops, truth is ever constrained by the elements of extramental reality as well as previously vetted truths. Thus it is proper to understand that pragmatist truth is not a function of personal caprice, and the “promethean pragmatist” is certainly not one who bends the world to his wishes.

This chapter’s clarification of Jamesian pragmatism is the necessary grounding for my argument that the development of James’s thought on evolution is an application of his pragmatism. As I shall argue in chapter 2, James affirms a nonreductive view of human nature, and this affirmation stems from his pragmatist temperament. It is here that the so-called antipromethean mystic enters the scene, for James recognizes that human distinctiveness entails, among other things, an immaterial dimension that is open to a wider, spiritual environment. In chapters 3 and 4, we shall see how he works out his thought on evolution pragmatically or concretely, specifically with due respect to this nonreductive view of human nature. Here then we observe James, as a pragmatist

“maker” of truth, making it in such a way that leaves room for the mystical persona. In this way, I argue, the pragmatist and mystic are not at odds, for as a pragmatist James is a guard and advocate of the authenticity of mystical dimensions of human nature and experience.

#### EARLY ARTICULATION OF PRAGMATISM (1870s–1890s)

Nearly thirty years before the publication of his well-known work *Pragmatism*, in an 1878 piece entitled “Remarks on Spencer’s Conception of Mind as Correspondence,”<sup>5</sup> James begins to articulate a central feature of his pragmatism, namely, what he calls the “teleological” nature of mind. Though he uses the term “teleological,” I suggest that “purposive” better captures the sense he intends. James does not import or otherwise rely on any teleological view of the world. The *telos* or “end” that is relevant here is not something innate or naturally present, but rather something defined or determined by the interests of an agent. That is to say, the “end” is more akin to an agent’s purpose, which is why I suggest “purposive” instead of “teleological.”

In this essay, James reflects on the important function of practical and emotional interests with respect to mental activity: in addition to serving purely rational or logical demands, our minds are motivated by and act for the sake of these other factors. Moreover, he characterizes the mind’s role as active and creative in the process of bringing about the knowledge of truth—and in this sense it is teleological or end-driven.

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<sup>5</sup> William James, “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 12 (1878): 1-18. Reprinted in *Collected Essays and Reviews*, 43-68.

Our thought is naturally geared toward our ends and purposes, which are determined by our emotional and practical interests. These interests necessarily guide the ways we move in the world, direct our thought, and ultimately formulate that which we call “true.” He writes, “Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, so far as they are the bases for human action”—action which to a great extent transforms the world—“help to make the truth which they declare.”<sup>6</sup> All thinking, for James, “must have consequences outside itself for feeling and conduct,” and he rejects the notion that thought is or could be purely self-contained or valued for its own sake.<sup>7</sup> It is important that, even in this early essay, James’s position is not properly interpreted as subjectivist, for he is ever mindful of the constraints that reality places on our thought. Reality is known to the mind as precisely that which “coerces,” limits, or constrains the mind. He writes, “The only objective criterion of reality is coerciveness, in the long run, over thought.”<sup>8</sup> The mind serves to make the truth, to bring about the truths that we know; but it does not do so capriciously, for in this process of truth-making it knows reality as that which reins it in.<sup>9</sup> This early

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Kappy Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> James, “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence,” 67.

<sup>9</sup> On this issue of the coerciveness of reality over thought, it may be plausible to note at least a parallel with, if not direct connection to, the thought of James’s contemporary Charles Peirce. On his own categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness, Peirce writes, circa 1890: “We have seen that it is the immediate consciousness that is preeminently first, the external dead thing that is preeminently second. In like manner, it is evidently the representation mediating between these two that is preeminently third. Other examples, however, should not be neglected. The first is agent, the second patient, the third is the action by which the former influences the latter. Between the beginning as first, and the end as last, comes the process which leads from first to last.” (Charles Peirce, “A Guess at the Riddle,” in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-58], vol. 1, par. 361).

exposition of the so-called teleological nature of mind is, arguably, the kernel of Jamesian pragmatism—it is repeated, refined, reformulated, supplemented, amplified, and never contradicted but rather consistently held throughout the development of James's thought.

In his 1884 essay “The Function of Cognition,” James's concern is not how consciousness knows something or how cognition comes about, but rather the very nature of cognition itself.<sup>10</sup> James directly confronts the problem of the “epistemological gulf”—the difficulty in explaining the connection between an object known and a knowing state of consciousness—and offers a pragmatist or action-centered explanation: this connection, which is the very essence of cognition, is describable only in terms of the knower's actions that follow upon his knowing state. These actions are what bridge the gap; they are how the knower is connected to the known object.<sup>11</sup> This analysis of cognition thus reiterates James's foundational view of the teleological or purposive nature of thought as that which serves to orient us within our environment.

James begins the essay by stating that cognition involves a feeling that has some content or quality *q* and involves some self-transcendence. If there are problems with using the term “feeling,” James allows “idea” or “state of consciousness” to be substituted. The main point is that cognition is not a merely subjective event, wholly

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<sup>10</sup> This essay was originally presented to the Aristotelian Society in December 1884. It later ran in *Mind* 10 (1885), and was reprinted as chapter 1 of *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt et al., *The Works of William James*, vol. 2 (1909; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 13-32.

<sup>11</sup> See Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 292.

within the consciousness of the thinker; rather, it transcends or extends beyond the thinker as it makes reference to some external entity, one that also has a quality  $q$  resembling the  $q$  of the feeling or idea or state. James is aware that a critic might complain that this description assumes the existence of some external reality that serves as the basis for the self-transcendence of the feeling or idea within the subject. He admits as much, even before such an objection can be made, when he writes, “we must prevail upon the god to create a reality outside of [the subjective feeling] to correspond to its intrinsic quality  $q$ .”<sup>12</sup> The existence of external reality is thus taken provisionally, as a matter of faith; but this should not be an opening for criticism, for as James notes, the study of the function of cognition, like any rational inquiry, is necessarily constrained by the natural limitations of the inquirer, “and we shall find our burden much lightened by being allowed to take reality in this relative and provisional way. Every science must make some assumptions.” Prescinding from any proof of the actual existence of external reality, James simply maintains that cognition involves some belief that the content of the “qualified inner fact” exists outside of the subject, as well as within it.<sup>13</sup> The subjective feeling is one that is “discharged”—James uses the analogy of a gunshot: if and only if it “hits” something, cognition occurs.

Now, how is it that I happen to believe that my thought  $q$  actually “hits” or matches up with some part of external reality? James examines more closely this self-

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<sup>12</sup> James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 15. This usage of “the god” is not typical for James. Here he simply uses it as a shorthand way of displacing the issue of the reality of an objective order. The existence of such reality is taken as a given, not demonstrated.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 16.

transcendence of the feeling of cognition. First, he notes that the feeling itself offers no guidance. The feeling alone dumbly offers the content that resembles some external entity. He gives the example of two eggs: they might resemble one another, but in this resembling neither really *accounts for* the other.<sup>14</sup> The relation of resembling is much weaker than that of representing. This contrast draws out the role that context plays in the latter. The context of the quality of an inner thought—say, an egg *in a basket*—narrows down and focuses the possibilities in the external world, and thereby contributes to the formation of my belief that my idea matches up with something external.<sup>15</sup>

James maintains that the key criterion for my belief that my thought matches an external entity is found through practical experience. My thought proves to be self-transcendent, more than just isolated content, when I live and act on its basis, and in so doing find that I succeed in “*interfering* with the course of reality.”<sup>16</sup> I am able, say, to take the egg from the basket and crack it open. Through my actions I confirm my belief that my thought represents some part of external reality, as I experience my thought successfully pointing or leading me to certain objects outside of me. James also notes that through this same process humans confirm each other in their common belief in the objectivity of the world. On the basis of our own inner thoughts concerning the constitution of the external world, we live and act in each other’s worlds, and through the observable consequences of these actions we form our beliefs in both the reality of other

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 22.

persons and a realm of objectivity: “Without the practical effects of our neighbor’s feelings on our own world, we should never suspect the existence of our neighbor’s feelings at all.”<sup>17</sup> And: “We see each other looking at the same objects, pointing to them and turning them over in various ways, and thereupon we hope and trust that all of our several feelings resemble the reality and each other.”<sup>18</sup> The self-transcendent feelings that constitute cognition are known to us precisely inasmuch as they successfully lead or point toward extramental realities in our environment, thereby enabling us to act in that environment.

To summarize, James characterizes cognition as an inner feeling or idea that both resembles and either directly or indirectly “operates on” external reality. Our thoughts operate on reality insofar as we use them to guide our interactions with objects and navigate through our environment. This characterization might be adequately clear in the case of percepts, which directly relate to the immediate physical environment, but what about more “remote” or abstract thought? It seems that many of our thoughts are related to objects outside of or beyond the immediate environment. For example, when I now think of a tiger in India, I am thinking of something that neither directly resembles nor

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. James admits that “this is a thing of which we are never theoretically sure,” and yet, unfazed, he contends, “The practical point of view brushes such metaphysical cobwebs away. . . . No matter for the metaphysical puzzle of how two minds . . . can mean the same body. Men who see each other’s bodies sharing the same space, treading the same earth, splashing the same water, making the same air resonant, and pursuing the same game and eating out of the same dish, will never practically believe in a pluralism of solipsistic worlds” (ibid., 25-6).

operates on anything in my immediate environment.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, many of our thoughts are of such remote objects with which we have no direct interactions. In order to extend his account to this more abstract type of thinking, James offers a refinement:

*A percept knows whatever reality it directly or indirectly operates on and resembles; a conceptual feeling or thought knows a reality, whenever it actually or potentially terminates in a percept that operates on, or resembles that reality, or is otherwise connected with it or with its context.*<sup>20</sup>

To illustrate, James considers the following statement: “Newton saw the handiwork of God in the heavens as plainly as Paley in the animal kingdom.”<sup>21</sup> He analyzes his own subjective state upon apprehending this sentence, and he reflects on the fact that certain words are immediately associated in his mind with concrete, albeit remote, images—the “mind-stuff I can discover in my first consciousness of the meaning of the sentence” that does not directly represent the objects of thought. For example, “animal kingdom” is bound up with some image of a museum of zoology that he has visited, perhaps even of the actual steps leading up to the museum. “Paley” and “Newton” prompt consciousness of a leather book and a wig of curled hair, respectively.<sup>22</sup> Evidently, none of these images resembles or directly affects the object it stands for—none enables us to come into direct physical contact with Newton or Paley or the “animal kingdom”; yet James

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<sup>19</sup> “The Tigers in India” is the title of the second chapter of *The Meaning of Truth*, in which James reiterates this point about how thought may indeed extend to objects beyond the immediate environment, but always through the medium of the immediate environment.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-8. Here (and hereafter, unless otherwise noted) all emphasis in quoted material appears in the original.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*



maintains that any critic will agree, on the basis of personal experience, that such “inadequate and symbolic” mental images do indeed ultimately lead to or “terminate” in certain intermediate percepts directly related to the objects themselves. For example, this initial “mind-stuff” may lead to his walking to the museum, or fetching Paley’s book, or pointing to Newton’s portrait. Thus James maintains that some cognitions contain merely the potential to lead us into either direct contact with their objects or indirect contact with other contextually related objects.

What about purely conceptual thinking, those “general theories and emotional attitudes towards life” which conduct their business beyond the purely sensible realm? James’s view is that we indulge in and value these most abstract and “higher modes of thought” only insofar as they return to and are resolved in the practical realm, that is, only insofar as they do business amid our practical needs and perceptual life. The laws of chemistry, for example, may hinge on speculation about unseen atoms and subatomic particles, but this speculation is valued only for the effects that are borne out in the sensible realm. He writes, “These percepts, these termini, these sensible things . . . are the only realities we ever directly know, and the whole history of our thought is the history of our substitution of one of them for another, and the reduction of the substitute to the status of a conceptual sign.”<sup>23</sup> Even in these most abstract modes, our thought is

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 31. Moreover, James suggests here that metaphysical theories are worthless inasmuch as they fail to submit to testing and verification in the sensible realm—they are “so much like fighting with air; they have no practical issue of a sensible kind” (ibid.). While he does not repudiate this claim, in my view he softens it later (especially in *Pragmatism* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*) with a refined position. He certainly will admit that certain observable effects will follow from holding certain metaphysical views, and so it must be said that metaphysical claims are frivolous or worthless *only to the extent that* they fail to affect measurable consequences in the practical realm.

wholly grounded in practical affairs. Scientific theories thus aptly illustrate the so-called teleological character of thought as leading or pointing, through the medium of our experience, to terminations within our environment that are in some manner satisfying successes. Through cognition—perceptual and conceptual, of objects immediate and remote—we move toward specific realities and ends within our environment. This is precisely the “function” of cognition.

In an 1898 lecture entitled “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results,”<sup>24</sup> James paraphrases the original “principle of practicalism” or pragmatism as articulated by Charles Peirce in the 1870s:

The soul and meaning of thought . . . can never be made to direct itself toward anything but the production of belief, belief being the demicadence which closes a musical phrase in the symphony of our intellectual life. Thought in movement has thus for its only possible motive the attainment of thought at rest. But when our thought about an object has found its rest in belief, then our action on the subject can firmly and safely begin. Beliefs, in short, are really rules for action; and the whole function of thinking is but one step in the production of habits of action. If there were any part of a thought that made no difference in the thought’s practical consequences, then that part would be no proper element in the thought’s significance.<sup>25</sup>

Under this principle, the meaning of any thought is identified with the particular effects that it implies or predicts, effects that in turn guide the attitudes and, ultimately, the actions of the thinker. Thought produces belief, and belief exists for the sake of action. To the extent that two differently worded thoughts determine the same course of action,

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<sup>24</sup> This lecture was originally delivered to the Philosophical Union at the University of California, Berkeley, in August 1898, and was later condensed and published as “The Pragmatic Method,” *Journal of Philosophy* 1 (December 1904): 673-87. It was also revised and incorporated into Lectures II-IV of *Pragmatism*.

<sup>25</sup> William James, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results,” Appendix 1 in *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt et al., *The Works of William James*, vol. 1 (1907; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 259.

they are in fact the same thought. Moreover, to the extent that a thought fails in practice to bring about consequences in one's active life, it is meaningless and indeed frivolous. Meaningful thought is characterized by the impact it has in the life of the thinker.

Outside of the concrete, lived experience of the thinker, thought has no meaning, and hence no value. Perfect clarity of thought concerning any object will consist in an exhaustive consideration and awareness of how the object will be present in one's experience, a complete accounting of "what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare."<sup>26</sup> With respect to objects of perception, James's presentation of this principle of Peirce intuitively makes good sense. Yet James extends the account to include more abstract thoughts and propositions, the "philosophical conceptions" of the lecture's title. Even these must be understood as always having their whole significance within the practical life of the thinker; as he maintains, "the effective meaning of any philosophic proposition can always be brought down to some particular consequence, in our future practical experience."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the clarification of such future consequences is, for James, what "the whole function of philosophy ought to be."<sup>28</sup>

To illustrate, James considers the competing metaphysical hypotheses of materialism and theism. He wishes to establish that "in every genuine metaphysical

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 260.

debate some practical issue, however remote, is really involved,”<sup>29</sup> and so he asks: What is the significance of this debate about the ultimate causes of the cosmos? He begins his analysis by noting that the hypotheses cannot be weighed against one another in terms of how they account for the emergence of the universe to date: “As far as past facts go, indeed there is no difference. These facts are in, are bagged, are captured; and the good that’s in them is gained, be the atoms or the God their cause.” Indeed, partisans on either side do not disagree about observed experience itself, but about the causes of such experience and specifically their implications for the future; for the “actually experienced world is supposed to be the same in its details on either hypothesis.” Moreover, if taken retrospectively, the two positions need not be construed as incompatible. Rather, they may differ only semantically and be easily reconciled if we modify our terms and “[t]alk of the primal mystery, of the unknowable energy, of the one and only power, instead of saying either God or matter.”<sup>30</sup> Theism and materialism diverge only with respect to their implications for the future of the universe: “Theism and materialism, so indifferent when taken retrospectively, point, when we take them prospectively, to wholly different practical consequences, to opposite outlooks of experience.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, according to the pragmatist, it is precisely these consequences that we look to in evaluating these competing worldviews.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 263.

Materialism, according to James, points to an unpromising future in which the mechanisms of matter will eventually unravel all that has come to be: “[T]he laws of redistribution of matter and motion, though they are certainly to thank for all the good hours which our organisms have ever yielded us and for all the ideals which our minds now frame, are yet fatally certain to undo their work again, and to redissolve everything that they have once evolved.”<sup>32</sup> By contrast, theism entails a future in which the perfection of the cosmos is achieved and sustained: “The notion of God, however inferior it may be in clearness to those mathematical notions so current in mechanical philosophy, has at least this practical superiority over them, that it guarantees an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved.”<sup>33</sup> Under the theistic hypothesis, though the physical realm might eventually dissolve in a fashion not unlike the destiny that materialism entails, God will nevertheless have the final word, and such dissolution will be “only provisional and partial.” Theism thus predicts an “eternal moral order,” while materialism implies the denial of any such eternal order, and leads in turn to “the cutting off of ultimate hopes.” The whole significance of the materialism–theism debate lies in this disposition toward the future, which is a matter that naturally concerns all thoughtful men.

Two reflections can be drawn from this analysis. First, it is important to note that, as a pragmatist, James argues for the worthiness of speculative philosophy. He carefully distinguishes his view from the conventional wisdom of positivists who are taken by the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 263-4.

increasing attraction and relevance of empirical science.<sup>34</sup> He proves himself to be metaphysically minded, as he opposes those who would deny that the debate between theism and materialism is genuine and substantive, “the positivists and pooh-pooh-ers of metaphysics” who are clearly in the wrong. Questions about “[t]he absolute things, the last things . . . are the truly philosophic concern; all superior minds feel seriously about them, and the mind with the shortest view is simply the mind of more shallow men.”<sup>35</sup> The seemingly remote and abstract questions of metaphysics are unavoidable; moreover, they are worthy of consideration precisely insofar as their answers seriously impact our lives.

Second, James offers a rather broad understanding of the “consequences” that determine the meaningfulness of any thought or belief. In addition to the outwardly observable or empirical consequences that a thought might imply or predict, there are important, inwardly felt consequences that affect one’s belief. James highlights the fact that, in the process of deciding between two competing positions, the subjective needs and desires of the thinker play an important role.<sup>36</sup> For example, one who opts for theism over materialism does so because theism satisfies “one of the deepest needs of our

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<sup>34</sup> See Myers, *William James*, 292-3. But as a pragmatist, James also objected to then-current philosophical movements such as neo-Hegelianism, idealism, and rationalism inasmuch as these characterized reality as something accessible by pure intellect alone. More on this follows in chapter 4.

<sup>35</sup> James, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results,” 264.

<sup>36</sup> An assertion may thus be understood as both “cognitively and emotionally meaningful.” This is a fine point that James is forced to develop and clarify in his later thought (to be detailed below), in order to refute the claim that his is a subjectivist epistemology. It is not the case, for James, that I believe *p* if and only if *p* is subjectively satisfying for me to believe. A belief’s “emotive significance may depend heavily on the intellectual”—and so we are not blindly led around by our desires, for these are not ultimately foundational. See Myers, *William James*, 296-7.

breast,”<sup>37</sup> that is, the desire to rest in the thought of an eternal moral order, the desire to inhabit a good and purposeful world that sustains one’s hope.<sup>38</sup> Thus, there are two levels of relevant practical consequences associated with the theistic hypothesis: (1) the external, cosmic moral order, and (2) the internal, personal preservation of hope. The latter follows upon the former, and is ultimately the justification of our belief. Thus we see that for James, emotive significance is foundational for belief—the propositions we choose to believe necessarily satisfy some personal desires.

These earliest articulations underscore two key elements of Jamesian pragmatism, namely, the teleological or purposive nature of mind or thought, and the role that subjective factors necessarily play in the formulation and adoption of beliefs. Mind is purposive, according to James, for its thought is understood wholly in terms of what it does for us or what it enables us to do in the world, how it equips us to navigate through our environment. Thought leads to belief—about objects in the environment and the capacities of the thinker with respect to that objective environment—and such beliefs in turn produce action. The significance of thought is always and necessarily borne out within one’s experience, as any meaningful thought—perceptual or conceptual, practical or theoretic—serves “to facilitate a satisfactory adaptation to the environment.”<sup>39</sup> Thought is thus necessarily a “personalized” thing; there exists, for James, no such thing as an impersonal or disembodied thought. Personalized thought comes to be through

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<sup>37</sup> James, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results,” 264.

<sup>38</sup> Similarly, one who opts for materialism is inclined to do because he fancies the predictive powers of natural science implied by that worldview.

<sup>39</sup> Myers, *William James*, 293.

personal, subjective means; in both its function and its origin, it is relative to the thinker.

Thought serves the active life of the individual thinker inasmuch as it derives from his perspective, needs, and desires. In this regard, there is an unmistakable continuity between James's early discussion of the function and genesis of thought and his later exposition of pragmatism, to which we now turn.

*PRAGMATISM* (1907) AND *THE MEANING OF TRUTH* (1909).

James's most comprehensive presentation of his pragmatism is the set of eight lectures, delivered in 1906–07 at Wellesley College, the Lowell Institute in Boston, and Columbia University, and published together in 1907 as his well-known work *Pragmatism*. This volume reveals Jamesian pragmatism to be not a single unified doctrine but rather a collection of positions which together form a coherent philosophical system. *The Meaning of Truth* is subtitled *A Sequel to Pragmatism* and, like *Pragmatism*, is set of lectures and essays. Published one year before James's death, it clarifies and reiterates key features of Jamesian pragmatism, and it also rebuts certain prominent critics. Here I shall consider these works together, first sketching the basic features of pragmatism and then focusing on two important objections, namely, (1) that pragmatism errs with respect to the priority of truth in its assertion that truth is not something preexistent that is discovered by us but rather something *made* by us, and (2) that pragmatism offers a subjectivist or relativist notion of truth. James's replies to these objections will draw out two significant aspects of pragmatism that are largely misunderstood or overlooked, namely, (1) the commitment to mind's active role in the



formation of true ideas and beliefs within our experience, and (2) the emphasis on the role of previously formed true ideas and beliefs that limit or constrain the mind's formation of new truths. This presentation will prepare for the following chapters, where these two features of pragmatism will be of great importance to the consideration of James's treatment of the question of evolution.

As James explicates it, the term "pragmatism" refers analogously to a variety of things, including a particular intellectual temperament, a method for settling metaphysical disputes, and a distinctive theory of truth.<sup>40</sup> These senses of pragmatism are necessarily interrelated, as is evident in the development of James's thought in *Pragmatism*. In the next several pages I trace this development and its culmination in the pragmatist account of truth, which is arguably the most controversial aspect of James's thought.

#### TEMPERAMENT

James begins Lecture I, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy," by noting the foundational significance of personal temperament in our intellectual lives. Our temperament directs our interpretation of the universe, "our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos."<sup>41</sup> It ultimately determines for each of us the legitimacy of any evidence or premise and, in turn, the success or failure of any philosophical argument. Typically, a philosopher will downplay or even deny the

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<sup>40</sup> See Lectures I, II, V, VI, and VII of *Pragmatism*. In Lectures III, IV, and VIII, James illustrates the pragmatist method by applying it to particular philosophical questions.

<sup>41</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 9.

role of this personal and seemingly subjective factor; indeed, he will prefer “to sink the fact of his temperament. . . . [H]e urges impersonal reasons only for his conclusions.”<sup>42</sup> Perhaps this is because it is difficult to establish the authority of any one temperament over another: Everyone has one, and for the most part everyone prefers his own, so to quest for authority in this realm is a fool’s errand. It is simpler to pretend that our own temperament isn’t there at all, or doesn’t play any determinative role, and to act as if our arguments were based on purely objective grounds. But, James asserts, in reality temperament is ever operative. In the life of any thinker, “his temperament really gives him a stronger bias than any of his more strictly objective premises. It loads the evidence for him one way or the other.”<sup>43</sup> Among those who dispute its influence, “[t]here arises . . . a certain insincerity in our philosophic discussions; the potentest of all our premises is never mentioned.”<sup>44</sup> Temperament can never be eliminated; James laments not this fact, but rather the disingenuousness of those who deny it.

This discussion of temperament is not some irrelevant or tangential psychologizing but rather a matter of serious epistemological import.<sup>45</sup> Though they are eminently subjective and personal, temperaments are legitimately measured and compared. For James, one’s temperament serves to “put one in better or worse touch

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> See Hilary Putnam, with Ruth Anna Putnam, “William James’s Ideas,” in *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 228.

with the universe,”<sup>46</sup> and so not all temperaments are equally valuable. According to James, along the temperamental spectrum, the basic divide is between what he calls “tender-mindedness” and “tough-mindedness.” The tender-minded are sometimes said to be rationalistic, intellectualistic, idealistic, optimistic, religious, free-willist, monistic, or dogmatical.<sup>47</sup> In general, these are the devotees of abstract ideals and principles who are given to belief in an absolute force that creates and guides the universe. The tough-minded, by contrast, are referred to as empiricist, sensationalistic, materialistic, pessimistic, irreligious, fatalistic, pluralistic, or skeptical.<sup>48</sup> Consider the modern devotee of scientism who absolutizes the role of observable facts and data while holding all else to be suspect or irrelevant. It is evident that at either extreme on this spectrum of types there is likelihood, perhaps certainty, that reality is misperceived, and so, one ought to guard against either extreme. Most people fall somewhere between the two poles and can be persuaded of the virtues and vices of both. Herein lies the essence of the moderate, pragmatist temperament.

While most of us have temperaments falling somewhere between the extremes of tough-mindedness and tender-mindedness, as a matter of “good intellectual conscience” some seek to be thoroughly consistent in their attitudes.<sup>49</sup> James notes that the present age teems with individuals who prefer the tough-minded, empiricist approach. However,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 14. Ironically, this is a consistency that may give way to a certain inconsistency, insofar as the extreme temperament sometimes acknowledges and accords with the facts, while at other times it does not.

he points out, this popular preference for the empirical does not eliminate, even among the tough-minded themselves, a tender-minded penchant for abstractions and absolutes, for a grasping of the whole which in fact exceeds mere scientific observation. He writes,

Never were as many men of a decidedly empiricist proclivity in existence as there are at the present day. Our children, one may say, are born scientific. But our esteem for facts has not neutralized us in all religiousness. It is itself almost religious. Our scientific temper is devout.<sup>50</sup>

As we shall see, this frank critique of science and the scientific temperament will be an important element of the development of James's thought on evolution.<sup>51</sup> What we note here is that, while the empirical-scientific mode of thought may be dominant, there persists, as James observes, a need to philosophize, so to speak—a need, which is universal, to consider and take a position concerning the broader nature of the whole of reality, over and above its material, empirical details. In consequence, the tough-minded inevitably adopt a metaphysics that satisfies this need; they draw their metaphysical conclusions not on the basis of empirical-scientific evidence, but in order to provide a suitable backdrop for the empirical-scientific enterprise. In tandem with the progress of science, a materialist worldview takes hold in the hearts of empirical scientific practitioners.

For a hundred and fifty years past the progress of science has seemed to mean the enlargement of the materialist universe and the diminution of man's importance. The result is what one may call the growth of naturalistic and positivistic feeling. Man is no lawgiver to nature. She it is who stands firm; he it is who must accommodate himself. Let him record truth, inhuman tho it be, and submit to it! The romantic spontaneity and courage are gone, the vision is materialistic and

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> See especially chapter 4 of this dissertation.

depressing. . . . You get, in short, a materialistic universe, in which only the tough-minded find themselves congenially at home.<sup>52</sup>

In James's view, the materialist metaphysics of the tough-minded renders man passive and impotent, a mere observer and recorder of the active forces of nature. Materialist, tough-minded men are blind to the possible efficacy of man's personal powers; therefore, a hasty and dismissive materialism may do serious injustice to reality, and indeed to themselves.

By contrast, the religious philosophies of the tender-minded turn away from this materialism and adopt metaphysical schemes that leave room for the affirmation of personal spontaneity, responsibility, and moral values. James notes two principal versions: the "transcendental idealism of the Anglo-Hegelian school," with its pantheistic vision of the Absolute, and traditional Protestant theism, which is "the lineal descendant . . . of the dogmatic scholastic theism still taught rigorously in the seminaries of the catholic church [sic]."<sup>53</sup> Both versions have notable shortcomings, however, for according to James,

[t]he more absolutistic philosophers dwell on so high a level of abstraction that they never even try to come down. The absolute mind which they offer us, the mind that makes our universe by thinking it, might, for aught they show to the contrary, have made any one of a million other universes just as well as this. You can deduce no single actual particular from the notion of it.<sup>54</sup>

In similar fashion, the notion of the theistic God, in itself, has little meaning or concrete significance.

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<sup>52</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 15.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

And the theistic God is almost as sterile a principle. You have to go to the world which he has created to get any inkling of his character: he is the god that has once for all made that kind of a world. The God of the theistic writers lives on as purely abstract heights as does the Absolute.<sup>55</sup>

These types of philosophies thus fail, though in a manner different from the failure of materialism. They do not satisfy the common religious needs of men, such as the desire for a personal God and a world in which one's own freedom to act is real, meaningful, efficacious; nor do they to jibe with the generally tough-minded sensibility typical of the modern era. In their failure to make reference to the real world, they lose their credibility.

These religious philosophies provide mere rationalistic models that smooth over the messy details of experienced reality. According to James, any such system

is far less an account of this actual world than a clear addition built upon it, a classic sanctuary in which the rationalistic fancy may take refuge from the intolerably confused and gothic character which mere facts present. It is no explanation of our concrete universe, it is another thing altogether, a substitute for it, a remedy, a way of escape.<sup>56</sup>

Hence philosophy's bad name, at least in the view of the generally empiricist modern man, who considers the world of facts to be "a thing wide open," to be observed and recorded, not artificially schematized. It is not proper to close off this open reality, which is precisely what philosophical systems do.<sup>57</sup> Rationalist philosophy thus appears as mere artifice, and perhaps even as pretension. In any event, removed as it is from the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>57</sup> See *ibid.*, 20.

world of experience, this sort of theorizing is something that cannot be countenanced by the empiricist modern man.

The preceding analysis points to the “present dilemma in philosophy” of which the lecture’s title speaks: to date, all metaphysical schemes leave something to be desired. On the one hand, the materialist worldview that derives from tough-minded empiricism is fraught with “inhumanism and irreligion”; on the other, with the tender-minded, “you find a rationalistic philosophy that indeed may call itself religious but that keeps out of all definite touch with concrete facts and joys and sorrows.”<sup>58</sup> The “mixed” pragmatist temperament, which is in fact the temperament of most men, does not succumb to either horn of this dilemma. Indeed, the pragmatist temperament wishes somehow to split the difference. James summarizes,

What *you* want is a philosophy that will not only exercise your powers of intellectual abstraction, but that will make some positive connexion with this actual world of finite human lives.<sup>59</sup>

The pragmatist temperament incorporates the concerns of both the tough-minded and the tender-minded. It will never deny the value of empirical science and the importance of observable facts; moreover, it decries the sort of “vicious intellectualism” that abstracts from concrete experience.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, however, it wishes to affirm the larger vision of the universe as something more than a mindless mechanism, as a setting in which our decisions and actions are real and significant factors. The pragmatist

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> See George Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 155.

temperament will insist that the universe is a place where things like values, ideals, and God make sense.<sup>61</sup> And they do so, it is important to point out, not as mere abstractions but only within the context of the world as we experience it; moreover, honest empiricists will be attuned to the experiential nature of such things—that is, they will recognize that metaphysical entities have meanings that are borne out in and justified through our experience. Believing in these things makes a concrete, observable difference in people's lives and in the world. So the pragmatist temperament coherently integrates tough-mindedness and tender-heartedness: it is religious precisely because it is honestly empirical.

Inasmuch as most men are a mixture of tough-mindedness and tender-mindedness, the “present dilemma in philosophy” is a problem that many thoughtful individuals take seriously. These considerations themselves illustrate how temperament functions as “the springboard of all philosophizing,”<sup>62</sup> for it is in response to this problem that James develops his pragmatist philosophy. He envisions it as the solution to the dilemma.

I offer the oddly-named thing pragmatism as a philosophy that can satisfy both kinds of demand. It can remain religious like the rationalisms, but at the same time, like the empiricisms, it can preserve the richest intimacy with facts.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> To a certain extent, for the pragmatist there is evidential value in the mere fact that many people believe in these things. See, for example, the discussion of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in the next chapter. But perhaps subtler and more important is the pragmatist's recognition that holding these beliefs makes a concrete difference in one's life and the lives of others. See the next chapter's discussion of James's essay “The Will to Believe.”

<sup>62</sup> Myers, *William James*, 304.

<sup>63</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 23.



Pragmatism has a special mandate: it “preserves . . . a cordial relation with facts, and . . . neither begins nor ends by turning positive religious constructions out of doors—it treats them cordially as well.”<sup>64</sup> Pragmatism mediates between the scientific and religious points of view,<sup>65</sup> satisfying the intellectual needs of those who are inclined to respect both science and religion. This view of the pragmatist temperament serves as background for understanding the development of pragmatist philosophy in general.

#### A METHOD OF SETTLING DISPUTES

James begins Lecture II of *Pragmatism*, “What Pragmatism Means,” by setting the scene for a metaphysical debate, the resolution of which is an apt example of his pragmatist method at work. There are two players: a squirrel clinging to one side of a tree, and a man standing on the tree’s opposite side. The man, wishing to see the squirrel, moves toward the other side of the tree, but just as quickly as he moves, so does the squirrel. Thus the trunk of the tree is always between the two, and the man never catches sight of the squirrel. From this scene, James extracts the metaphysical question: Does the man go round the squirrel or not? Certainly he circles the tree, and the squirrel is on the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>65</sup> Cotkin questions whether James is disingenuous in claiming that his pragmatism is a mediator between these points of view. While James will maintain that pragmatism is neither dogmatic nor an ideology that favors any one position over another, it is evident that in practice Jamesian pragmatism is not neutral with respect to particular philosophical positions. For example, it clearly sides with theism and pluralism over atheism and monism, and it also explicitly condemns abstract, rationalist modes of thought. See Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher*, 156.

tree, yet it is not so clear-cut whether or not he circles the squirrel.<sup>66</sup> How to answer this question? “Mindful of the scholastic adage that whenever you meet a contradiction you must make a distinction,”<sup>67</sup> James says it is necessary to clarify the meaning of “going round” before we can settle on an answer. If “going round” means passing from the north of the squirrel to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and finally to the north, then certainly the man goes round him. But if “going round” means moving from in front of him, to the right of him, then behind him, then to his left, and returning to in front of him, then just as clearly the man does not go round the squirrel. This example draws out the essence of James’s pragmatist method, which is to resolve disputed questions “that otherwise might be interminable” by looking to what their terms mean in practice.<sup>68</sup>

James uses the squirrel example to show that the pragmatist method quite simply and sensibly seeks to resolve questions by clarifying their terms. It does this by analyzing the terms’ practical import in order to ferret out the merely verbal or semantic disputes. The heart of the pragmatist method is “to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences.” Moreover, “[i]f no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is

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<sup>66</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 27. James relates that this very question actually arose among a group of his friends while vacationing in the mountains.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* James does not give the provenance of the “adage.”

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 28. There are evident and strong affinities here with the thought of Wittgenstein, who years later in his *Philosophical Investigations* underscores largely the same point, namely, the primacy of usage and context—the “language-games” of our terms—with respect to resolving philosophical questions. See Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, 43.

idle.”<sup>69</sup> Much of the work of the pragmatist method lies in exposing the so-called distinctions without differences, that is, those merely verbal or semantic debates, and lightening the philosophical load by setting them aside. As James writes,

It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence. There can be no difference anywhere that doesn't make a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon the fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and sometime.<sup>70</sup>

Thus James intends to discount those logical and metaphysical debates that lack any experiential implications or consequences and so neither guide men's actions nor help them understand their experience.<sup>71</sup> But importantly the method does not simply dismiss all metaphysical issues. Indeed, James's conviction is that certain metaphysical ideas and realities are of the utmost importance in our lives, and so the questions about these things are crucial. He writes,

The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants in our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 28. In this regard James may be echoing the Leibniz's principle of the identity of indiscernibles, one formulation of which states that entities  $x$  and  $y$  are identical if all of their properties are identical. Importantly, though, James insists that all such properties are manifest as the experiential upshots or “cash-value” of the notions in question. Compare G. W. Leibniz, “Discourse on Metaphysics” (1686), in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2d ed., ed. and trans. Leroy E. Loemker (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1969), sec. 9.

<sup>70</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 30.

<sup>71</sup> See Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, 43.

<sup>72</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 30. I believe James here sidesteps the thornier issue of whether and how we may accurately determine what “makes a difference” for us. His point is simply that the proper methodology for examining any philosophical position entails an investigation of its practical implications for us in our concrete experience. This method need not guarantee success, but success requires it.

The pragmatist method will thus resolve philosophical questions in one of two ways: either by attempting to identify a specific answer grounded in practical experience, or by calling off the debate. In either case, the practical import of the question and its answer—the concrete impact on life and experience, or lack thereof—is determinative.

James maintains that this is no new method. He includes Socrates, Aristotle, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume among its practitioners.<sup>73</sup> He also notes the similarities between the pragmatist method and the classical empirical approach to knowledge. Both pragmatism and empiricism eschew rationalist models that fail to draw from and relate directly to human experience; both turn “away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, and pretended absolutes and origins. . . . towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power.”<sup>74</sup> Pragmatism balks at the impotence and primitive nature of metaphysical schematizing, which seeks to quell the enigma of the universe by simply naming its principle, and which rests once a name has been assigned. Indeed, pragmatism pushes onward, not satisfied with mere names. The pragmatist method will take a name and seek to draw out “its practical cash-value” and then “set it at work within the stream of your experience.” For this reason, the method “appears less a solution . . . than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*.”<sup>75</sup> Pragmatism sees theories not as mere tales or fancies, but as man-made

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 32. So the pragmatist takes naming for granted, and he seeks to understand names concretely, that is, in terms of the practical relations to which name-bearers are open.

instruments which we use and refine for the sake of perfecting our action: “We don’t lie back on them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid. Pragmatism unstiffens our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work.”<sup>76</sup> In the pragmatist method, practice is the measure of theory: theories themselves are drawn from and refined in light of experience, and the significance of any theory lies wholly in its applicability to the world of experience.

As James articulates it, the pragmatist method is open to any and all conclusions that human experience can affirm. It is not tendentious, biased, or preferential in any manner. It favors no particular theories or results but is rather simply “an attitude of orientation. . . . away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and . . . towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.”<sup>77</sup> Notwithstanding this apparent affinity with empiricism, in practice the pragmatist may well be more consistently empirical than the ordinary empiricist. Whereas practitioners of empirical science often tend to be biased toward a materialist worldview and to favor only those results and conclusions that are coherent within that worldview, the Jamesian pragmatist is not so biased. Indeed, pragmatism “has no objection whatever to the realizing of abstractions, so long as you get about among particulars with their aid and they actually carry you somewhere.”<sup>78</sup> Pragmatism has “no *a priori* prejudices against theology,”<sup>79</sup> whereas

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. It is proper to note that this “impartiality” is a feature of pragmatism as a *method*; as a *temperament*, pragmatism is “biased” toward certain determinations.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

empirical science quite often does. In sum, the theoretic hospitality of the pragmatist far exceeds that of the typical empiricist.

In Lectures III, IV, and VIII of *Pragmatism*, James further demonstrates how pragmatism is useful to flesh out and resolve various metaphysical problems. The point of the examples in these lectures is not to argue pragmatically for any one position over another, but rather to illustrate that all meaningful and persuasive argumentation necessarily draws from and makes reference to the practical realm. In each case, James attempts to show that a problem's practical significance is its *sole* significance. When confronting philosophical issues like these, the pragmatist begins by asking, "What practical difference does any position make?" From the basis of this simple question the pragmatist proceeds to work out his thought. Pragmatism insists that such questions are resolvable only when we consider them vis-à-vis our real-life experience.

For example, with regard to the notion of substance, James considers the nominalist position that "substance" is a spurious notion, one that is a merely a function of "our inveterate human trick of turning names into things."<sup>80</sup> Under this view, "substance" is meaningless term inasmuch as all we ever know through direct experience are the "accidental," phenomenal features of things. We have no experience of substance itself, and were it not for accidents, we would never have arrived at a notion of substance in the first place. No substance in itself is revealed to us through experience, and hence nothing called "substance" can ever make a difference in that context. For this reason, we may dismiss the term as meaningless.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 46.

By contrast with this nominalist position, James notes the scholastic application of the notion of substance to the understanding of the Real Presence in the Eucharist. By transubstantiation, it is believed, the substance of the bread and wine becomes the body and blood of Christ, while the accidents of bread and wine remain the same. Here surely—on the supposition that that which is believed to occur by transubstantiation actually does occur—the notion of substance makes a most important difference. As James writes,

a tremendous difference has been made, no less a one than this, that we who take the sacrament, now feed upon the very substance of divinity. The substance-notion breaks into life, then, with tremendous effect.<sup>81</sup>

Of course, James admits, in the case given the notion of substance will carry weight only for those who already believe on independent grounds in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. His point in citing these views regarding “substance” is not to argue pragmatically for either the meaningfulness or meaningless of the term; rather, he seeks to establish that a person’s position on this matter, whatever that position happens to be, is necessarily supported by a pragmatist basis. His aim is to highlight the pervasiveness of the pragmatist method. Whichever way we think—that substance is spurious or that it is real—the experiential import of the position we hold is necessarily determinative.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>82</sup> This is not to say that the experiential import *makes* a proposition true; James’s point, rather, is that it is a measure that necessarily guides people’s truth-formation. Also, here we see the nonpreferential nature of the pragmatist *method*; it favors no particular results, and James even shows that it can be employed to justify contrary conclusions. As a *temperament*, however, pragmatism does incline toward specific positions in debates such as free will versus determinism, theism versus atheism, and so forth.

Indeed, we will never affirm a position, either way, except through some reference to the concrete realm in which the notion may “break into life.”

James applies his pragmatist method to other philosophical issues, including the understanding of God, the question of design in nature, the free will versus determinism debate, and the problem of the one and the many. These treatments effectively rebut any claim that his pragmatism is a sort of trade-school philosophy, neglectful of important metaphysical issues and crassly concerned only with present, practical affairs. Here we see clearly the broad reach of James’s pragmatist method: “so far from keeping her eyes on the immediate practical foreground, as she is accused of doing, [pragmatism] dwells just as much upon the world’s remotest perspectives.”<sup>83</sup> What is distinctive about pragmatist philosophy is not the objects and questions of its concern, but rather its methodology. Pragmatism does not neglect or reject intellectual abstractions, but in its investigation of these it “shifts the emphasis and looks forward into facts themselves.”<sup>84</sup> The pragmatist method takes abstract concepts seriously; moreover, it insists that in order to do this, it is necessary to measure such concepts against practical, empirical experience. If they are real, things like substance and free will cannot be taken “in themselves, as something august and exalted above facts.”<sup>85</sup> Rather, if they are real, they must make some real difference in the world. It is this real difference that makes it

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.



possible for us to know of them, and it is precisely this real difference that pragmatism tracks.

#### A THEORY OF TRUTH

Pragmatism as a theory of truth emerges, in Lecture VI of *Pragmatism*, as yet another application of his pragmatist method. Confronted with the philosophical problem of understanding what truth is, the pragmatist begins by asking, “What difference does such a thing as ‘truth’ make in anyone’s life?” What is its “cash-value”?<sup>86</sup> Built into the very asking of this sort of question is the presumption that truth is something known only, and wholly, through our experience. “Truth” is our term, and so there cannot be anything about it that is inaccessible to us. The notion is capable of full articulation, and the reliable mechanism by which to analyze it is our simple, straightforward appeal to experience. The appropriate analysis of truth is necessarily a functional one; it pins down the answers to questions like: Why do people seek truth? What conditions are important in establishing truth? What consequences arise in association with truth? Apart from these sorts of questions, any account of truth will be not merely abstract, but artificial and indeed irrelevant.<sup>87</sup> As we have seen, for James, any philosophical problem or concept is meaningful only insofar as it conducts some business in the concrete, empirical realm. Thus, a good theory of truth must explain truth on this level. A good

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>87</sup> For a good summary of this functional analysis, see Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, 94 ff.

theory will reveal what truth is simply by uncovering what truth is “known as” by us.

Indeed, to go beyond this level in an account of truth is to overreach—to speculate idly and to exceed our human capacity for knowing.

So, what difference does “truth” make in anyone’s life? What is truth known as?

To begin, it is important to note that truth is something said of our ideas or beliefs concerning what is; these are, as it were, the substrate of truth, and “truth” expresses some relation between our thought and the world. In this regard James is in line with a traditional correspondence theory of truth, and yet he explicitly takes issue with such a theory. Though a correspondence theory is not necessarily incorrect, according to James, is too abstract for him to accept. He is amenable to a correspondence definition of truth, namely, that “truth” in some way indicates the agreement between thought and reality, but he finds such a formulation rather simplistic and imprecise. Too often the talk about “agreement” is “offhand and irreflective.” For example, he notes the agreement-relation is sometimes described as the idea’s “copying” reality. Copying, he says, is inadequate to explain the relation between thought and thing, for in many cases we have true thoughts that are far from good copies of the things to which they refer. Most laymen, for example, will think of the inner mechanism of a clock in a primitive, nontechnical way that “is much less of a copy, yet . . . passes muster, for it in no way clashes with the reality.”<sup>88</sup> To summarize, pragmatist truth does indeed entail some agreement between

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<sup>88</sup> See James, *Pragmatism*, 96. For further discussion, see also Graham Bird, *William James* (New York: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1986), 38 ff.

thought and reality, but what distinguishes it for James is the effort to say more than just that.

Specifically, pragmatism pushes further and asks what it actually means for thought and reality to “agree.” When we speak of truth, we are necessarily referring to something that is not a disembodied abstraction but that is, rather, personally manifest, a feature of certain ideas held in someone’s consciousness. Truth is a property of certain of our beliefs and ideas, and so it is to these that we look in order to flesh out our understanding of truth. Importantly, functionality is what divides true and false ideas, according to James: “True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot.”<sup>89</sup> This statement is the kernel of James’s account of truth. The activities of assimilation, validation, corroboration, and verification are central to the pragmatist notion of truth. But James moves to still more novel and controversial ground in asserting that these activities are the very essence of truth.

[Truth] *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verification*. Its validity is the process of *valid-ation*.<sup>90</sup>

Here James stakes his claim. Against the traditional intellectualist assumption that truth is a fixed and eternal entity that exists prior to and independently of any knower,<sup>91</sup> James maintains that truth is not fixed and eternal but *made*, that truth *comes into being* in the

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<sup>89</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 96-7.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

very processes of verification and validation. Indeed, for James, there is no truth outside of these processes. Pragmatist truth exists dynamically and, in some sense, contingently in the life of the knower inasmuch as its very being is caused by the knower when she forms and verifies certain ideas.<sup>92</sup>

If truth is an event or process in the life of the knower, what does it look like? How does verification proceed? How is truth made? Pragmatically, verification is bound up with satisfaction. Verification consists in certain practical consequences of my idea, specifically, the activity of using an idea or belief to navigate successfully through my experience. In the process of its verification, my idea leads me—through my stock of other ideas and through my experience itself—to make certain agreeable connections and transitions in my life. This “progressive, harmonious, satisfactory” movement through experience is precisely the practical import of my true idea, and this practical import is precisely its pragmatist truth.

For example, when I think, “This aspirin relieves a headache,” and I proceed, on the basis of that idea, to take the aspirin and to have my headache relieved, my original idea is verified as I am satisfied—it is made true, known to be true, precisely as I am relieved and not a moment sooner.<sup>93</sup> My true ideas serve as important tools for action and life; I do not think them for their own sakes. They are not ends in themselves, but

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<sup>92</sup> Compare Charles Peirce, who writes: “Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then the whole of our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object.” (Charles S. Peirce, *The Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, ed. Max H. Fisch [Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986], 3:266.) Unlike his contemporary for whom concrete, experiential effects are said to be the very *meaning* of a sign, James makes experience the *test of the truth* of a concept. For James, concepts may be better or worse snapshot approximations of reality, and their truth is measured by the yardstick of experience. Chapter 4 discusses James’s critique of concepts more fully.

“preliminary means towards other vital satisfactions.”<sup>94</sup> They are means that have no significance apart from their functions and uses. Thus, there is an intimate relation between what is true and what is useful, as James writes: “True is the name for whatever starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience.”<sup>95</sup> My experience of truth is of truth *as verified*; that is, as an experience of the beneficial effects of true ideas, of their guiding me within my environment in ways satisfying to me.<sup>96</sup> Apart from these concrete, experienced satisfactions or “workings” of my ideas, I know nothing to be true.

In order more fully to draw out the novelty and distinctiveness of the pragmatist theory of truth, it is helpful to consider how James responds to two objections, namely, (1) that truth is not something made, and (2) that truth is not what satisfies us.

*First Objection: Truth Is Not Something Made.* James maintains that pragmatist truth is something *made*. It comes to be in and through the experience of the knower, as the verification of thoughts and ideas that lead us in fruitful ways through our experience. This understanding of truth as something made prompts the objection that “pragmatists

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<sup>94</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 98.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Hence James’s well-known characterization of truth as “only the expedient in the way of our thinking,” a formulation which he later described as “unguarded language,” regrettable for the misinterpretations and criticism to which it gave rise. See *ibid.*, 106, and James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 5 and 127-8, for example.

put the cart before the horse.”<sup>97</sup> James summarizes the so-called rationalist objection as follows:

“Truth is not made,” [the critic] will say; “it absolutely obtains, being a unique relation that does not wait upon any process, but shoots straight over the head of experience, and hits its reality every time. Our belief that yon thing on the wall is a clock is true already, altho no one in the whole history of the world should verify it. The bare quality of standing in that transcendent relation is what makes any thought true that possesses it, whether or not there be verification. . . .”<sup>98</sup>

According to the critic, pragmatism fails by not recognizing that truth is antecedent to its verification. The critic says truth is “transcendent,” wholly independent of and unaffected by our knowing (or not knowing) it. Truth exists prior to verification, and verification is not identified with truth but *follows from* it. We do not make truth but discover it. True ideas are and have been true even before the processes of verifying them are completed.<sup>99</sup>

James’s reply to the objection that truth is not something made but something that exists independently of the human knower begins with a simple restatement and clarification of terms. First, he lays out the basic structure of truth: it is a relation

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<sup>97</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 105.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> For example, James considers James B. Pratt’s worthy formulations of this objection in “Truth and Its Verification,” *Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 12 (June 1907): 320-4, and later in Pratt’s *What is Pragmatism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909). Pratt calls into question precisely the status of the “workings” or verification processes of our ideas. He does not deny that these are associated with truth, but he maintains that they are insufficient to ground the truth-relation or constitute the very essence of truth. Several other critics point to James’s claim that truth is something made by a knower as justification for describing him as antirealist or nonrealist in his epistemology. For example, see A. J. Ayer, *The Origins of Pragmatism* (London: Macmillan, 1968); Ralph Ross, *Makers of American Thought: An Introduction to Seven American Writers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974); Morton White, *Documents in the History of American Philosophy, from Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); and John Wild, *The Radical Empiricism of William James* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1969).

between two things, namely, (a) my idea and (b) reality. Next, he affirms that both ideas and reality are grounded in “the matrix of experiential circumstance.” Neither exists outside this world, which provides both the context and the matter for all sorts of truth-relations to be borne out.<sup>100</sup> Properly speaking, “truth” is the truth-*relation*, but James also uses the term to describe certain of our ideas. An idea is said to be true because it is recognized as one side of a truth-relation, and truth-relations are accessible to us only within our concrete experience. Much of the confusion concerning the question of the priority of “truth” arises simply because of looseness in the way the term is used.<sup>101</sup> Some use it to describe (b), the “objective reality” side of the truth-relation, but James prefers to use it to refer to (a), the “subjective idea” side. He justifies this preference by the following argument: any object is open to being the referent of false ideas, so why use the term “truth” to indicate the object? It will be better to use “truth” to indicate a *property of some ideas* about the object rather than the object itself.<sup>102</sup>

To return to the objection, then: With regard to the truth-relation, James does not disagree that *something* is independent of human knowing; however, he will not call this independent something truth per se, for truth is the relation between *my* idea and reality—and thus much depends on me, the knower of truth. Indeed, “the ‘experience’ which the

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<sup>100</sup> James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 91-2.

<sup>101</sup> See *ibid.*, 151, where James says that one of his critics “shifts universes of discussion” in his use of the term “truth,” “applying it sometimes to a property of opinions, sometimes to the facts which the opinions assert.” This shifting contributes to the present confusion; but it is necessary to be clear and consistent in usage. James prefers to use the terms “reality,” “idea,” and “belief,” and to speak of “the truth of the idea or belief.” Thus, as a matter of usage, “truth” refers to the “subjective” side of the truth-relation (*ibid.*, 151-2).

<sup>102</sup> See *ibid.*, 8.

pragmatic definition postulates is the independent something which the anti-pragmatist accuses him of ignoring.”<sup>103</sup> So, for James, the background or source of truth, if you will—namely, our concrete experience, “*this fundamentum of circumstance surrounding the object and idea*”<sup>104</sup>—is independent, while the truth-*relation*, which is what the term “truth” signifies, is not.

So how is it that truth—the truth-relation—is dependent and indeed *made*? Quite simply, the truth-relation requires a knower engaged in processes of verification that take place in concrete experience. Truth comes into being—that is to say, the truth-relation exists—precisely when a knower’s idea is experienced as comporting with reality, thereby informing him and providing him some benefit. Indeed, the truth-relation is known as an experience of beneficial effects: our ideas work, they prove out, they facilitate our adaptation to the environment. As James puts it, “you cannot define what you mean by calling [ideas] true without referring to their functional possibilities”; otherwise, the relation between idea and reality is “mere coexistence or bare witness,” or some other sort of generically imprecise relation that does not properly capture the special nature of truth.<sup>105</sup> Truth as truth-relation entails experiencing our ideas and our relation with and through them to the realities of the concrete world.

Further, James’s offers a nuanced argument that not only rebuts the criticism but also lends support to his position by showing that the rationalist position is actually

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 118.



grounded in pragmatist principles. First, he notes that, owing to the regularities, similarities, and general predictability present in the world, we often use one verification process as a proxy for many others. Through our collective human experience we form concepts, rules, laws, and other sorts of generalizations—all having their origins in the direct verification processes of some individual's experience—and, without necessarily directly verifying them ourselves, we use these as guides in our own lives. To the extent that there are no unexpected results when we use them, these thoughts are *indirectly* verified for us. Moreover, the pragmatist will say that, strictly speaking, in these instances the truth-relation is experienced while the verification is suppressed or implicit; truth in such cases consists not in the actual verification of these thoughts but rather in their *verifiability* or *possible* verification.

Now, according to James, the rationalist position regarding the priority of truth derives from the fact that so many of our truths are of this indirectly verified or verifiable type. He writes, “The quality of truth, obtaining *ante rem*, pragmatically means, then, the fact that in such a world innumerable ideas work better by their indirect or possible than by their direct and actual verification. Truth *ante rem* means only verifiability, then.”<sup>106</sup> This practice of working with indirect and possible verifications makes our lives much easier and more productive, since it relieves us of the time-consuming and intolerable, indeed impossible, burden of directly verifying all of our truths for ourselves. Yet because so often we do not engage in the actual verification processes that constitute the bulk of our truths—notwithstanding that these processes are the essence of the truths, the

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<sup>106</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 105.

ultimate explanation of why they are truths—we may lose sight, as the rationalists do, of the fact that processes of verification are literally how our truths come into being.

James turns the tables on his rationalist critics. They insist that truth does not require a knower, that it is transcendent or independent of human knowing, that it exists before and after—indeed regardless of whether—it is actually grasped by someone. But to view truth in this manner is to err, according to James, with respect to the question of priority. He contends that the sort of “discarnate truth” which his critics so revere is in fact “static, impotent, and relatively spectral.” He writes:

Essential truth, the truth of the intellectualists, the truth with no one thinking it, is like the coat that fits tho no one has ever tried it on, like the music that no ear has listened to. It is less real, not more real, than the verified article; and to attribute a superior degree of glory to it seems little more than a piece of perverse abstraction-worship. . . . Intellectualist truth is then only pragmatist truth *in posse*.<sup>107</sup>

At the very least, this sense of truth is likened to a hypothesis or preliminary thought that has yet to be tested and verified in concrete experience. Thus it may be apt to say that, while not necessarily temporally prior to intellectualist truth, pragmatist truth is metaphysically prior in the way that act is metaphysically prior to potency.

James also argues that the objection regarding the priority of truth is only a bit of conceptual sleight of hand, “a case of the stock rationalist trick of treating the name of a concrete phenomenal reality as an independent prior entity, and placing it behind the

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<sup>107</sup> James, “The Pragmatist Account of Truth and Its Misunderstandings,” in *The Meaning of Truth*, 110-11. Here James does not name names, but as mentioned above James B. Pratt was prominent among his critics (see n. 96). See also the relevant correspondence between James and John E. Russell in “Controversy about Truth,” *Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 11 (May 1907): 289-96.

reality as its explanation.”<sup>108</sup> To clarify this point, he offers some examples. First, he notes that wealth is nothing apart from a set of concrete processes—earning, saving, and spending—in the lives of certain individuals; it is not an intangible excellence present in some men and lacking in others. Similarly, health is not an abstract, independent entity, but rather the collection of activities that includes good digestion, circulation, sleep, and so forth. Physical strength, too, is nothing but the development and employment of one’s musculature.<sup>109</sup> In the case of truth, the analysis is the same: fundamentally, it is nothing apart from the verifying activities of men. James writes:

All such qualities sink to the status of ‘habits’ between their times of exercise; and similarly truth becomes a habit of certain of our ideas and beliefs in their intervals of rest from their verifying activities. But those activities are the root of the whole matter, and the condition of there being any habit to exist in the intervals.<sup>110</sup>

The rationalist insistence regarding the priority of truth reflects a failure to attend to the fact that all our truths are generated by us in our experience. The rationalist may be misled by the fact that, once acquired, truths assume the status of latent, mental habits, to be called up and put into practice as needed. The rationalist misconstrues the latency of these acquired, habitual ways of thinking—our truths—as innateness or preexistence, as independence of us and our activity. James insists, however, that our true ideas and beliefs are in fact brought into being within our experience. The mind’s active role in the formation of truths is undeniable. Truth is something made.

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<sup>108</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 105.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* James offers a more complete discussion of habit in chapter 4 of his *Principles of Psychology*.

*Second Objection: Truth Is Not What Satisfies.* According to the pragmatist, I know my idea to be verified, and hence true, when I am aware that it satisfies me in some manner. Critics see this as no more than a subjectivist or relativist notion of truth. In this view, pragmatist truth, grounded in the satisfaction and verification of the individual knower, is no truth at all in any meaningful sense, for it is grounded in the individual and thus lacks objectivity, or is at least uncomfortably compatible with subjectivity.<sup>111</sup> The following explication of the Jamesian response to this sort of criticism will draw out three important yet often overlooked elements of James's pragmatism. First, pragmatism is a theory of truth that presupposes objectivity in the traditional sense and is grounded in and measured by empirical experience. Accordingly, true ideas for the pragmatist are never the products of pure subjective preference, for such preference alone cannot guarantee that an individual is in good, working contact with reality. Second, the formulation of pragmatist truths is necessarily constrained not only by empirical experience but also by conceptual ideas and logical relations, as well as by a whole body of previously accepted truths. Finally, James's development of the notion of absolute truth helps to situate both pragmatist truth and its critics in their proper places, as it were. As we shall see, absolute truth is a foil that highlights human fallibility and the revisability of pragmatist "half-truths";<sup>112</sup> moreover, James's account of absolute truth moves the individual knower

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<sup>111</sup> For example, Bertrand Russell, "Transatlantic Truth," *Albany Review* 2 (January 1908): 393-410; Ralph G. Hawtrey, "Pragmatism," *The New Quarterly* 1 (March 1908): 197-210; G. E. Moore, "Professor James' 'Pragmatism,'" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* n.s. 8 (1908): 33-77.

<sup>112</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 107.

beyond pure epistemic solitude and underscores the need for progressively better truths to be generated within and through the community. In due course I shall trace these elements of James's pragmatism, which I think serve to rebut the charge of subjectivism that is sometimes leveled against it and to flesh out some overlooked aspects of the pragmatist account.

To return to the criticism: Is truth really something that depends on me and my assessments and satisfactions? No doubt I would find it satisfying to believe that I have \$100 million in the bank, but such satisfaction would have nothing to do with the truth of the matter. Similarly, I may find it quite dissatisfying to believe that I am mortal, but here again, satisfaction and dissatisfaction are quite irrelevant to truth. It would be easy to think of countless examples of satisfying falsities and dissatisfying truths. To define truth in terms of personal satisfaction, as James does, thus seems problematic.<sup>113</sup> But is it really a problem?

James answers his critics by saying that they fail to grasp an important point, namely, that there is no satisfaction apart from verification—verification which binds us to an objective order. For the pragmatist, it is not the case that the satisfaction associated with an idea *causes* that idea to be true. Satisfaction does not come first. Rather, satisfaction is eventually a necessary consequence of the fact that the idea is verifiable—it coheres with an objective order and is not an ultimately frustrating delusion. For the

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<sup>113</sup> Graham Bird notes that, while critics like Russell and Moore make much of the “apparent equation of truth with usefulness or expediency,” James early on dismisses the objection as superficial. However, owing to the persistence of such critics, he is compelled to address them in *The Meaning of Truth*, where he goes to great lengths to stress that the expediency he means is *in general* and *in the long run*. See Bird, *William James*, 37, as well as further discussion below.

pragmatist, truth is not a product of willfulness, wishful thinking, or caprice. On the contrary, the pragmatist, knowing truth through verification, is constitutionally guarded against such subjectivism. James writes:

Truth, . . . meaning nothing but eventual verification, is manifestly incompatible with waywardness on our part. Woe to him whose beliefs play fast and loose with the order which realities follow in his experience: they will lead him nowhere or else make false connexions.<sup>114</sup>

Grounded as it is in experience, pragmatist truth cannot flout the authority of the objective realm.<sup>115</sup> Ultimately, only those ideas and beliefs that comport with that order will be verified, and, in turn, only those will prove satisfying to believe.<sup>116</sup> In other words, ultimately, there is no satisfaction without verification. This simple but key point is often overlooked or distorted, which moves James to clarify the position in *The*

*Meaning of Truth:*

The pragmatist calls satisfactions indispensable for truth-building, but I have everywhere called them insufficient unless reality be also incidentally led to. If . . . reality . . . were cancelled from the pragmatist's universe of discourse, he would straightaway give the name of falsehoods to the beliefs remaining, in spite

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<sup>114</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 99.

<sup>115</sup> In *The Meaning of Truth*, James fortifies this position by highlighting the fact that independent and prior reality is the source of those verification processes and "workings" which constitute truth as we know it. As he writes, "Something else is there first, that practically makes for the knowing. . . . That something is the 'nature' namely of the [reality] . . . that operates to start the causal chain of processes which, when completed, is the complex fact to which we give whatever functional name best fits the case. Another nature, another chain of cognitive workings; and then either another object known, or the same object known differently, will ensue" (97).

<sup>116</sup> Again, it is important to note that James allows that direct experiential verification need not always occur for an idea to be (known as) true. In other words, verification does not always require an eye-witness. Many truths exist on a sort of "credit system," whereby they are assumed to be true: "Our thoughts and ideas 'pass,' so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them." Such ideas are true, and they prove beneficial or satisfying to believe in just the same manner that directly verified ideas do. See *Pragmatism*, 99-100. All such indirectly verified ideas either can be, will be, or are directly verified first-hand somewhere in someone's empirical experience. See *ibid.*, 103.

of all their satisfactoriness. . . . [T]here can be no truth if there is nothing to be true about.<sup>117</sup>

To believe what could never be verified is to be in contact with falsity, which is ultimately associated with “eccentricity and isolation, . . . foiled and barren thinking . . . clash and contradiction.”<sup>118</sup> Though some truths might be unpleasant to face or own up to, such discomforts pale in comparison with the dissatisfactions associated with our falsities. For James, we do not have unconditional discretion to construct, decide upon, or choose our truths. Quite the contrary, the way the world is ultimately limits pragmatist truth.

Further, against critics who have a problem with hinging a theory of truth on satisfaction, it is relevant to point to James’s rather broad understanding of the notion of satisfaction. It would be a mistake to read him as defining satisfaction exclusively in terms of personal feelings and self-serving appetites. Rather, the satisfaction associated with truths is better articulated as “the maximum possible sum of satisfactions.”<sup>119</sup> In addition to natural desires for what is immediately and personally gratifying, we also have desires that extend beyond our personal interests. The things that satisfy us are best understood as a family of factors pertaining to interests that are not only subjective or personal but also more objective—factors such as evidence, consistency, clarity, and

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<sup>117</sup> James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 106.

<sup>118</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 103.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 101. Granting, of course, that certain satisfactions may be inconsistent with one another. A maximum “net” aggregate of satisfactions may be a more precise formulation.

theoretical elegance.<sup>120</sup> The satisfactoriness of our truths need not be construed as a wholly subjective affair, and so the criticism is deflated.

In addition to his articulation of a theory of objective truth grounded in empirical experience, James's "genetic" account of truth also argues against the charge of subjectivity. According to this account, when we formulate truths, we are constrained not only by the evidence of empirical experience but also by other abstract, purely conceptual and logical ideas and their relations. James explicitly extends his account of truth beyond matters of sensible or perceivable fact to "the relations among purely mental ideas."<sup>121</sup>

His thought here can be analyzed in two parts. First, conceptual ideas are necessarily grounded in empirical reality. Even at the conceptual level, ideas are understood functionally: they are always understood in relation to other ideas, all of which are eventually resolved, or at least resolvable, in practical experience. As James writes, "In this realm of mental relations, truth again is an affair of leading. We relate one abstract idea with another, framing in the end great systems of logical and mathematical truth."<sup>122</sup> The whole significance of any conceptual idea lies in its connections with other ideas—none exists or is meaningful in perfect isolation. Moreover, any legitimate conceptual and logical system of ideas will return to and be

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<sup>120</sup> On this point about satisfaction as an aggregate, see Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, 101-6, and Bird, *William James*, 41-3. James maintains that the satisfaction of a truth is measured "by a multitude of standards, of which some, for aught we know, may fail in any given case; and what is more satisfactory than any alternative in sight, may to the end be a sum of *pluses* and *minuses*"; James, "Humanism and Truth," in *The Meaning of Truth*, 40.

<sup>121</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 100.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.



justified by empirical realities: “[U]nder the respective terms of [our theoretical systems] the sensible facts of experience eventually arrange themselves, so that our eternal truths hold good of realities also. This marriage of fact and theory is endlessly fertile.”<sup>123</sup> Thus, there is a necessary, observable, working relationship between the abstract order of logic and concepts and the realm of empirical experience.

More interesting is the second part of James’s analysis, where he notes that these logico-conceptual truths, which are well formed in accordance with the constraints of empirical reality, themselves serve to limit or constrain any further formulations of truths. In arriving at truths, my subjectivity is necessarily checked, not just by the objective, empirical realm but also by the mental order of ideas that has been built up on the basis of facts. James writes:

Between the coercions of the sensible order and those of the ideal order, our mind is thus wedged tightly. Our ideas must agree with realities, be such realities concrete or abstract, be they facts or be they principles, under penalty of endless inconsistency and frustration.<sup>124</sup>

He includes “the whole body of other truths already in our possession”<sup>125</sup> among those things that limit the formulation of new truths. Any newly formed true idea or belief must “derange common sense and previous belief as little as possible, and it must lead to some sensible terminus or other that can be verified exactly.”<sup>126</sup> An individual’s pure subjectivity has little room for maneuver in the formulation of truths. To use the

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 104.

language of correspondence, pragmatist truths must “agree” with all three sorts of realities: empirical facts, conceptual and logical relations, and previously accepted truths.<sup>127</sup> In this way the pragmatist truth-relation exhibits the virtue of a sort of tensile strength. This agreement is a far more dynamic relation than that rather imprecisely suggested by a traditional correspondence theory.<sup>128</sup>

Finally, James’s development of the notion of absolute truth also argues against the claim that pragmatist truth is subjectivist or relativist. In contrast to all presently held truths, “the absolutely true” means, for James, “what no farther experience will ever alter, . . . that ideal vanishing point towards which we imagine that all of our temporary truths will some day converge.”<sup>129</sup> James does not assert that this absolute truth is the necessary, inevitable culmination of human truths, to be achieved at some point in the future; rather, it is simply something we might achieve. Here and now it is a “regulative notion” that emerges through the course of human experience when we recognize as false certain ideas and beliefs that we once believed to be true. Retrospectively recognizing the falsity of some of our ideas and, in turn, seeing our general fallibility, we tacitly acknowledge a higher standard against which we measure ourselves.

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<sup>127</sup> This point is reiterated in the essay “The Essence of Humanism,” which appears in *The Meaning of Truth*, where James writes, “If a novel experience, conceptual or theoretical, contradict too emphatically our pre-existent system of beliefs, in ninety-nine out of a hundred it is treated as false” (76). Also see “The Pragmatist Account of Truth and Its Misunderstandings” (*The Meaning of Truth*, 105), where James writes: “Above all we find consistency satisfactory, consistency between the present idea and the entire rest of our mental equipment, including the whole order of our sensations, and that of our intuitions of likeness and difference, and our whole stock of previously acquired truths.”

<sup>128</sup> In this respect James may be echoed in the Nicholas Rescher’s thought on coherentism. See Rescher, *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (1973; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1982).

<sup>129</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 106-7.

Insofar as this absolute truth is something toward which we are moving through the development of our presently held truths, it “turns its face, like all pragmatist notions, towards concreteness of fact, and towards the future.”<sup>130</sup> It will emerge out of our pragmatist truths and be made by us, “as a relation incidental to the growth of a mass of verification-experience, to which the half-true ideas are all along contributing their quota.”<sup>131</sup> Absolute truth is not envisioned as an abstract, disembodied reality, but as something concrete, borne out of and intimately bound up with human experience. Conceived as a completed final draft, it highlights an important feature of present pragmatist truth, namely, its revisability.<sup>132</sup>

Indeed, our presently held truths are ever subject to revision, and the process will proceed in accordance with the pragmatist criteria of verification and satisfaction. It may begin, at least in theory, with the truths formed and held by a single knower. Such ideas and beliefs will have been established insofar as they are both verified for that individual and consequently somehow satisfactory for him to hold. Now, in a world of many individual knowers, no single individual’s personal experience will ever be perfectly private or solitary. For this reason, the criteria of verification and satisfaction will necessarily play out within a context of interconnectedness, and they will necessarily

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> James’s thought on absolute truth may be compared to that of his colleague Charles Peirce, who writes: “Truth is that concordance of an abstract statement with the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief, which concordance the abstract statement may possess by virtue of the confession of its inaccuracy and one-sidedness, and this confession is an essential ingredient of truth.” (Charles Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* 5:565).

involve considerations pertaining to the broader communal setting. What is verifiable and satisfactory for me necessarily takes some account of the needs, interests, and demands of other individuals and the whole community. True ideas and beliefs thus become “progressively more objective” as they prove verifiable and satisfactory in the experience of more and more individuals.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, any individual’s truths are unlikely to hold up well against the measure of future experience unless they are fortified by the experience of other individuals. This communal vetting of truths produces better truths, that is, ones less likely to be confounded by future experience; and the projected culmination of the process is absolute truth. In this doctrine James’s commitment to the objectivity of truth once again is visible, notwithstanding his insistence that truth can emerge only within the experience of a subject, the individual knower.

## CONCLUSION

As this sketch of the origins and development of Jamesian pragmatism shows, the Jamesian pragmatist exhibits a special temperament that blends, in nonideological fashion, the tough-minded bent of empirical science and a tender-minded openness to spiritual realities and religious belief. In this perspective, pragmatism emerges as a method for settling philosophical disputes that disinterestedly seeks out the practical differences and consequences implicit in the meanings of the terms of any debate. As

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<sup>133</sup> Suckiel gives a good presentation of this “doctrine of degrees of truth” in *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James*, 106-15. Noting the “remarkable parallelism between James’s epistemology and his ethics” (106), she focuses on the role this doctrine plays in James’s ethical thought, wherein values and norms are understood as “progressively more objective” precisely insofar as they jibe with the experience and sensibilities of more and more members of the community.

applied to the question of the nature of truth, this pragmatist method arrives at a view of truth that is steeped in the concrete world of verification and satisfaction. What I know to be true is what is verifiable, and hence what proves beneficial and indeed satisfying to accept as true. The pragmatist doctrine of truth is “promethean” in its emphasis on the mind’s active role in the formation of truths; but also, importantly, it respects the constraints of reality, and the formation of new truths is always conditioned by previously held or prior truths that have been derived from the objective order of reality.

In the development of his thought on the question of evolution, James operates as a promethean pragmatist—his thinking on evolution, I shall argue, is an application of his pragmatism to this particular subject. But precisely as such it is conditioned by certain prior ideas of his regarding human nature, ideas he arrives at owing to his pragmatist temperament that is both empirically rigorous and open to the immaterial, religious dimensions of reality. The next chapter therefore will consider his views on human nature, focusing on his nonreductive view of man and developing his sense of the self as both free and in continuity with a wider spiritual environment. It is here that we encounter the so-called antipromethean mystic. The third and fourth chapters will trace James’s thought on evolution and show how it pragmatically reflects his view of human nature. As a pragmatist, James develops his thought on the question of evolution in such a manner that respects and includes the immaterial, mystical potentialities of man.

## CHAPTER 2

### JAMES ON HUMAN NATURE

*What is man?* One of James's major concerns throughout his career was to argue against the materialist view that explains the nature and activities of man solely in physico-chemical terms. Among those who would argue that man be understood nonreductively, moreover, James brought a unique and valuable perspective to bear insofar as he was a practicing scientist, albeit one with larger metaphysical interests. As a medical doctor and professor of physiology, James not only understands and values the methodological standards of empirical science, but credibly calls upon his contemporaries to hold rigorously and faithfully to empirical standards. In a sense, he wishes to purify empiricism. Whereas many in the scientific community are inclined to dismiss as unreal the unseen spiritual or metaphysical elements traditionally accepted as essential components of human nature, James calls such dismissals empirically unwarranted acts of dogmatism. Nonmaterial aspects of human nature may elude explanation under the traditional terms and methods of the natural sciences, but the simple fact remains: none of the sciences can disprove the reality of these things. To claim otherwise is neither empirically justified nor, properly speaking, scientific.

This chapter offers a brief but detailed study of James's nonreductive view of human nature, the two pillars of which are human freedom, or man's ability to choose and act in ways that somehow clearly transcend his material being, and human

spirituality, which James characterizes as the capacity for “continuity” with a wider, immaterial, spiritual environment. As important background, I shall detail the extensive treatment of human consciousness in James’s masterpiece, *The Principles of Philosophy*. James clearly explains his opposition to various traditional accounts of consciousness that appeal to epiphenomenalism, associationism, a substantial soul, or a transcendental ego, but much less easily understood is his own positive view of consciousness. After a survey of James’s rejection of the traditional philosophical accounts just mentioned, I shall turn to his own thinking. James’s account of consciousness is subtle and nuanced, and readers might even question its coherence. In the essay “Does Consciousness Exist?” his response to the question is negative—he denies that consciousness is something independent, something really separate or separable—while elsewhere he clearly affirms its existence. On this point, the nuances of his thought will require a bit of attention. I briefly note now that he resists characterizing consciousness in terms of philosophical abstractions or as an independent entity comprising one side of an ontological dualism. There is no truth, no sense, no reality to a consciousness thus conceived. Nonetheless, consciousness is something living and concrete, and it is this consciousness-as-experienced that James seeks to comprehend.

After considering James’s general account of human consciousness, I shall focus specifically on an important feature that he highlights, namely, selective attention or selectivity. Examining it will clarify the distinctive nature of human consciousness. For James, the selectivity of consciousness entails a feeling of effort—a feeling that one actively chooses to attend to certain objects and ignore others within one’s field of apprehension. Thus, the consideration of selectivity dovetails with James’s thought on

human freedom, which is also examined here. In his discussion of freedom, James departs from argument on the basis of empirical and introspective considerations and moves toward supporting his claims on the basis of other pragmatic and philosophical considerations. In his later thought, James develops a conception of the universe as a realm of spontaneity and indeterminacy within which human freedom fits well as an active force that introduces novelty.

Finally, I shall consider James's "religious" works, in which he bolsters his nonreductive view of human nature by arguing for the continuity of human consciousness with a wider, spiritual environment. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he collects and analyzes evidence with the aim of corroborating the reality of an "unseen" order accessible to human consciousness though unperceived by the bodily senses.

Consciousness that can grasp such an order must itself be of that order, at least in some sense. Thus this analysis supports a nonreductive view of human nature. In the essay "Human Immortality," James argues that it is feasible to conceive of consciousness as an entity transmitted or channeled through the body yet not depending on the body for its existence. This review of James's thought makes clear that it was his consistent and longstanding conviction that there is more to human nature than the materialist, reductive account allows.

Throughout his career, James's nonreductive view was essentially this: man is more than a physico-chemical being bound by the laws of matter. He affirmed the reality of human freedom within a nondeterministic universe, and he argued that human consciousness transcends what is known through the bodily senses. This chapter thus shows how James develops an anthropology in which the promethean pragmatist—the



active persona who best embodies human freedom—and the antipromethean mystic—the passive persona who best embodies spirituality—both come to the fore, not as rivals, but as dual supports for his nonreductive view of human nature. So we see the pragmatist and the mystic in a light that actually unites them. Also, we are able to see how James integrates the two insofar as he himself, though not a mystic, affirms the mystical persona through his own pragmatist temperament, which strives to abide by empirical standards but at the same time is not closed off to immaterial dimensions of experience. In all, this chapter provides a comprehensive view of James's convictions regarding the immaterial dimensions of human nature, and serves as the foundation for the pragmatist development of his thought on the question of evolution, which we shall examine in the following chapters.

#### JAMES'S OPPOSITION TO TRADITIONAL ACCOUNTS OF CONSCIOUSNESS, AND HIS OWN POSITIVE DOCTRINE

At the outset of *The Principles of Psychology*, James carefully distinguishes psychology from physiology. True, the two fields may be closely related; he even admits that he will accept as a postulate the general law that “*no mental modification ever occurs which is not accompanied or followed by a bodily change.*”<sup>1</sup> It is a given, then, that all events in the psychological order have correlates in the physiological order, and so the concerns of the two disciplines are intertwined. Nonetheless, psychology and physiology are clearly distinct: the former is, strictly speaking, the study of the phenomena and

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<sup>1</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt et al., *The Works of William James*, vols. 8-10 (1890; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1:18.

conditions of mind, while the latter concerns the structures and mechanisms of the body.

James denies that mental life and bodily life are essentially one and the same,<sup>2</sup> and he identifies consciousness as the key feature that distinguishes the two. While the natural sciences may dismiss the notion of teleology in the universe, James insists that purposive action, which presupposes consciousness or awareness, is the hallmark of mental life.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the primary concern of the *Principles* is the analysis of consciousness itself.

In chapter 5, “The Automaton-Theory,” James considers a reductive account of consciousness favored by many of his contemporaries. On this view, consciousness is explained in terms of the physiology of the nervous system. The theory develops from this basis either as a radical materialism that denies the reality of a nonphysical mental order, or as an epiphenomenalism that reduces mental states to the mechanical consequences or by-products of brain function.<sup>4</sup> Under the latter, which is also referred to as automatism, the motto is: “No psychosis without neurosis.”<sup>5</sup> The understanding is that the events of mental and physical life run exactly parallel; moreover, under this view it is possible, at least in theory, to comprehend the otherwise elusive mental phenomena, for they are interpreted as tracking with the laws and mechanisms that govern bodily matter. The advantages of automatism are primarily aesthetic,<sup>6</sup> for the model satisfies the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 1:19-21.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 1:21.

<sup>4</sup> See Daniel N. Robinson, *Toward a Science of Human Nature: Essays on the Psychologies of Mill, Hegel, Wundt, and James* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 179 ff.

<sup>5</sup> James, *Principles* 1:133. James cites Hodgson, Huxley, and Clifford as examples of contemporaries who espouse this view.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 1:134

desires for unity, simplicity, and continuity by adopting and adhering to a single category of explanation in accounting for diverse mental and physical phenomena. Another advantage is that the theory seemingly does not overreach, for it suggests no particular explanation of how mind operates; rather, it simply posits an “absolute chasm” between the heterogeneous mental and physical orders while sensibly leaving untackled many questions concerning the mental that go beyond the empirical scientific perspective.<sup>7</sup> It is no surprise that this explanation of consciousness is one natural scientists would be inclined to adopt, since it permits science not only to include mental phenomena within its domain but to do so with amazing ease and facility. Under this model, science comprehends consciousness without engaging in any new investigations beyond the physiological order.

These advantages notwithstanding, James takes issue with this automatist or epiphenomenalist view. At its core, it reduces consciousness to complex neural activities. It places the entire explanatory burden on physical bodies and their laws, while explaining nothing of mind per se.<sup>8</sup> Further, it asserts that consciousness or mind has no function or power with respect to the physical realm. As an example of a problematic consequence of this view, James offers the following:

If we knew thoroughly the nervous system of Shakespeare, and as thoroughly all his environing conditions, we should be able to show why at a certain period of his life his hand came to trace on certain sheets of paper those crabbed little black

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 1:138-9.

<sup>8</sup> Under this theory, thought may come to pass as a consequence of physical or mechanical laws, but even so, this dependence fails to explain the *nature* of thought. See Andrew Bailey, “The Strange Attraction of Sciousness: William James on Consciousness,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 34, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 420.

marks which for shortness' sake we call the manuscript of Hamlet.<sup>9</sup>

Under automatism, there is no appealing to the life of the mind in order to explain, for example, the creative works of literature or art. There is an “absolute separateness” of the mental and the physical, and works of art or literature are properly accounted for only in terms of a physical chain of causality.<sup>10</sup> This implication troubles James, not only because it defies the test of common sense, but also because he finds “utterly irrational” the notion that mind has nothing to do with the many physical activities and products that it nonetheless “so faithfully attends.”<sup>11</sup> Why should the automatist mental–physical parallelism exist, if there is not some real interaction between the two realms?

There is in fact no adequate justification for this theory's flat dismissal of the causal efficacy of mind. The relation between mental and physical is properly a matter of metaphysical inquiry; as such, this relation necessarily exceeds the scientific perspective. Therefore, in the absence of careful philosophical inquiry, one should remain open to the possibility that mind may have sway over body, since at the very least, commonsense intuitions support this point of view. The automatist, however, fails to remain honestly agnostic. James writes:

However inadequate our ideas of causal efficacy may be, we are less wide of the mark when we say that our ideas and feelings have [such efficacy], than the automatists are when they say they haven't it. As in the night all cats are gray, so in the darkness of metaphysical criticism all causes are obscure. But one has no right to pall over the psychic half of the subject only, as the automatists do, and to say that that causation is unintelligible, whilst in the same breath one dogmatizes

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<sup>9</sup> James, *Principles* 1:136.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 1:139.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 1:139–40.

about material causation as if Hume, Kant, and Lotze had never been born.<sup>12</sup>

This is to say that James finds a certain impertinence, dogmatism, and indeed hypocrisy in the automatist who subscribes to metaphysically unsettled views about physical causes, while denying the possibility that mind is causally efficacious. Far from being a metaphysically defensible account of consciousness, automatism is a “philosophic faith” that confers on believers “the comfort of all simple and absolute formulas.”<sup>13</sup>

Chapter 10 of the *Principles*, “The Consciousness of Self,” considers three different accounts of consciousness that James refers to as spiritualism, associationism, and transcendentalism. These theories seek to account for the sense of personal identity that is a fundamental feature of human consciousness. According to spiritualism, the personal identity of consciousness derives from an immaterial soul that is independent of, yet temporally joined to, the body. While remaining agnostically open to the possibility that such a soul does exist, James judges the theory a “complete superfluity” from the scientific perspective.<sup>14</sup> He exercises his pragmatic method in this analysis: since such a soul is not directly empirically verifiable by means of sense data, it is necessary to examine its supposed consequences or effects in order to evaluate it. In other words, in the absence of actually seeing the soul, we ask: what difference does it make if such a

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 1:140.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 1:138.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 1:329. All that is evident to James through direct experience are the physiological facts, the felt and observed bodily processes that are associated with consciousness. Within an empirical science such as psychology, it is not proper to appeal to anything nonphenomenal, any outside force or agency beyond our experience such as a substantial soul, in order to account for the phenomena of experience. See Milic Capek, “The Reappearance of Self in the Last Philosophy of William James,” *The Philosophical Review* 62, no. 4 (October 1953): 528.

soul exists? What explanatory power or advantages would it have? Do these justify our affirming its existence?

Presumably, this spiritualist theory of a personal soul may be offered to account for the felt unity, identity, and individuality of the self; however, James maintains that such a soul is not necessary to explain these phenomena of consciousness.<sup>15</sup> The soul theory may also be attractive to some because it undergirds certain religious convictions regarding personal immortality and, in turn, moral accountability; yet James maintains that immortality and accountability are not directly verifiable anyway, and thus are we are not justified in positing such a soul merely to provide them with a basis.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere in the *Principles*, he maintains “logical respectability” of the theory of the soul, stating that it “seems to me the line of least logical resistance, as far as we have yet attained.”<sup>17</sup> However, as always he is careful to draw a clear line between empirical observation and metaphysical inference. The bare phenomenal fact known is always simply the state of consciousness, not a soul which may or may not underlie such a state. In short, as James sees it, the sort of soul that spiritualism posits neither explains nor guarantees anything regarding the personal identity of human consciousness. The only things known of consciousness through experience are its successive states or thoughts and their correlation to brain-processes. This is as far as an empirical science like psychology can

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<sup>15</sup> *Principles* 1:326. While the existence of a substantial soul is not actually disproved, it is rejected here precisely because it is useless as an explanatory principle. Even if one asserts that a substantial soul is responsible for unifying one’s various thoughts and mental states, this assertion does not show *how* these are united. See Eugene Fontinell, *Self, God, and Immortality: A Jamesian Investigation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 89 ff.

<sup>16</sup> James, *Principles* 1:326-7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 1:182. See also *ibid.* 1:181: “The fact is that one cannot afford to despise any of these great

go. Upon this analysis, James dismisses spiritualism.

At the other end of the spectrum, James also takes issue with the associationist account. Contrary to spiritualism, which posits a soul to account for an underlying unity of being, associationism posits an abstract and absolute diversity: it maintains that the conscious self is nothing but a bundling or collection of sense perceptions.<sup>18</sup> This is an atomistic view that understands our complex mental states as no more than the compounding of the more elementary units of sensation, which are subject to and hang together through laws of association such as contiguity, resemblance, cause and effect, and so on.<sup>19</sup> The advantage of this theory is that it relies on nothing immaterial—on no outside force or agency like a soul—in order to account for mental life. The theory's failing, however, is simply that it does not explain the origin and nature of consciousness. No combining of elemental units will itself be sufficient to produce consciousness.

James offers an analogy:

Take a sentence of a dozen words, and take twelve men and tell to each one word. Then stand the men in a row or jam them in a bunch, and let each think his word as intently as he will; nowhere will there be a consciousness of the whole sentence.<sup>20</sup>

When elements combine, all that results is the combination, as far as the elements themselves are concerned. Under associationism, each elementary unit, *a* or *b*, grasps its own object individually, but none can grasp the combination as such, *a + b*.

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traditional objects of belief.”

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.* 1:332–4 ff. James cites Hume as the primary example of this way of conceiving mental life.

<sup>19</sup> Robinson provides a good description in *Toward a Science of Human Nature*, 183 ff.

<sup>20</sup> James, *Principles* 1:162.

Consciousness at a higher level never emerges, much less self-consciousness. Absent any overarching principle, lower-level psychic atoms do not spontaneously give rise to anything other than themselves; they do not constitute or ascend to a higher-level consciousness or awareness. The associationist theory might explain the nature of simpler mental states, but it fails to account for the awareness of complex mental states, and so it offers no meaningful account of consciousness.

Associationism is also discounted for its failure to jibe with important aspects of the immediate experience of self. James says that his goal in the *Principles* is not to explain or offer a positive analysis of the phenomena of consciousness; he presumes only to describe what is felt and how it is felt.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, any suitable theory will have to comport with such descriptions. Now, according to James, consciousness knows itself as a being with temporal connectedness—a sense of identity and continuity through time—and is also immediately aware of itself as interested in and pursuing its own ends and purposes.<sup>22</sup> Associationism deals with these features of self-consciousness by saying that any such connection among successive states of consciousness “is not a ‘real tie’ but ‘a mere product of the laws of thought.’”<sup>23</sup> Thus it places the burden of explanation ultimately on these laws. But to posit these laws is to assert more than what is given strictly through experience,<sup>24</sup> for indeed experience contradicts them. James, faithful to

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, *ibid.* 1:286.

<sup>22</sup> Even if these self-perceptions are illusory, they are still part of “the living reality” of consciousness which James’s psychology studies, and so they call for some explanation under a theory of consciousness.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 1:340.

<sup>24</sup> See Fontinell, *Self, God, and Immortality*, 90 ff.



experience, blanches at this as another “artificial schematism”—of which the associationist theory is as guilty as the spiritualist theory. He also finds it problematic that a consciousness operating according to such laws of thought is effectively reduced to inert mental stuff; this is not the living entity that fosters interests or makes decisions.<sup>25</sup> James thus dismisses associationism for failing to account for the felt continuity and purposiveness of consciousness.

James turns finally to the Kantian transcendentalist theory. As he describes it, under this account experiential objects are initially presented in a chaotic, sensible manifold and ultimately grasped only through the ordering faculties of the ego; therefore, the pure ego, the *I think*, is implicit in all experience. The pure ego is not to be understood as a soul but rather as a subject; it is not itself an object of knowledge but rather the necessary condition and correlate of all objects of knowledge. Moreover, it is not something directly known. As James frames the transcendentalist view of self-consciousness, “The only self we know anything positive *about* . . . is the empirical *me*, not the pure *I*; the self which is an object among other objects and the ‘constituents’ of which we ourselves have seen, and recognized to be phenomenal things appearing in the form of space as well as time.”<sup>26</sup> *That* this ego underlies our experience is all that is known; precisely *what* it is eludes us.

While transcendentalism might correct the failings of associationism by supplying some entity to account for the concatenated and continuous unity of personal

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<sup>25</sup> See John Danisi, “The Vanishing Consciousness,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (March 1989): 8-10.

<sup>26</sup> See James, *Principles* 1:343.

experience,<sup>27</sup> James criticizes the theory as pretentious and vague. It offers yet another “mythological” description, an unnecessarily complex and elaborate scheme to account for the much simpler and immediate facts of our thought.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, it fails to explain *how* thought comes to be.

The best grammatical subject for the verb *know* would, if possible, be one from whose other properties the knowing could be deduced. And if there be no such subject, the best one would be that with the fewest ambiguities and the least pretentious name. By Kant’s confession, the transcendental Ego has no properties, and from it nothing can be deduced.<sup>29</sup>

Much like the substantial soul, the transcendental ego has no real explanatory power.

James goes so far as to assert that “Transcendentalism is only Substantialism grown shame-faced, and the Ego only a ‘cheap and nasty’ edition of the soul.”<sup>30</sup> Since nothing can be said about the essential nature of the ego, there can be no meaningful understanding of its workings. It is “simply *nothing*: as ineffectual and windy an abortion as Philosophy can show.”<sup>31</sup> While the hypothesis of transcendentalism may remain open as matter for metaphysical speculation, it has no place in the empirical context of the *Principles*.<sup>32</sup>

Thus James disposes of the automatist, spiritualist, associationist, and transcendentalist theories of human consciousness. What, then, is his positive

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<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.* 1:348-9, as well as Fontinell, *Self, God, and Immortality*, 91.

<sup>28</sup> James, *Principles* 1:344.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 1:345.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> In characteristic fashion, James says as much at *ibid.* 1:350 n. 39.

understanding of its nature? In chapter 9 of the *Principles*, “The Stream of Thought,” he coins the phrase “stream of consciousness” and expands on the metaphor. The chapter offers an analytic “study of the mind from within,” a description of the features of consciousness as immediately felt or known by the individual.<sup>33</sup> The analysis begins with a primary or fundamental fact: simply, “*that thinking of some sort goes on.*”<sup>34</sup> Consciousness happens; it cannot be denied. James carefully chooses this minimalist statement of the case in order to avoid importing into his description any undue assumptions about a substrate that might or might not underlie thinking. Conscious thought is all that is experientially known.

James fleshes out this understanding of consciousness by detailing five characteristics of thought that are immediately known, namely, its nature as (1) personal, (2) ever-changing, (3) sensibly continuous, (4) appearing to deal with objects independent of itself, and (5) interested in or selective of particular features of the things it regards. In any given setting, say, a lecture hall, there may exist a multitude of thoughts, each owned by or a part of someone’s personal consciousness; there is no such thing as a free-floating thought. Also, conscious thought is in constant change. This is not to say thoughts have no temporal duration, but rather that “*no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before.*”<sup>35</sup> Since some brain activity, and hence physical modification, attends any thought *t*, it is impossible for *t* to occur a second time in an unmodified brain. As a consequence, every thought is genuinely unique; whenever

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 1:219.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

a thought “recurs,” it necessarily comes in “a fresh manner.”<sup>36</sup> Even so, thoughts succeed one another “without breach, crack, or division”—thought proceeds continuously, and there are no thought-less gaps in the flow of consciousness.<sup>37</sup> Even in cases of abrupt qualitative contrast between successive states, the two are not truly disjointed but very much bound together. The preceding state in fact bleeds into the succeeding one. Consider the breaking of silence by a clap of thunder:

Into the awareness of the thunder itself the awareness of the previous silence creeps and continues; for what we hear when the thunder crashes is not thunder *pure*, but thunder-breaking-upon-silence-and-contrasting-with-it.<sup>38</sup>

Conscious thought also appears to deal with—to grasp, to know—objects that are independent of itself. While philosophy may debate the veracity of this appearance, James simply notes that, from the psychological point of view, this impression naturally arises in human consciousness. Over time, the individual accumulates sufficient experience, leading him to judge that there is an external reality presented in and through conscious thought.

The first spaces, times, things, qualities, experienced by the child probably appear . . . in this absolute way, as simple beings, neither in nor out of thought. But later, by having other thoughts than this present one, and making repeated judgments of sameness among their objects, he corroborates in himself the notion of realities, past and distant as well as present, realities no one single thought either possesses or engenders, but which all may contemplate and know.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 1:224.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 1:227.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 1:231.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 1:234.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 1:263.

Finally, conscious thought is apparently selective. It accentuates or focuses on particular features of the objects available to it and, at the same time, it ignores or suppresses the vastly larger body of available content. In a sense, then, one's whole world of experience is the direct product of what one's consciousness selects or attends to and does not ignore.<sup>40</sup>

Is conscious thought all there is? Does it stand alone, so to speak, or does it belong to a thinker? How else might we account for the felt continuity of one's present thought with one's past thoughts or, for that matter, one's anticipated future thoughts? James goes on to investigate more deeply the sense of personal identity associated with conscious thought in chapter 10 of the *Principles*. He begins by describing what he calls the "empirical self," which in the widest sense includes all that can possibly be called "me" or "mine"—one's body, material possessions, spiritual, emotional, or psychic powers, family, friends, reputation, works, and so on. The empirical self is "a fluctuating material," whose extent depends on how broadly the lines of self-possession are construed.<sup>41</sup> Through reflection on this self, a theoretic distinction between subject and object arises, as one gazes introspectively upon what might be called the "central nucleus of the self," "a home of interest," "a sort of junction at which sensory ideas terminate and from which motor ideas proceed."<sup>42</sup> The latter is "the source of effort and attention" that takes an interest in all those objects that constitute the empirical self.

But what is the nature of this central nucleus of self? James maintains that the

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<sup>40</sup> See *ibid.* 1:273-5.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 1:279.

most we can do is describe pragmatically what it is known-as, how it is felt in our experience; instead of positing metaphysical principles to account for it, he focuses on “just how this central nucleus of the self may feel, no matter whether it be a spiritual substance or only a delusive word.”<sup>43</sup> As he summarizes it, this “palpatating inward life” is experienced as “a constant play of furtherances and hindrances,” of movements toward and away from various objects of interest.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, as literally *felt*, the activity of the innermost self involves a variety of bodily movements, located principally in the head and neck. For example:

When I try to remember or reflect, the movements in question . . . seem to come from the periphery inwards and feel like a sort of withdrawal from the outer world. As far as I can detect, these feelings are due to an actual rolling outwards and upwards of the eyeballs.<sup>45</sup>

All this detail notwithstanding, James is careful not to reduce conscious thought to physiological process. His general strategy here is simply to describe the central nucleus of self as felt or given in experience. While these bodily movements are positively identifiable in and through experience, he readily concedes that such elements may well not be the whole story. Indeed, he notes that experience reveals there is still a feeling of “something more” in addition to them. In characteristic fashion, he simply affirms this feeling given in experience and agnostically leaves the door open for further inquiry and metaphysical speculation.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 1:285.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 1:286.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 1:287.

[O]ver and above these [bodily movements] there is an obscurer feeling of something more; but whether it be of fainter physiological processes, or of nothing objective at all, but rather subjectivity as such, of thought become “its own object,” must at present remain an open question.<sup>46</sup>

At the very least, James concludes that the body and its activities are perceived as major players contributing to the sense of one’s personal identity; but, he notes, we may not positively assert that they are the only sources of that identity.

Common sense would have it that the felt unity and identity of one’s conscious life derive from some actual unity and identity. Does this mean the stream of thought, insofar as it is felt as personal consciousness, needs a unifying “proprietor,” a substantial, independent, preexistent entity that draws the thought stream together? James predictably contends that we need not (and ought not) depart from the empirically verifiable facts of experience and posit a transcendent entity like soul or ego to account for the unity of personal consciousness. Rather, the following explanation, which can be built into the immediate experience of thought itself, is sufficient.

Instead of appealing to metaphysical principles, James asserts that the present passing thought may collect and appropriate all past thoughts in the stream of consciousness. In this capacity it is referred to as the “judging thought,” but James also refers to it simply as “Thought” itself. Rather than flowing one after the next in simple linear fashion, successive thoughts may be conceived as superceding one another in a sort of nested progression. “Each thought is thus born an owner, and dies owned, transmitting what it realized as its Self to its own later proprietor.”<sup>47</sup> James suggests the image of a

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 1:292.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 1:322.

succession of herdsmen who come into the possession of the same cattle through the transmission of an ownership title by bequest.<sup>48</sup> This judging thought serves to explain the unity and identity of the stream of personal consciousness without the introduction of any speculation about transcendent, nonexperiential entities. Thought and thinker are simply identified: “The passing Thought then seems to be the Thinker; and though there *may* be another non-phenomenal Thinker behind that, so far we do not seem to need him to express the facts.”<sup>49</sup> Apparently a fan of Ockham’s razor, James favors the simplest explanation possible.

In sum, at the end of chapter 10 of the *Principles*, James’s reflection on the consciousness of self leads to a distinction between the empirical *me* and the subjective *I*. The latter is the passing thought, continuously perishing and reborn, which somehow contains all of its predecessors, knows what they knew, and, from among all the contents of those thoughts, is able to “emphasize and care paramountly for certain ones . . . as

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 1:324. This account draws on nothing but the fact of streaming conscious thought itself. For this reason, James even goes so far as to coin the term “sciousness”—for there is nothing extra, nothing “con-” or “with,” no concrete, substantial, independent entity underlying or alongside the content-laden thought itself. But this account is highly criticized in the literature. Milic Capek argues that James faces a somewhat intractable problem. In avoiding an unverifiable and empty metaphysical principle such as soul or ego, James necessarily tends toward the atomism of the associationists, while in arguing for the unifying judging thought he moves in the direction of a soul or ego. One cannot argue against one side without adopting problematic features of the other. See Capek, “The Reappearance of Self in the Last Philosophy of William James,” 535 ff. Robinson also points out that the judging thought “becomes more substance-like the more work James calls on it to do” (Robinson, *Toward a Science of Human Nature*, 195). Indeed, while this doctrine of the judging thought does not rely on anything nonphenomenal to account for the unity and identity of personal consciousness, it does seemingly reach beyond what is empirically given in its description of the intricate appropriative role of the judging thought. Gale offers a detailed critique of James’s account which focuses on this very “bundling” or appropriative function of the passing thought. As an appropriator, the present thought seemingly *makes* the unity of thought; but, aware that this characterization smacks of the functionality of a substantial soul, James will still insist that the unity of thought is something immediately known or given—something *discovered*, not made. Thus there is some contradiction in James’s account of the unity of thought as something both made and discovered. See Richard M. Gale, *The Philosophy of William James*, 163-7 ff.



‘*me*.’”<sup>50</sup> The nucleus of the empirical *me* is one’s presently felt bodily existence, and to this central core the subjective *I* attaches all those other things that may fluctuate but are still “reckoned to be themselves *constituents* of the *me* in a larger sense,—such are the clothes, the material possessions, the friends, the honors and esteem which the person receives or may receive.”<sup>51</sup> The *me* is thus an aggregate of sorts, whereas the *I* is no such thing. The *I* is known concretely as the temporal, passing thought, “at each moment different from that of the last moment.”<sup>52</sup> It is not explained as an unchanging or transcendent metaphysical entity, but simply as a concrete and experiential, though temporary and passing, one.

Although this language of the *I* and *me* may appear to delineate the traditional ontological dualism of mind versus matter or thought versus thing, this is a misreading of James. In his later essay “The Notion of Consciousness,” he clarifies his position by addressing the issue head-on. The central question is: “Can we say . . . that the mental and the physical are absolutely heterogeneous?”<sup>53</sup> Are we justified in concluding that there are two separate realms of being and, correspondingly, two separate principles of the self, namely, conscious thought and bodily matter? The answer, quite simply, is “no.” Adopting the Berkeleian motto *esse est percipi*, James contends that at the

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<sup>50</sup> James, *Principles* 1:378.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 1:379.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> “Peut-on dire ici que le psychique et le physique sont absolument hétérogènes?” William James, “La Notion de Conscience,” in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt et al., *The Works of William James*, vol. 3 (1912; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 107. Originally presented at the Fifth International Congress of Psychology, in Rome, 30 April 1905, and published in *Archives de psychologie* 5, no. 17 (June 1905).

moment of sensation, any so-called subject and object are really one and the same.

Sensations are not inner replicas of original things but rather the originals themselves as they are present to us—the reality sensed and the sensation thereof are fully “merged” in experience.<sup>54</sup> The subject–object distinction is artificially drawn,<sup>55</sup> and James explains that this is owing to a false conception of reality on the analogy of paint: as paint is composed of pigment mixed into colorless solvent, so objective content is thought to fill up an otherwise empty subjective consciousness. In fact, however, nothing given in immediate experience justifies this way of thinking of consciousness, which is hastily “built up into an ontological fact.”<sup>56</sup> The idea of consciousness as an independent, spiritual entity is superadded to experience, not properly inferred therefrom.

The later James is straightforward in his position on the ontological status of consciousness.

I believe that consciousness, as we commonly conceive it, . . . as being fluid, inextensive, diaphanous, and void of any content of its own, yet knowing itself directly—in a word, spiritual—I believe, I repeat, that this consciousness is a pure chimera.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. While we certainly distinguish ideas and memories of things from the things themselves, James maintains that an “idea” and a “real” image are still, at rock bottom, composed of “the same stuff, which is the stuff of experience in general.” Moreover, he asks whether, if there were a real dichotomy between the external matter of our experience and our internal ideas thereof, these two could come together in our thoughtful experience. “Cela pourrait-il advenir si l’objet et l’idée étaient absolument dissemblables de nature?” See *ibid.*, 109-10.

<sup>55</sup> Pragmatically speaking, the distinction is simply contextual; it is not ontologically real. Whenever they are used, the terms “subject” and “object” (or “consciousness” and “content”) both name one and the same experience, just from different perspectives. See *ibid.*, 117.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 114: “on l’érige en fait ontologique.”

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-13: “Je crois que le conscience, . . . comme fluide, inétendue, diaphane, vide de tout contenu propre, mais se connaissant directement elle-même, spirituelle enfin, je crois, dis-je, que cette conscience est une pure chimère.”

Similarly, in the essay “Does Consciousness Exist?” he unambiguously declares that consciousness “is the name of a nonentity, and has no right to a place among first principles.”<sup>58</sup> Although these assertions might seem anomalous in light of the extensive discussion of consciousness in the *Principles* (why spend so many pages discussing a nonentity?), they draw out useful amplifications of James’s earlier thought. In the *Principles*, on the basis of the experience itself, the only aspects of consciousness that James can describe are the bodily movements and physiological changes felt during thought. As we have seen, from the perspective of the *Principles*, James dismisses transcendent, nonphenomenal principles of mental life, such as substantial soul and transcendental ego. The later James continues to argue for this dismissal and clarifies his view by developing a functional description of consciousness.

This functional account begins with the assertion that the fundamental stuff of reality is experience itself.

[T]here is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff out of which everything else is composed, and . . . we call that stuff ‘pure experience.’<sup>59</sup>

There is no thought-stuff different from thing-stuff . . . ; but the same identical piece of ‘pure experience’ (which I said was the name I gave to the *materia prima* of everything).<sup>60</sup>

Given this starting point, the term “consciousness” simply draws on “the susceptibility

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<sup>58</sup> William James, “Does Consciousness Exist?” in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 3. Originally published in *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* 1, no. 18 (September 1904): 477-91.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> William James, “A Place of Affectional Facts in a World of Pure Experience,” in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 69.

possessed by parts of experience of being reported or known.”<sup>61</sup> Consciousness is not an entity but rather a mode of pure experience. Some experiences play the role of things known, in which case they are referred to as *content*, others that of knowers, in which case they are called *consciousness*. For example, James remarks that experiencing a lecture hall can be taken either as an external, material, physical fact or as an individual’s personal mental image—a fact of inward consciousness. Consciousness and content, thought and thing, subject and object—these are all just perspectival or functional terms, practical ways of “taking” or distinguishing among experiences. None is ontologically significant, as there is but one stuff of reality, namely experience itself.<sup>62</sup>

Under this functional analysis, consciousness is understood as a certain type of experience involving the activities of grasping, knowing, perceiving, or taking objects in some fashion.

There is . . . no aboriginal stuff or quality of being, contrasted with that of which material objects are made, out of which our thoughts of them are made; but there is a function in the experience which thoughts perform, and for the performance of which this quality is being invoked.<sup>63</sup>

It is precisely these activities or functions that distinguish certain parts of experience as conscious. Here the later James is further articulating the earlier account of consciousness in chapter 9 of the *Principles*, insofar as this functional account expands on the selective, object-taking character of the stream of thought discussed there. I now turn to this particular aspect of consciousness in order to draw out its significance in

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<sup>61</sup> James, “La Notion de Conscience,” 117: “la susceptibilité que possèdent les parties de l’expérience d’être rapportées ou connues.”

<sup>62</sup> See *ibid.*, 115-17.

<sup>63</sup> James, “Does Consciousness Exist?” 4.

relation to James's thinking on human freedom.

#### SELECTIVE ATTENTION AND FREEDOM

In this section we shall turn to the first pillar supporting James's nonreductive anthropology, namely, human freedom. In his discussion of the selective attention of consciousness he both points to the distinctiveness of consciousness and introduces the larger issue of freedom. An overview of the chapters on "Attention," "Reasoning," and "Will" in the *Principles* will make this clear. As James here describes these aspects and activities of consciousness, his interest is piqued by a fundamental question: Is our attentive activity necessitated or determined, or is it free, spontaneous, and undetermined? Throughout the *Principles* he officially sets aside this question, maintaining that it cannot be settled on strictly empirical or scientific grounds. Nevertheless, he still has much to say about the matter, though he couples his views on human freedom with the caveat that they are not scientific but philosophical, and are justified on other—ethical and pragmatic—grounds. He is also concerned to call attention to certain overreaching, nonscientific positions put forth under false scientific authority. Science ought to do better and recognize, as James himself does, those areas of speculation that are outside of its bounds. Thus attuned to the proper limits of scientific discourse, his positive contributions here culminate in the discussion of the physical ontology of the brain and nervous system, which does not necessitate but at least lends itself to a nonmechanistic interpretation of human consciousness.

This early treatment in the *Principles* points to James's later thought, where, freed from the restrictions and requirements of natural science, he offers more sustained and

unapologetic philosophical argument that draws on a pragmatic analysis of the psychological effects of affirming or denying human freedom. Consistently throughout his career, James promotes and develops a view of human consciousness as operating freely and spontaneously, with real, independent causal efficacy. In his later thought, James offers further support for this view by developing a broader understanding of an open universe that is a pluralistic, undetermined concatenation of independent forces, of which consciousness is one.

#### SELECTIVE ATTENTION SCIENTIFICALLY CONSIDERED

In chapter 11 of the *Principles*, James defines attention as “the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought.”<sup>64</sup> He contrasts this with distraction or “daydreaming,” the passive state out of which one breaks by the pulse of some mental and/or physical energy. Ostensibly built into this definition is the intuition that attention entails some degree of reactive spontaneity, whereby consciousness narrows down the options and renders *actual* one of its many possible objects.<sup>65</sup> James also distinguishes between attention that is passive or nonvoluntary and attention that is active or voluntary.

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<sup>64</sup> James, *Principles* 1:381.

<sup>65</sup> John Danisi reads this element of spontaneity as essential to James’s view of consciousness: “the spontaneity is . . . that of the conceiver functioning to register certain ideals which he helps to create. The point is that at the core of consciousness lies a vital activity of a preservative sort” (9). Selective consciousness is manifest as a living, striving, and self-determining entity inasmuch as it directs its course of thought by “bracketing” its focus on the very objects of its interest: “Consciousness as the performer of the act of bracketing is thus intelligible only on the basis of the fact that consciousness is a creature with partial purposes and private interests” (15). This is in contrast with the associationist and spiritualist models of consciousness, which respectively describe consciousness as inert mental stuff and some mere knowing or cognitive entity. See Danisi, “The Vanishing Consciousness,” 9-15.

The mark of the latter is some feeling of effort, of reaching out and extending one's gaze, literally or figuratively. Though universal, this sense of effort is somehow ineffable, "a feeling which everyone knows, but which most people would call quite indescribable."<sup>66</sup> Activities associated with this feeling of effort include such things as squinting to make out a figure in the distance or perhaps struggling to recall someone's name.

Insofar as voluntary attention seemingly involves effort, it does not jibe with an interpretation of consciousness as purely receptive and passively determined by the stimuli of experience. Rather, James maintains that, through its effort, attentive consciousness actively constructs the experiential environment—it makes experience, not vice versa. Indeed, to a large extent, experience presupposes attention: "*My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos.*"<sup>67</sup> Through our effort of attention, specific content is brought into focus, and we thereby form out of chaos some sort of meaningful and ordered environment by means of the specific attentive acts of perceiving, conceiving, distinguishing, remembering, and so on.

True to his mission as a natural scientist, James notes that any attentive act is accompanied by observable physiological movements and changes, often of various nerves and muscles in the head and neck. In characteristic fashion, however, he eschews a reductive materialist account of attention, saying "it is one thing to point out the presence of muscular contractions as constant concomitants of our thoughts, and another

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<sup>66</sup> James, *Principles* 1:397.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 1:380.

thing to say . . . that thought is made possible by muscular contraction alone.”<sup>68</sup> This reflection leads to an important question: Is voluntary attention simply an effect or resultant of various other forces, or is it a force itself with its own causal efficacy? This consideration, according to James, is one version of “the pivotal question of metaphysics”—it is one way of framing the debate between materialism, fatalism, and monism, on the one hand, and spiritualism, voluntarism, and pluralism, on the other.<sup>69</sup> In asking the question and in offering any response, we necessarily depart from science and enter into the realm of speculative philosophy, for there is no empirical way to settle the matter. Yet James is unsatisfied with this simple displacement of the issue, and he devotes some time to further consideration of the question.

Several things appear to support the conception of attention as a resultant or effect. First, this seems often to be an accurate characterization of our immediate sensory attention.<sup>70</sup> Drivers’ heads turn immediately at the glimpse of a gruesome crash; players’ ears are alert to the sound of a coach’s whistle. In cases like these, it seems quite plausible to take attention as the simple product or effect of certain environmental stimuli. Second, attention has no control over what is attended to. It simply receives these objects of attention, which determine its activity: “The things we attend to come to us by their own laws. . . . Attention only fixes and retains what the ordinary laws of association bring ‘before the footlights’ of consciousness.”<sup>71</sup> Finally, attentive effort may

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 1:421.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 1:424.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 1:425.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 1:426.



be thought of as analogous to pain. In the normal, baseline state of consciousness—effortless attention—the stream of thought naturally flows freely, without any interruption or struggle. A sense of effort arises only when some obstruction appears. The tension of effort then experienced may be likened to the pain in one’s finger after a hammer strikes it. In other words, it may be conceived as simply reactive, not proactive or causally efficacious.<sup>72</sup>

These points notwithstanding, however, James argues pragmatically against this “effect theory” which would deny that voluntary attention is itself a real, originaive force. He is quick to point out the ironically nonscientific mode of those who argue for it, who happen usually to be members of the scientific community.

[Their argument] is an argument from analogy, drawn from rivers, reflex actions and other material phenomena where no consciousness appears to exist at all, and extended to cases where consciousness seems the phenomenon’s essential feature. . . . It is making the mechanical theory true *per fas aut nefas*. For the sake of that theory we make inductions from phenomena to others that are startlingly *unlike* them; and we assume that a complication which Nature has introduced (the presence of feeling and of effort, namely) is not worthy of scientific recognition at all. Such conduct may be conceivably wise, though I doubt it; but scientific, as contrasted with metaphysical, it cannot seriously be called.<sup>73</sup>

While a scientist may argue nonscientifically, it is illegitimate for him to claim, qua scientist, special authority or privilege for such arguments. And, since the opposite view—that voluntary attention is a force—is just as clearly conceivable, though equally unverifiable by empirical science, we should remain open to the possibility of its truth.

James considers the question pragmatically by asking: What would it mean if

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 1:428.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 1:429-30.

attentive effort were causally efficacious? What role would it play? What difference would it make in our lives? His answer is, very briefly, that it would mean that we have the power to focus on certain thoughts and ideas that would otherwise pass away, and that in varied ways influence and determine how we act in our daily lives. Attention then would be a fundamental source of “the whole drama of voluntary life.”<sup>74</sup> Rather than unfolding deterministically, according to a mechanized plan or pattern, the universe and our lives would be taking shape dynamically, via the decisions and choices we make. This is, after all, how reality does appear to us.

But the whole feeling of reality, the whole sting and excitement of our voluntary life, depends on our sense that in it things are *really being decided* from one moment to another, and that it is not the dull rattling of a chain that was forged innumerable ages ago. This appearance, which makes life and history tingle with such a tragic zest, *may* not be an illusion.<sup>75</sup>

At the very least, the question ought to remain open; science ought not to pretend to have settled it. At this point in the *Principles*, however, James draws back, admitting that the question is “hardly suited for introduction into a psychological work. The last word of psychology here is ignorance, for the ‘forces’ engaged are certainly too delicate and numerous to be followed in detail.”<sup>76</sup> Fuller discussion of these issues is properly deferred to a different context, and these comments foreshadow James’s later treatment of the question, to be taken up shortly.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 1:429. Robinson reiterates this central role of attention as he calls it the “star performer” in our voluntary life; the capacity to hold an object before the mind, without influence from the forces of stimulation and association, is the “original psychic force.” See Robinson, *Toward a Science of Human Nature*, 206.

<sup>75</sup> James, *Principles* 1:429.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

In chapter 22 of the *Principles*, James details the distinctively human function of attention—the activity of reasoning. Although the “thought-sequences” of many other species may often produce results similar to those of humans, there are important differences. To begin, James distinguishes concepts from what he calls “recepts.” The latter are mental images of general objects suggested by particular experiential stimuli. They are the spontaneous products of what James refers to as association by contiguity. Formed through repetition and habituation, they predictably prompt certain expectations and attendant activities. For example, in a dog’s experience, hollows in the ground may come to be associated with drinking water, and a thirsty dog may be observed searching for water in such places. Similarly, a duck learns by this sort of association to recognize the difference between land and water and, as a consequence, will alight differently on each surface.<sup>77</sup> Such “trains of ideas” are functional, but they are also limited, for they never break out of the learned pattern of association.

By contrast, reasoning moves beyond familiar patterns and performs in novel situations: “Reasoning helps us out of unprecedented situations—situations for which all our common associative wisdom, all the ‘education’ which we share with the beasts leaves us without resource.”<sup>78</sup> Its two key components are abstraction and substitution. Concepts, the proper currency of reasoning, are formed through the process of attentive abstraction. Unlike a recept, a concept is not the simple product of repetitive association by contiguity; rather, it is formed by focusing on and extracting certain attributes of an

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 2:955.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 2:957.

object and neglecting the rest. Having thus formed a concept, reasoning proceeds when we substitute the concept, or extracted character of the object, for the experiential whole. On the basis of this substitution, we are able to draw conclusions otherwise obscured by the whole, empirical, preconceptualized object.<sup>79</sup> Man's superior ability to associate by similarity and analogy, not just contiguity, shines forth in his reasoning. He is able not just to see *a* and *b* and remember that *b* follows *a*, but also to *see into* things perspicaciously, picking out essential characteristics and performing powerful substitutions on the basis of this insight.<sup>80</sup>

Toward the end of this chapter James draws some interesting physiological conclusions. While he admits the seemingly obvious correlation of physico-chemical brain processes and mental facts of reasoning, he does not draw from these what might seem a ready inference. Though reasoning and other higher-level conscious activities might be traceable to the brain and nervous system, this does not mean that they can be fully illuminated through physiological analysis. He writes,

In terms of brain-process, then, all these mental facts resolve themselves into a

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 2:955-6. This power is, of course, the key to the development of scientific thought (ibid. 2:970-3). It is also at the root of man's other differences, such as the capacity for language and a sense of humor (ibid. 2:979). Patrick Dooley reflects on this distinctive human capacity, whereby we are able to "notice reality's richness and deal with it in an abundance of ways" (75). In addition to (and indeed owing to) the enhanced ability to focus on and see very narrowly yet perspicaciously into the intricacies of the world, man's consciousness uniquely transcends the utilitarian interests and purposes of other living creatures. Thus is born man's intellectual, moral, and aesthetic life. See Patrick K. Dooley, "William James on the Human Ways of Being," *Personalist Forum* 6 (1990): 75-81.

<sup>80</sup> Association by contiguity is "guided by a sum of impressions, not one of which is emphatic or distinguished from the rest, not one of which is conceived, but all of which together drive [the associator] to a conclusion to which nothing but that sum-total leads" (James, *Principles* 2:976 n. 16). Thus, brutes "are enslaved to routine, to cut-and-dried thinking. . . . Thoughts will not be found to call up their similars, but only their habitual successors. Sunsets will not suggest heroes' deaths, but supper-time. This is why man is the only metaphysical animal. To wonder why the universe should be as it is presupposes the notion of its being different, and a brute, which never reduces the actual to fluidity by breaking up its literal sequences in his imagination, can never form such a notion" (ibid. 2:977).

single peculiarity: that of indeterminateness of connection between the different tracts [of neural activity], and tendency of action to focalize itself, so to speak, in small localities which vary infinitely at different times and from which irradiation may proceed in countless shifting ways.<sup>81</sup>

Anyone seeking to map the connections between brain-processes and the mental activities of higher-level consciousness are confounded, then, by the “indeterminate” and non-isomorphic nature of such connections which, in everyday experience, is evident in the many and varied ways men respond to their common environment.

Indeterminacy—the indeterminacy of our matter—is the key to our higher-level activities of consciousness. If we consider ourselves in contrast to other species, we see that the sophistication of consciousness’s functions and the determinacy of neurological matter are inversely proportionate. A bear’s instincts may appear to flow from rigid, deeply ingrained patterns of his brain and nervous system; and to that extent physiology determines the bear’s behavior and precludes varied, much less more sophisticated, responses to his environment. Man, however, is evidently quite different. James writes: “[I]n man the negation of all fixed modes is the essential characteristic. . . . Only at the price of inheriting no settled instinctive tendencies is he able to settle every novel case by the fresh discovery by his reason of novel principles.”<sup>82</sup> In man, the indeterminacy of matter—that is, the lack of many neurologically determined instincts present in other animals—is a necessary condition of higher-level activities of consciousness.

This point is worth underlining, for here we find further support in James for a nonmechanistic interpretation of human consciousness. Even though this analysis of

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 2:989.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 2:990.

conscious activities points to physiological causes, the latter still escape the grasp of materio-mechanical explanation.<sup>83</sup> This early characterization of man's attentive, reasoning consciousness lays a foundation for the later development of James's thought. The indeterminacy of man's matter is in some sense a precondition of his freedom.

James returns to the question of the causal efficacy of attentive effort in chapter 26 of the *Principles*, on "Will," where much of the discussion repeats the treatment in chapter 11. Humans, he notes, tend to arrive at an "unshakable belief" in will as a free, originative force, an immaterial process of thought coexisting alongside yet independent of physical, bodily processes. Will appears as self-directed thought, thought that is not fixed or determined by environmental stimuli. Moreover, owing to this apparent force of will, we appear to select and execute our actions, which are therefore not predestined.<sup>84</sup> Despite this appearance of efficacious free will, one can certainly argue that the facts are otherwise. However, any such argument cannot claim support from empirical observation and analysis.

To tell that, we should have to ascend to the antecedents of the effort, and defining them with mathematical exactitude, prove, by laws for which we have not at the present even an inkling, that the only amount of sequent effort which could possibly comport with them was the precise amount which actually came. . . . We are thrown back therefore upon the crude evidences of introspection on the one hand, with all its liabilities to deception, and, on the other hand, upon a

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<sup>83</sup> Andrew Bailey suggests that James's claims are better understood if the less stable and more unforeseeable nervous system of humans is modeled as a "chaotic system." Conceived thus, consciousness need not be an external agent that acts on the brain; rather, it may be thought of as native "attractor," an internal principle of organization that stabilizes the brain. Within a chaotic system, an attractor is a "set of points to which the initial system is initially 'attracted' within the space of possible outputs." So consciousness guides and limits brain activities on the basis of initial conditions, but it does not strictly determine those activities. Bailey's suggestion thus expands on the indeterminacy of matter indicated by James, extending it to the activities of consciousness itself. Indeterminacy prevails on both fronts. See Bailey, "The Strange Attraction of Sciousness," 421-3.

<sup>84</sup> See James, *Principles* 2:1174-5.

*priori* postulates and probabilities.<sup>85</sup>

Either way, the question will be decided on other, nonscientific grounds, and James concedes that this is about as much as can be said in a scientific work such as the *Principles*. But he adds, candidly, that on pragmatist grounds he prefers to opt for the view that will is truly free. His rationale is more completely fleshed out in later essays, to which we shall turn in a moment, but briefly summarized here as follows. Belief in efficacious free will is the root of meaning for so much in our lives: if we consider it an illusion, then all our struggles, virtues, and heroes, our morality and our religion, also are illusions. But these such things are essential to our active lives; without them a sense of hollowness and apathy sets in. Certainly, this fact alone is not what makes free will true. It does, however, suggest that the search to ground a belief in free will is something worthwhile, for such belief has vitally important consequences as the fundamental impetus for our active living.<sup>86</sup>

In further pragmatic support of free will, James also expounds on what he calls “the logic of the question.” Very briefly, the sides of the debate boil down to two incompatible prescientific postulates: (a) the monistic view that the universe is “one unbroken fact” in which all events are interrelated and unfold according to determinate, mechanistic laws; and (b) the pluralistic view that the universe is an “open system” of many independent forces, in which alternate future possibilities are real and events are

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 2:1176.

<sup>86</sup> See *ibid.* 2:1180-2.

not mechanistically fated to occur.<sup>87</sup> Under (a), the activity of will is conceived as no more than an effect or resultant of prior conditions; while under (b), will may be a real force impacting the course of events. Even though these postulates are themselves incompatible, both are equally compatible with the world of our experience: the universe *appears* the same, no matter which is true. Absent any objective evidence or coercive proof for one postulate or the other, if one is to stake a claim either way, “the only course is voluntary choice,” says James—and the first act of a thusly undetermined will should be to affirm its freedom.<sup>88</sup>

#### FREEDOM PRAGMATICALLY DEFENDED

James returns to this clever nonargument for freedom in his 1897 essay, “The Dilemma of Determinism,” where he maintains that this sort of pragmatic analysis is logically the best that an affirmer of free will like himself can offer. For there would be something contradictory in a proof that *forces* belief in free will, as he writes at the outset of the essay:

I thus disclaim openly on the threshold all pretension to prove to you that the freedom of the will is true. The most I hope is to induce some of you to follow my own example in assuming it true, and acting as if it were true. . . . [A doctrine of free will] ought to be freely espoused by men who can equally well turn their backs upon it. . . . This should exclude, it seems to me, from the free-will side of the question all hope of coercive demonstration.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 2:1176-7.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 2:1177.

<sup>89</sup> William James, “The Dilemma of Determinism,” in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt et al., *The Works of William James*, vol. 6 (1897; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 115.



The analysis proceeds by identifying the crux of the question: the status of possibilities in the universe. The psychological perspective is here displaced, as the central issue does not concern whether or how one might perceive one's choices and actions to be undetermined and hence free. The question instead is metaphysical. According to determinism, the will is not free inasmuch as possibilities are not real. "The future has no ambiguous possibilities hidden in its womb"; rather, the course of events is narrowly tracked and bounded by necessity, and any perception that the will is a free, originitive force is an illusion. According to indeterminism, however, possibilities are real; the world is not "one unbending unit of fact" but rather a dynamic state of affairs that really may unfold in a variety of ways that exclude one another, and will may be one of the independent forces impacting its unfolding.<sup>90</sup>

Having framed the question as properly metaphysical, James notes a simple fact: humans form judgments of regret regarding certain events in the world, such as the murder of an innocent child. A regrettable event is deemed "a bad moral fit" within the world—the world would have been better without it, with something else in its place.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 117-19. Donald Wayne Viney notes that while Charles Renouvier is an often cited source for James on this point, a largely unnoted and deeper source (both direct and indirect) is Jules Lequyer. According to Viney, Renouvier credits Lequyer for, among other things, framing an argument for freedom around the notion of real possibilities or ambiguous futures, which is the key to developing a fuller conception of freedom as something more than the mere absence of constraint. Lequyer maintains that deliberation itself reveals the truer sense of freedom insofar as deliberative moments give a person the "presentiment" that one's will is open to a variety of exclusive courses of action, albeit a presentiment that is illusory if determinism is true. Admitting that neither freedom nor determinism is properly demonstrable, Lequyer again anticipates James by asserting that belief in freedom will stem from a pragmatic examination of the consequences of the alternative positions. While James himself acknowledges Renouvier as an important source, he does not mention Lequyer by name. See Donald Wayne Viney, "William James on Free Will: The French Connection," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (January 1997): 37 ff.

<sup>91</sup> James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," 125.

Now, what is determinism to make of these sorts of events and the ensuing judgments of regret? A committed determinist might be expected to extend this regret into a generalized form of pessimism, saying that the murder, for example, is further evidence that the world is unavoidably cruel, “an organism whose constitution is afflicted with an incurable taint, an irremediable flaw.”<sup>92</sup> Alternatively, a determinist might optimistically put the murder into perspective, so to speak, maintaining that such evil acts are necessary conditions for greater goods.

The second determinist—the supposedly optimistic one—faces a logical predicament, however, and this shows that determinism cannot escape pessimism so easily. For if one takes the optimistic perspective, one still cannot deny that some people make judgments of regret regarding murders and the like. This determinist will say such judgments of regret ought properly to be replaced by other, longer-sighted judgments of approval, inasmuch as the evil acts are the conditions for the achievement of greater goods. But, as a matter of consistency, he must concede that the regrets are necessitated, and nothing else could ever take their place. James concludes: “the universe is just what it was before,—namely, a place in which what ought to be appears impossible. We have got one foot out of the pessimistic bog, but the other one sinks in all the deeper.”<sup>93</sup> Simply put: if evil acts are ultimately good; then regretting them is bad; if regretting is good, then evil acts are bad. Either way, the world confronting this determinist is fraught with moral sin, intellectual error, or perhaps both—compelling grounds indeed for honest

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 127.

pessimism.

James adds, however, that determinism might still escape pessimism through a subjectivist perspective that interprets the unfolding universe as valuable only insofar as it contributes to one's personal edification. "[I]f determinism is to escape pessimism, it must leave off looking at the goods and ills of life in a simple objective way, and regard them as material, indifferent in themselves, for the production of consciousness, scientific and moral, in us."<sup>94</sup> But this subjectivism does not square with the well-documented, centuries-long human drive to do good and to be good. The end it posits, the enhancement of an individual's intellectual and moral consciousness, is wildly incommensurate with the efforts and sacrifices of ages.

If this be the whole fruit of the victory, we say; if the generations of mankind suffered and laid down their lives; if prophets confessed and martyrs sang in the fire, and all the sacred tears were shed for no other end than that a race of creatures with such unexampled insipidity should succeed, and protract *in saecula saeculorum* their contented and inoffensive lives,—why, at such a rate, better lose than win the battle, or at all events better ring down the curtain before the last act of the play, so that a business that began so importantly may be saved from so singularly flat a winding-up.<sup>95</sup>

While subjectivism might be rationally defensible, it is certainly liable to a number of practical objections. It undercuts the commonsense conviction that we are on earth for some good purpose, and so it weakens human incentives and motivations. It also limits the range of human fulfillment to the present satisfaction of personal interests. And finally, it fosters vanity, together with an uneasy sense of the ultimate meaninglessness of life, from which there is no possible theoretic escape. The world becomes “a vast,

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 130.

solitary Golgotha and mill of death.”<sup>96</sup> But what more is this than another setting for ineluctable pessimism?

Action is the only solution to this subjectivist gloom. “Take, then, the yoke upon our shoulders; bend our neck beneath the heavy legality of its weight; regard something else than our feeling as our limit, our master, and our law; be willing to live and die in its service.”<sup>97</sup> But this turn to action, which is based on a faithful commitment to the real possibility that action might accomplish something, represents at least implicitly the adoption of a doctrine of indeterminism and free will. Important convictions find a hospitable framework when we act under this assumption that we are part of a universe that is “a plurality of semi-independent forces, each one of which may help or hinder, and be helped or hindered by, the operations of the rest.”<sup>98</sup> Willingness to act at all, interest in acting rightly, and shame for wrongful deeds all make sense only if free will is real.

A world with free will is far preferable to the alternative. As James writes, “This is the only chance we have any motive for supposing to exist. . . . For its presence is the vital air which lets the world live, the salt which keeps it sweet.”<sup>99</sup> He repeats, of course, that his analysis here is only pragmatic; determinism is not refuted in the sense in the sense of being exposed as logically incoherent or incompatible with empirical evidence. As a pragmatist, he only asks: What difference does it make if a doctrine of free will is true? The answer: The world becomes hospitable to hope. While the committed

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 137.

determinist, at the end of the day, must (logically) succumb to pessimism and despair, the committed affirmer of free will may inhabit “a world with a *chance* in it of being altogether good, [which] even if the chance never comes to pass, is better than a world with no such chance at all.”<sup>100</sup> Strictly speaking, neither logic nor evidence compels one to affirm (or deny) free will. To affirm free will is simply to take the better part, which in James’s view is sufficient pragmatic justification for affirming it.

James also pits free will against determinism in *Pragmatism*, where the pragmatic analysis takes a slightly different tack. This treatment begins by noting that many men, including both affirmers and deniers of free will, share an “instinctive belief” that the human person is somehow a source or principle of his actions.<sup>101</sup> Interestingly, it is on the basis of this shared instinctive belief that the affirmer and the denier of free will accuse one another: “both free will and determinism have been inveighed against and called absurd, because each, in the eyes of its enemies, has seemed to prevent the ‘imputability’ of good or bad deeds to their authors.”<sup>102</sup> For both affirmers of free will and determinists, personal accountability is the crux of the debate. On the one hand, the affirmer of free will argues, if my actions are predetermined, how can I be said to be responsible for them? On the other hand, the determinist objects, if the affirmer of free will’s position entails the possibility of “the grafting on to the past of something not involved therein,” how is it that a “free” action can be in any meaningful sense *mine*, flowing from and hence actually determined by the tendencies inherent in my already

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 59.

established character?

Having thus briefly sketched the debate, James promptly dismisses both sides, justifying this dismissal on pragmatist grounds. Both the affirmer of free will and the determinist hitch the question of free will to the notion of personal accountability. This, however, is a seriously misguided maneuver, for a thorough and accurate discernment of personal merit or demerit—one that “completely plumb[s] the depths of the secret incentives of our actions,” to use Kant’s phrase<sup>103</sup>—is beyond our human ken. In real life, it is folly to speculate about the unseen causes of others’ actions, to which for the most part we ultimately respond simply on the basis of outward appearances. We ought always to be guarded in our assessments of the internal dispositions of agents other than ourselves. James writes: “If a man does good acts we shall praise him, if he does bad acts we shall punish him—anyhow, and quite apart from theories as to whether the acts result from what was previous in him or are novelties in a strict sense.”<sup>104</sup> Who among us is fit to judge? God alone can know our merits and demerits. Human opinions on this score provide no solid basis for either ethical evaluations or arguments about free will.

Instead of seeking to ground a position on free will in an abstract and unknowable basis like personal accountability, the pragmatist simply asks: What difference does it make if there be free will? James answers:

Free-will pragmatically means novelties in the world, the right to expect that in its deepest elements as well as in its surface phenomena, the future may not identically repeat and imitate the past. That imitation *en masse* is there, who can

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 407.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

deny? The general ‘uniformity in nature’ is presupposed by every lesser law. But nature may be only approximately uniform; and persons in whom knowledge of the world’s past has bred pessimism . . . may naturally welcome free-will as a *melioristic* doctrine. It holds up improvement as at least possible; whereas determinism assures us that our whole notion of possibility is born of human ignorance, and that necessity and impossibility between them rule the destinies of the world.<sup>105</sup>

The justification of free will on pragmatic grounds rests not on the speculative, unknowable, “piteous unreality”<sup>106</sup> of accountability, but on the concrete notion of a world that might possibly be made better. Pragmatically, free will directly implies the expectation that the state of the world might be improved (or made worse), and that we in some way make important contributions to this improvement (or worsening). Once again, free will makes sense only as a “doctrine of relief”—“relief” from the sense of dread, apathy, hopelessness, or impotence that its alternative implies—within the context of our active life and experience.<sup>107</sup>

James’s scientific consideration of the selective attention of consciousness lays the groundwork for his pragmatic affirmation of freedom in the properly philosophical context. In the *Principles*, he exposes certain nonscientific, properly philosophic or metaphysical claims that fail to be justified by empirical science, and he argues that the physical ontology of the brain and nervous system are compatible with opposite or exclusive philosophical positions. Thus, he establishes that a nonmechanistic interpretation of the activity of consciousness remains a possibility from the perspective of natural science. Later, he develops and defends the notion of human freedom on

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 60-1.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 60.

pragmatist grounds. Freedom is central to his nonreductive view of man, for as free, human nature transcends the laws of matter. Man is one of the independent forces contributing to the dynamic unfolding of the universe. Fundamentally, human freedom comprises the capacity selectively to attend to certain parts of the environment, and to act on the basis of that attentive reflection. It is important to note that, in James's view, man's attentive consciousness is not limited to the present physical or mental environment; rather, it extends to a wider, spiritual environment. In continuity therewith, man is evidently more than a physico-chemical being. I now turn to James's religious works in order to examine the further support they provide for the nonreductive view of human nature.

#### CONTINUITY WITH A WIDER ENVIRONMENT

This section examines the second pillar supporting James's nonreductive anthropology, namely, human spirituality. James affirms that human consciousness naturally extends beyond the immediate sensory environment. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of religious experience. James develops this point in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he seeks to form a general theory of the origins and significance of religious feelings. He begins with a clarifying definition: "Religion . . . , as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to*

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 61.



*stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*”<sup>108</sup> He is interested not in any one religion or set of religions, but in religion most broadly construed, the basic and universal features of which entail the individual’s personal relation to some greater entity that is “godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not.”<sup>109</sup> With this definition James intends to include all religiously minded persons—Christians, Jews, pantheists, ancestor-worshippers, and so on. Externally, religions are clearly divided as regards the forms of their particular deities and institutions. Internally, however, in their inner dispositions and attitudes, religious individuals have much in common. All have highest esteem for a “primal reality” of some sort which they feel “impelled to respond to solemnly, gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest.”<sup>110</sup> Because the reverence of religious feeling takes many forms, James’s imprecise formulation is appropriate, for “to be rigorously ‘scientific’ or exact’ in our terms would only stamp us as lacking in our understanding of our task.”<sup>111</sup>

The primary concern in the *Varieties* is the religious individual himself, his attitudes and dispositions. This would seem a likely subject for James the psychologist. Yet in turning to the religious individual, one also necessarily turns to a consideration of the object or objects of his religious regard. While there is a seemingly endless

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<sup>108</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt et al., *The Works of William James*, vol. 15 (1902; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 34.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. James here echoes Aristotle’s comment (*Nichomachean Ethics* 1.2) that the degree of precision to be sought in any inquiry should be appropriate to the subject matter at hand.

proliferation of deities and other godlike entities, which accordingly appear to elude generalization, James collects them pragmatically—that is, by looking at their effects, in other words, at the consequences of individuals’ believing in them. Notwithstanding their disparities, according to James, the objects of religious regard universally engender both an intensity of experience found nowhere else and a type of happiness obtainable through no other means. The awareness is of something more, greater, wider, beyond the limits of one’s finite experience; this religious regard for God, or the gods, or the godlike subsumes the personal will, in a sense.

[T]he will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God. . . . The time for tension in our soul is over, and that of happy relaxation, of calm deep breathing, of an eternal present, with no discordant future to be anxious about, has arrived.<sup>112</sup>

What distinguishes the objects of religious awareness is their capacity to buoy man’s life amid and through his personal experience of evil, sin, and suffering. Religion elevates man above his immediate environment inasmuch as it entails belief in an unseen order, something over and against the appearances of the present world, a realm in union with which his supreme good is secured.<sup>113</sup>

James’s survey of religious experiences thus points to a basic fact: the human

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 46. Elsewhere James summarizes the “universal message” transmitted via religious experience: “All is not vanity in this Universe, whatever the appearances may suggest” (ibid., 39).

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 51. Bennett Ramsey remarks that James develops “an increasingly strong avowal of the human person as a religiously bounded self” (3), and thereby offers a nuanced view of human freedom. Ever constrained by his continuity with and responsibility to the larger forces of his environment, the religious man’s freedom is checked and balanced. He is “bound to forces and powers beyond [his] control, capable of acting, but acting relationally and responsibly rather than independently” (9). See Bennett Ramsey, *Submitting to Freedom: The Religious Vision of William James* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

capacity to sense “reality more diffused and general than that which our special senses yield.”<sup>114</sup> He explicitly defers the question of the physiological source of this capacity, for he is concerned with the nature of the faculty itself, not its bodily components. More interesting is the epistemological question: In what manner do religious persons possess the objects of their belief? In general, religious awareness is both unmediated and spatially unconfined; it is unlike either intellectual conceptualization or sense experience. It is an immediate grasp, and so different from intellectual conceptualization; and yet it is not associated with any of the particular bodily senses. For want of a better term, “intuition” might best approximate what James understands religious awareness to be. As he describes it, the religious persons grasp the objects of belief “not in the form of mere conceptions which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended.”<sup>115</sup> He quotes at length a number of firsthand accounts of religious experience, and more often than not these descriptions are negative, drawing out dissimilarities to bodily sense experience.<sup>116</sup> The following is typical:

God had neither form, color, odor, nor taste; moreover, . . . the feeling of his presence was accompanied by no determinate localization. It was rather as if my personality had been transferred by the presence of a spiritual spirit. But the more I seek the words to express this intimate intercourse, the more I feel the impossibility of describing the thing by any of our usual images. At bottom the expression most apt to render what I felt is this: God was present, though invisible; he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> James, *Varieties*, 55-9. In addition to religious experiences, James here includes hallucinations and other clearly pathological cases, for even these are evidence of the fact that our “mental machinery” is capable of extending beyond the strict confines of our bodily senses.

<sup>115</sup> See *ibid.*, 52-3. On this point, James amplifies: religious persons possess their beliefs (*ibid.*, 59).

<sup>116</sup> See *ibid.*, 59-66.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

In addition to their intuitive character, religious experiences are marked by their unimpeachable authority. They are as convincing to those who have them as any direct sense experience would be. Moreover, they supercede reason, which “can challenge you for proofs, and chop logic, and put you down with words [, yet] will fail to convert you all the same, if your dumb intuitions are opposed to its conclusions.”<sup>118</sup> Setting aside the question of the intuition’s veracity, James here simply notes the fact of such religious experiences. While not every human may have them, they are not limited by culture or era. They reveal a human capacity to sense or grasp objects that transcend the present physical and conceptual environment.

Although empirical science may discount it, the wider spiritual environment that humans are capable of grasping is known phenomenally through many and varied effects in the personal lives of individuals. James points to these in commenting on “healthy-mindedness,” mysticism, and prayer, where he offers an extended pragmatic defense of the reality of the unseen order. Voluntary or systematic healthy-mindedness is James’s term for the religious attitude of optimism that “deliberately excludes evil from its field of vision” and fortifies an individual in his pursuit of equanimity and happiness.<sup>119</sup>

James cites the mind-cure movement, with its affirmation of “the conquering efficacy of courage, hope, and trust” over physical and psychological afflictions, as a good example of this sort of optimism.<sup>120</sup> The key to the potency of mind-cure is the

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 84. It is often suggested that James was intimately aware of this power of positive thinking inasmuch as he employed it in tackling his own psychological crisis. See, for example: Howard M.

individual's feeling of personal union with the divine, of the interpenetration of the self with the infinite power of God, upon which the individual draws. James says that, while not for everyone, the mind-cure movement has thrived owing largely to its array of observable, practical results. Of course, mind-cure is met with skepticism and ready dismissals by critics who explain away its supposed effects by pointing to material or organic causes. But James is not interested in debating the underlying presuppositions and mechanisms of mind-cure; he is simply documenting this particular form of religious experience. He contends nevertheless that mind-cure does battle with empirical science on science's own grounds, for in appealing to "palpable experiential results" as its justification, it adopts as its method what is essentially the method of experimental science.<sup>121</sup> He views the critics' dismissal of mind-cure as dogmatic and premature, and he advocates a greater open-mindedness to the very many personal accounts he has surveyed.

In his direct treatment of mysticism, James further considers the capacity of human consciousness to extend beyond its familiar sensory and conceptual environment. Although he observes no common kernel of mystic doctrine, he attempts to generalize by detailing four marks of mystical experience: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. Mystical experiences tend to defy precise expression by those who have them,

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Feinstein, *Becoming William James* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 307 ff; and Robert J. Richards, "The Personal Equation in Science: William James's Psychological Uses of Darwinian Theory," in *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 411 ff.

<sup>121</sup> See James, *Varieties*, 103-4.

yet mystics will attest that such experiences grant authoritative insight into important truths. The experiences pass and fade obscurely into memory. The mystic feels he has been granted this experience through no activity or power of his own.<sup>122</sup> Skeptics tend to view mystical experiences as no more than the delusional or fantastic products of aberrant physiological processes, and certainly not authentic revelations of truth or reality. James's pragmatic analysis, however, does not seek to speculate on the causes of mysticism. Whatever the causes might be, they "tell us nothing about the value for knowledge of the consciousness which they induce. To pass spiritual judgment upon these states, we must not content ourselves with superficial medical talk, but inquire into their fruits for life."<sup>123</sup>

Mystical experiences undeniably empower the individuals who have them. "But," James writes, "that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal."<sup>124</sup> He notes the examples of Sts. Ignatius Loyola, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila, all of whom report strengthened, toughened souls and cures of various spiritual infirmities.<sup>125</sup> While the critic may remain unconvinced of the genuineness and perspicacity of mystical states, the fact that they occur and are reported cannot be denied. At the very least, such states call into question the presumption that nonmystical or rationalistic consciousness, drawing on the operations of intellect and senses alone, is

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<sup>122</sup> See *ibid.*, 302-3.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>125</sup> See *ibid.*, 328 ff.

exclusively authoritative. It may well be but one type of consciousness, while mysticism “open[s] out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith.”<sup>126</sup> Moreover, mystical feeling need not compete with or contradict rationalistic consciousness; it may instead offer a complementary perspective on reality that is essential to “our approach to the final fullness of the truth.”<sup>127</sup>

James’s reflections on prayer similarly offer support to the view that human consciousness is in contact with a wider, spiritual environment. He describes prayer in this way: “Prayer is religion in act. . . . [It is] no mere repetition of certain sacred formulae, but the very movement itself of the soul, putting itself in a personal relation of contact with the mysterious power of which it feels the presence.”<sup>128</sup> Does one’s prayer really influence a divine being in one’s favor? For James, this question of efficacy remains open. Without question, however, prayer does make an objective difference in the lives of prayerful people, as it disposes them to see the Providence at work in the world and readies them to toil alongside: “when one’s affections keep in touch with the divinity of the world’s authorship, fear and egoism fall away; and in the equanimity that follows, one finds in the hours, as they succeed each other, a series of purely benignant opportunities.”<sup>129</sup> The essence of any act of prayer lies in this sense of communion with the divine, whereby energy from the transcendent is transferred and becomes manifest in

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 366.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 373.

the phenomenal world.

Seeking to identify a common nucleus of intellectual content among religions, James points to prayerful union with the divine as a key element. In general, religious sentiment entails both a sense of uneasiness and a sense of deliverance therefrom. It begins with a feeling that there something naturally wrong or imperfect with us, and it finds resolution in the conviction that we are nonetheless saved if, though only if, we make the proper connection with the higher powers of the universe. The religious man is thus “*conscious that his higher part is coterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with.*”<sup>130</sup> Regarding the precise nature of the “more,” religions certainly vary; yet they all agree that it not only exists but also acts, and that man is better off when he turns to it.

Laboring to formulate a unified account of religious phenomena, James resists metaphysical speculation about the existence and nature of a transcendent higher power and suggests that the subconscious might be the proper locus of the “more.” It is important to highlight the tentative nature of this suggestion: James offers a hypothesis as he attempts to begin what he calls a science of religions, collecting and accounting for what is common among otherwise disparate faiths. Moreover, he does not deny the reality of a transcendent, divine being; he simply sets aside this issue inasmuch as it is divisive and thereby not appropriate to a unified science of religions. Well aware of developments in the psychology of the subconscious self, he is intrigued by the evidence

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 400.



that “there is actually and literally more life in our total soul than we are at any time aware of.”<sup>131</sup> Our capacity for awareness of reality may be greater than we ordinarily assume. Perhaps religious life stems from this part of the psyche, whose movements tend to take on the appearance of objectivity and create the impression that something external to the self is at work. In his survey of religions, James observes a recurring theme—“*the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come*”—and he hypothesizes that the subconscious, inchoate yet real, might explain this fact.<sup>132</sup> With this hypothesis, James again opens the door to an expanded conception of human nature that is not confined to its physico-chemical elements.

James also offers a stern assessment of “medical materialist” skeptics who would explain away religious phenomena as mere effects of physiological processes. Their theory fails by retorsion, for if thoughts and dispositions are reduced to their organic components—which is why religion is deemed false—then so also must the conclusions of science be reduced. Under such a theory, “none of our thoughts and feelings, not even our scientific doctrines, not even our *dis*-beliefs, could retain any value as revelations of the truth, for every one of them without exception flows from the state of their possessor’s body at the time.”<sup>133</sup> Medical materialism provides no justification for

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 402.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 405. Eugene Fontinell develops the notion of “field self” as an interpretation of James on this point. This self is a “full self,” extending beyond the body and its immediate environment. It is a shifting center of energy from which radiates a vast number of fields, or channels of activity and receptivity, through which the centered self is continuous with other conscious and nonconscious fields. The ever present sense of “more” that James notes comes from the “fringes” of these fields and is “an indication of relations with a wider reality than is currently in focus.” Conceptually, we identify the self with the center of energy; the full self, however, which includes the radiant fields that overlap with other parts of reality, is not conceived but simply and immediately felt. See Fontinell, *Self, God, and Immortality*, 95-7, 102-10.

<sup>133</sup> James, *Varieties*, 21.

privileging medical materialism. In his final word on the matter, James appeals to the authority of his intuition, against which all else is impotent:

I *can*, of course, put myself into the sectarian scientist's attitude, and imagine vividly that the world of sensations and of scientific laws and objects may be all. But whenever I do this, I hear that inward monitor . . . whispering the word 'bosh!' Humbug is humbug, even though it bear a scientific name, and the total expression of human experience, as I view it objectively, invincibly urges me beyond the narrow 'scientific' bounds.<sup>134</sup>

A thoroughgoing pragmatist, James rejects scientific reductionism and skepticism regarding religion, for these do not jibe with important prior ideas concerning the nature and depth of human experience.

In his 1898 essay "Human Immortality," James defends the conceivability of an afterlife by clarifying some common assumptions regarding the brain–thought relation. His argument is not intended to demonstrate that human immortality is a fact, but simply to eliminate certain objections, thereby making room for a belief that is "one of the great needs of man."<sup>135</sup> The central question is whether the common assumption that thought or spiritual life is a function of the brain compels disbelief in immortality. James argues that it does not, notwithstanding the conclusions of physiological psychologists. The latter make the mistake of taking "too superficial a look at the admitted fact of functional dependence," and they hastily conclude, or assume, that the brain *produces* thought.<sup>136</sup> James notes, however, that productive function is but one type of function found in nature. Other types include the releasing function, which removes obstacles to further

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 408.

<sup>135</sup> William James, "Human Immortality," in *Essays in Religion and Morality*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt et al., *The Works of William James*, vol. 11 (1898; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 77.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 82.

natural action (such as the trigger of a crossbow), and the transmissive function, which sifts and limits the flow of natural forces (such as a prism with light or an organ's keys with the wind of its air-chest). James's thesis is that "when we think of the law that thought is a function of the brain, we are not required to think of productive function only; *we are entitled also to consider permissive or transmissive function.*"<sup>137</sup> This expanded understanding of functions still preserves the commonly accepted view that conscious thought is somehow a function of brain matter.

James then suggests a model of conscious life based on the transmissive function, which is entirely compatible with belief in human immortality. Supposing a noumenal–phenomenal view of reality, the human brain can be conceived as the appropriately thin spot in the "veil of nature" through which some wider consciousness, the greater "absolute life of the universe" breaks, creating "[g]lows of feeling, glimpses of insight, and streams of knowledge and perception [in] our finite world."<sup>138</sup> Immortality is secured under this model, for bodily death does not destroy the wider consciousness filtered through brain-matter. James also argues that this model is preferable to one that conceives of the brain as productive of thought, for it entirely avoids the major stumbling block of having to explain how matter produces mind. It also comports with and has some explanatory power with respect to various religious phenomena that otherwise defy explanation by physiological psychology, such as "conversions, providential leanings in

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 86-7. In the preface to the second edition, James replies to the criticism that this conception of a wider consciousness piercing through the veil of nature undermines the idea that personal identity withstands bodily death: "*one may conceive the mental world behind the veil in as individualistic a form as one pleases, without any detriment to the general scheme by which the brain is represented as a transmissive organ*" (ibid., 76).

answer to prayer, instantaneous healings, premonitions, apparitions at the time of death, clairvoyant visions or impressions, and the whole range of mediumistic capacities.”<sup>139</sup>

This model may be only hypothetical or tentative, but it certainly has these points to recommend it. More importantly, in this defense of the plausibility of immortality, James once again upholds a nonreductive conception of human nature by offering a picture of human consciousness extending beyond bodily matter, “in continuity . . . with a mother sea” from which a purely physical being is otherwise divided.<sup>140</sup>

## CONCLUSION

James’s concrete account of human nature centers on his description of the distinctive nature of human consciousness. He rejects other traditional theories of consciousness insofar as each in its own way not only overreaches or exceeds what is given through experience but also actually fails to do the work it claims to do.

Automatism, the theory that conscious mental life emerges as an epiphenomenon, in parallel with physical processes, is really no account at all. It says nothing about the specific nature and origin of consciousness, displacing the issue entirely as it remains wholly within the realm of bodily matter. Moreover, it denies that the activities of consciousness may have some impact on matter, and thereby conflicts with common sense. Spiritualism and transcendentalism are rejected because they both appeal to principles—a substantial soul and a transcendental ego, respectively—that are themselves

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 94.

empirically unverifiable and, indeed, superfluous. Neither is actually needed, in James's view, to explain the phenomena that it supposedly causes. Finally, associationism, which offers a model of consciousness as a set of diverse atoms of thought collected under various laws, lays the burden on laws that themselves are not empirical but a priori. James also rejects associationism inasmuch as it offers no solid account of the felt unity of consciousness or of self-consciousness.

His own positive account of consciousness draws from experience alone. Seeking to describe what consciousness is known-as, he details five characteristics. In general, consciousness as experienced is always personal, ever changing, and sensibly continuous. It also appears to deal with objects that are other than and independent of itself, and it takes interest in and focuses on particular features of those things it regards, ignoring the rest of what is available to it. The special nature and activities of human consciousness derive from this last feature of consciousness, its selectivity or attentiveness. The heightened ability of human consciousness to home in on, and in turn reflect on, certain elements of its environment is the key ingredient in man's free and spontaneous activity, since it enables him to engage with the world in a highly sophisticated and creative manner. In this way, the promethean pragmatist comes to the fore in James's articulation of his nonreductive anthropology.

James also defends an expanded view of the range or reach of human consciousness. It is not confined to the present, immediate environment but rather is continuous with a "more" that is a wider, spiritual environment, known pragmatically through its phenomenal effects. In continuity with such an environment, human nature itself must entail a transcendent or spiritual element. Thus we observe the

antipromethean mystic operative as the second pillar of James's nonreductive anthropology.

In summary, James's positive thought on consciousness entails both the pragmatist and the mystic, but any tension between the two is absent. The pragmatist is reflected in consciousness's active, free, and efficacious dimension that stems from its selective attentiveness, while the mystic is reflected in consciousness's openness to the immaterial aspects of reality. The pragmatist and the mystic do not compete here; rather, both serve the same end, in a sense, as both are central to the articulation of James's nonreductive view of human nature.

The present chapter has established that James's understanding of human nature extends beyond the physical, material, bodily aspects of man. As a pragmatist who develops and measures truths concretely, he must cultivate his thought on evolution in light of this view. Has man evolved from other species? If so, how? For a pragmatist like James, the answers to these questions are necessarily colored by this nonreductive view of man, as we shall see in the next chapter's examination of James's thought on evolution.

## CHAPTER 3

### JAMES ON THE EVOLUTION OF MAN

*Has man evolved? If so, how?* The question of evolution, and specifically the evolution of man, was one of the most significant and controversial issues of the second half of the nineteenth century, and one that thinkers like James and those in his extended academic circles seemingly could not avoid confronting. The Darwinian theory of evolution, not yet dominant in James's time but on its way to becoming so, provides an account of the emergence of species whereby man is understood to have evolved from other species through the random mutation of physical traits and the process of natural selection. Yet however capable it may be of providing an account of the emergence of other species, many have argued that Darwin's theory is incapable of adequately illuminating the nature and origin of the human being. Even if random variation and natural selection were sufficient to explain the emergence of man as a physical, biological creature, the question would remain: whence come those aspects of a human being that are other than merely physical and material?

Some thinkers might dismiss out of hand any reference to the nonphysical, nonmaterial aspects of the human being, but certainly James would not. Among the great variety of views on the matter, James's contribution is valuable insofar as he seeks to integrate within an evolutionary scheme his full, nonreductive view of human nature. This chapter will examine the development James's thought, from its early sympathy to

Darwinism through its affirmation that a theory of evolution is compatible with an understanding of man as more than a physico-chemical being.

As noted at the outset, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* were published in 1859 and 1871, respectively, and James entered professional life during the period when Darwinism was a central topic of discussion and debate. He was a student at Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School from 1861 to 1863. He entered Harvard's Medical School in 1864 and earned an M.D. in 1869. After a period of poor mental and physical health, he began teaching anatomy and physiology at Harvard in 1872. In 1875 he taught his first course in psychology, and in 1879 he began teaching philosophy. Along with several of his teachers and peers, James was among the first generation of thinkers to reflect upon Darwin's theory and the range of controversial implications associated with it.

The present discussion of James and evolutionary theory proceeds in two parts. First, I briefly consider the impact of nineteenth-century evolutionary thinking on metaphysics and epistemology. Collectively, theories of evolution effected important shifts in the understanding of both nature itself and the goals of scientific inquiry; fluidity of natural kinds and probabilistic reasoning supplanted the ideals of fixed kinds and certain knowledge through demonstrative proof. This is the context from which emerge James's affirmation of the subjective method and his pragmatist theory of truth, under which scientific concepts and theories are no longer regarded as independently and exclusively authoritative. Instead, any concept or theory is taken as a tool that is the product of an evolutionary process, as a construct that comes into being and survives only because it is useful, that is, because it serves and satisfies the needs of individuals; if it



contradicts experience or contravenes individuals' purposes, it is rejected. This attitude of evolutionary thinking in general forms a broader epistemological framework within which specific theories of evolution are evaluated.

In the second part, I examine the development of James's thought on evolution as it emerges from this new perspective on nature and science. How do specific theories of evolution fare within the intellectual climate for which they are largely responsible? Throughout his career, James was a proponent of Darwinian evolution, but the nature of his support changed as James addressed different issues and foes. Early on, as a scientifically minded young man, he is pitted with Darwin against the dogmatically religious or quasi-creationist views of an older generation that includes his father and many of his teachers. But he is not simply polemical: even at this early stage, he recognizes and appreciates the key aspect of Darwinism—variation stemming from within the individual organism—that is the kernel of the development of his own substantive, philosophical thought on evolution.

Next, I trace James's later amplification of the idea of variation as he argues against evolutionary thinking that entails or implies determinism, most notably that of Herbert Spencer. In the preceding chapter, we saw James's deep commitment to the freedom and indeterminacy of human consciousness; given this commitment, he argues pragmatically against any theory of evolution that construes man's distinctive consciousness as a passive by-product of environmental forces spun out in accordance with laws of matter. To this end, James employs Darwin's principle of variation from within as a viable scientific alternative to explain the evolving emergence of species without reverting to mechano-materialism.

Finally, I consider James's positive use of Darwinian principles in his own account of the evolution of human consciousness. Against those who would reduce consciousness to the mechanism of the brain and nervous system, and against those who would simply posit a fundamental dualism of mind and matter, James argues that consciousness emerges and acts as a force that dynamically influences the flow of events—both internally or within the individual organism, and externally or in the larger context of the individual's environment. With this development of the evolutionary nature and role of human consciousness, he consistently affirms the distinctively free and self-determining capacities of man.

In this manner, the development of James's thought on evolution is an application of his pragmatism, and it also provides further support for the claim that his thought is unified. As a promethean pragmatist he develops his thought concretely, with deference to the nonreductive view of man, and his evolutionary thinking is thus hospitable to the supra-material dimensions of human freedom and spirituality. To the extent that the latter is characteristic of the antipromethean mystic, here we see James as pragmatist accommodating the mystic as he develops his thought on the evolution of man. Unlike the many strains of evolutionary thinking that entail a materialist view of man, James's view, precisely qua pragmatist, cannot and does not set aside these other aspects of humanity. In this regard, the distinctive and valuable character of James's thought on evolution is notable.

This chapter's treatment of James's thought on the evolution of man will prepare for the following chapter's consideration of what Ralph Barton Perry has referred to as the later James's "radical evolutionism," whereby he "extend[s] the notion of

spontaneous variation to the whole of nature, and proclaim[s] the view that the physical order [is] itself an effect of progressive selection.”<sup>1</sup> That fourth and final chapter will examine how James’s thought on the evolution of man is integrated into the broader metaphysical framework of a provisional, pluralistic, open universe that is aptly characterized as “reality-in-the making.”<sup>2</sup>

### THE IMPACT OF EVOLUTIONARY THINKING

Evolutionary thinking solidified two fundamental and related shifts—ontological and epistemological—in the modern scientific understanding of and approach to nature. The 1859 publication of the first edition of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* may be regarded as the culmination of the era of modern evolutionary thought that began in earnest at the turn of the nineteenth century with the writings of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck.<sup>3</sup> In a 1909 essay entitled “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy,” John Dewey describes the significant place of this achievement from the standpoint of intellectual history:

Old questions are solved by disappearing, evaporating, while new questions corresponding to the changed attitude of endeavor and preference take their place. Doubtless the greatest dissolvent in contemporary thought of old questions, the greatest precipitant of new methods, new inventions, new problems, is one

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol. 1 (1935; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1974), 490.

<sup>2</sup> See Robert J. Richards, “The Personal Equation in Science: William James’s Psychological and Moral Uses of Darwinian Theory,” *Harvard Library Review* 30 (1982): 417.

<sup>3</sup> See Darwin’s introductory piece, “An Historical Sketch,” in Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (New York: Mentor, 1958), 17-25. No doubt, in addition to calling it a “culmination,” it would be proper to characterize the *Origin* as the seed or foundation of the 150 years of evolutionary science that have followed its publication.

effected by the scientific revolution that found its climax in the *Origin of Species*.<sup>4</sup>

As Dewey explains, the old questions that Darwin's theory dissolved were ones that ultimately pointed to formal and final causes, the metaphysically prior, intelligent or at least intelligible sources of the observed changes in living beings. Such inquiries were predicated on an assumption that nature is purposive, that it "operates throughout a series of changes and holds them to a single course; which subordinates their aimless flux to its own perfect manifestation; which, leaping the boundaries of space and time, keeps individuals distant in space and remote in time to a uniform type of structure and function."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the goal of this type of scientific investigation was thought to be unified knowledge of nature's fixed forms in relation to its single, final end and good of all.

Dewey acknowledges Galileo, Kepler, and Copernicus as progenitors of the Darwinian revolution who shifted the focus of scientific inquiry through their research. Turning empirically to the processes of nature themselves and away from unseen, metaphysical causes, each contributed to a "new logic" that involved a "transfer of interest from the permanent to the changing."<sup>6</sup> With Darwin, this change was confirmed in the life sciences. According to Dewey's sketch, until the nineteenth century, a teleological nature was the backdrop of the disciplines that studied living beings; Darwin's innovation was to offer an explanation of the observed changes in such beings

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<sup>4</sup> John Dewey, "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy," in *James and Dewey on Belief and Experience*, ed. John M. Capps and Donald Capps (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 188.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 182.

that did not require a prior, intelligent, causal force to guide or preordain them. The seemingly random and spontaneous variations of physical traits together with the impersonal winnowing of natural selection are sufficient, at least in theory, to account for the emergence of the great diversity of species that populate the earth.<sup>7</sup> Nature is conceived as something essentially in flux, and evolutionary thinking thus “conquer[s] the phenomena of life for the principle of transition.”<sup>8</sup> Both the objects and the goals of inquiry in the life sciences are confined to the processes of nature themselves, while attention is withdrawn from the fixed principles of metaphysics and other such nonempirical abstractions.

It is proper to note that these shifts confirmed by the rise of evolutionary thinking represent a revolution within science itself. Less important and more superficial are the disputes, too often merely ideologically driven, that evolution provoked with religion and theology. Darwin certainly did disturb many religious people with his naturalistic explanation of the emergence of species that did not require any intervention or authority on the part of a divine being; and indeed many such people themselves were professional scientists who tended to believe that their natural research did or would corroborate their belief in God as the benevolent creator of the universe.<sup>9</sup> But the weightier criticisms of Darwin did not concern his removing the divine from the account of the development of species. Instead, within the scientific community detractors took aim at the method of his

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>9</sup> See *ibid.*, 179, and Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, 91-3.

argument, and the major issues of concern were the standards of scientific reasoning and whether and how Darwin had met those standards.<sup>10</sup>

According to Darwin's theory of evolution, the observed diversity of species has emerged from a simpler, common ancestry, largely owing to a process whereby nature selects for survival and propagation those individual organisms that happen to possess traits favorable within their given ecological circumstances.<sup>11</sup> Yet because the emergence of a new species through the principles of variation and natural selection cannot be literally observed, strictly speaking Darwin's theory is conjectural. Moreover, the favorable traits of individuals spring from a principle of variation that he posits is spontaneous, that is to say, springing from within the organism from causes that are at least obscure and perhaps even unknowable. In both respects, the parameters of Darwin's theory involve a high degree of indeterminacy,<sup>12</sup> and it cannot be modeled and verified through experimentation. In light of these facts, Darwin offers a new criterion

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<sup>10</sup> See Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, 102 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Nielsen and R. H. Day, among others, provide a basic description of the of Darwin's evolutionary account of the formation and differentiation of species (supplemented by a post-Darwinian understanding of genetics): "Members of a population will exhibit characteristics that conform to an average that have [sic], in the past, enabled them to be best adapted to their environment. . . . However, differing traits within species will occur as a result of random genetic variations, providing the individual with a characteristic that is outside the normal distribution. This new characteristic will invariably become more common if it provides a statistical advantage in the rate at which it is transmitted to the next generation." They also succinctly describe the process of natural selection as "non-purposive, non-random, differential selection of traits that confer on the animal a survival and reproductive capacity in its adopted ecological niche." See Mark Nielsen and R. H. Day, "William James and the Evolution of Consciousness," *Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 19 (1999): 94. As Gertrude Himmelfarb also points out, Darwin so wished to stress that there is no agent or active power driving natural selection, and that it is only a process whereby certain traits are weeded out and others preserved, that in the sixth edition of the *Origin* he clarified that "natural selection" is just a shorthand expression for the process which might be better called "natural preservation" or simply "survival of the fittest." See Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, 322.

<sup>12</sup> See Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, 102-3.

for accepting his theory: “The doctrine must sink or swim according as it groups and explains phenomena.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the theory should be accepted as a likely explanation, whose plausibility gradually ratchets up to strong probability as we amass more and more facts that suitably fit within its explanatory framework. Probabilistic reasoning supplants demonstrative proof, and Darwin is thus a major figure in the inauguration of the modern hypothetico-deductive scientific method.<sup>14</sup>

Though Jamesian pragmatism was yet to be articulated, its spirit seems already to be anticipated in Darwin’s method. It has been suggested that Darwin’s help in extending the range of scientific standards to include probabilistic reasoning planted the seeds of James’s pragmatism;<sup>15</sup> and James himself writes that pragmatism

owes its being to the break-down which the last fifty years have brought about in the older notions of scientific truth. . . . Up to 1850 almost everyone believed that sciences expressed truths that were exact copies of a definite code of non-human realities. But the enormously rapid multiplication of theories in these latter days has well-nigh upset the notion of any one of them being a more literally objective kind of thing than another. . . . Our mind has become tolerant of symbol instead of reproduction, of approximation instead of exactness, of plasticity instead of rigor.<sup>16</sup>

For Darwin and for James, the ultimate arbiters of truth are the facts and circumstances of experience. Darwin admits that his own theory is a probable

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<sup>13</sup> In 23 April 1861 correspondence with J. D. Hooker, quoted in *ibid.*, 102.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*, 110: “Because the theory of natural selection was a plausible explanation rather than a proof of the origin of species, James began to doubt the need to expect certainty in either his science or his religion.”

<sup>16</sup> James, “Humanism and Truth,” in *The Meaning of Truth*, 40.

explanation that merits acceptance because it fits a great number of observed facts,<sup>17</sup> and this approach to knowledge clearly resonates in the development of James's thinking.

For James, as we have seen, pragmatic truth is defined in terms of verifiability and satisfaction. Amid the chaos of the myriad data of experience, empirical fact-gathering alone is insufficient for knowledge. Raw facts need to be organized, and any such organization is the act of some individual, who neither mirrors nor copies but rather *adds to reality*.<sup>18</sup> So no idea or theory is literally objective or exclusively authoritative.

Rather, ideas and theories are always matters of perspective that are accountable to and measured against the data of experience; and they are pragmatically true only insofar as they are both concretely verifiable and satisfactory guides for navigating through that experience. At the very least, it may be safe to suggest that the method of Darwin's argument helped to set the scene for the later exposition of James's pragmatism.

The influence of Darwin may be especially apparent in the development of James's subjective method and "evolutionary epistemology,"<sup>19</sup> both of which are

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<sup>17</sup> In the introduction to *The Origin of Species*, Darwin writes that he has proceeded by "patiently accumulating and reflecting on all sorts of facts which could possibly have any bearing on [the question of the origin of species]" and by deliberately drawing conclusions that "seemed to me probable." Further, he notes the need for continuing factual corroboration of his theory: "No one can feel more sensible than I of the necessity of hereafter publishing in detail all the facts, with references, on which the conclusions have been grounded. For I am well aware that scarcely a single point is discussed in this volume on which facts cannot be adduced, often apparently leading to conclusions directly opposite to those at which I have arrived. A fair result can be obtained only by fully stating and balancing the facts and arguments on both sides of each question; and this is here impossible" (Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 27-8).

<sup>18</sup> On this "additive" nature of truth: truth consists not in the mental duplication of reality but rather in man's "collaborating with realities so as to bring about a clearer result," the result being a path or guide to action or navigation through future experience (James, "Humanism and Truth," 41).

<sup>19</sup> The doctrine is fully developed in chapter 28 of the *Principles*. Robert J. Richards uses the term in "The Personal Equation in Science." He also notes several contemporary thinkers who have subsequently adopted this view, including Donald Campbell, David Hull, Karl Popper, and Stephen Toumlin. See Richards, "The Personal Equation in Science," 424 n. 126.



important aspects of his pragmatism. With the former, he argues the controversial position that personal desires or preferences are sufficient justification for accepting certain propositions or hypotheses.<sup>20</sup> It is a fundamental fact, according to James, that all philosophy stems not from man's reason, strictly speaking, but from his passional or appetitive nature. Distaste for uncertainty and desire for some handle on the future motivate the development of all intellectual systems: "a prime factor in the philosophical craving is to have expectancy defined."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, in cases where the experiential world is logically compatible with intellectual systems that are themselves mutually exclusive, and in the absence of determinative rational grounds, man's aesthetic preferences and practical demands necessarily come to the fore and tip the scales for the option that they favor.<sup>22</sup> Alongside the amassing of suitable evidence and probabilistic

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<sup>20</sup> See his 1878 essay, "Quelques considérations sur la méthode subjective," in *Collected Essays and Reviews*, 69-82 (originally published in *Critique philosophique* 2 [1878]: 407-13). Nearly all of the material in this essay is reproduced in "The Sentiment of Rationality" (1879) and "The Will to Believe" (1896). According to James, those propositions that we can "will to believe" are not wide open but rather a constrained, narrow set. They must be "living" (possibilities that do not patently violate our common sense), "forced" (where suspending judgment is effectively the same as denying), and "momentous" (having unique consequences or implications). See "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe*, 14-16 (originally published in *New World* 5 [1896]: 327-47). To clarify for critics the range and power of the subjective method, he also makes the elementary but important distinction between *saying* and *believing*: "Can we, just by willing it, believe that Abraham Lincoln's existence is a myth . . . ? Can we, by an effort of will, or by any strength of wish that it were true, believe ourselves well and about when we are roaring with rheumatism in bed, or feel certain that the sum of the two one-dollar bills in our pocket must be a hundred dollars? . . . We can *say* any of these things, but we are absolutely impotent to believe them" (ibid., 15-16).

<sup>21</sup> William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," in *The Will to Believe*, 70 (originally published in *Mind* 4 [1879]: 317-46). Of course, desire is not the sole foundation of theory; James's point is simply that its role ought not to be denied. He writes: "Pretend what we may, the whole man within us is at work when we form our philosophical opinions. Intellect, will, taste, and passion co-operate just as they do in practical affairs; and lucky it is if the passion be not something as petty as love of personal conquest over the philosopher across the way" (ibid., 77).

<sup>22</sup> See ibid., 66. See also ibid., 77-8: "[E]very philosopher, or man of science . . . , whose initiative counts for anything in the evolution of thought, has taken his stand on a sort of dumb conviction that the truth must lie in one direction rather than another." Elsewhere he writes that the most fundamental belief of all is

reasoning, and in the absence of demonstrative proof, such factors may well claim support for Darwinism, for example.

Darwin's influence is also apparent in the development of James's evolutionary psychology, which underscores the dynamic and originaive force of the individual. Under this doctrine, the truth-value of ideas is taken as analogous to evolutionary survival-value. James asserts that the novel ideas or "mental instincts" out of which fruitful intellectual or practical systems grow are not properly conceived of as imposed on the mind by the external environment; rather, these are "spontaneous variations upon which the intellectual struggle for existence is based. The fittest convictions survive."<sup>23</sup> Further, James expands on the criteria of fitness:

For a philosophy to succeed on a universal scale it must define the future *congruously with our spontaneous powers*. . . . [I]ts ultimate principle must not be one that essentially baffles or disappoints our dearest desires and most cherished powers. . . . Incompatibility of the future with their desires and active tendencies is, in fact, to most men a source of more fixed disquietude than uncertainty itself.<sup>24</sup>

The subjective method and evolutionary psychology of James thus affirm that human desire both spawns and measures any intellectual system. Ultimately, any idea or theory survives only if it satisfies the personal drives and interests that have underwritten it.

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"that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other. . . . We want to have a truth; we want to believe that our experiments and studies and discussions must put us in a continually better and better position towards it; and on this line we agree to fight out our thinking lives" (James, "The Will to Believe," 19). Moreover, James practices what he preaches: as Perry describes, he "*resolved* to allow his subjectivity to color his judgments" (Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* 1:493).

<sup>23</sup> James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," 78.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

Moreover, James argues that these needs and demands include due respect for man's intuitive sense that he is a free, self-determining being, as well as a host of corollary religious commitments. The most significant developments in intellectual history derive from these beliefs regarding human nature and its position within the universe. For example, he writes of the impact of Christianity:

If we survey the field of history and ask what feature all great periods of revival, of expansion of the human mind, display in common, we shall find, I think, simply this: that each and all of them have said to the human being, "The inmost nature of the reality is congenial to the powers which you possess." In what did the emancipating message of primitive Christianity consist but in the announcement that God recognized those weak and tender impulses which paganism so rudely overlooked? But for paganism this faculty of repentance was a pure supernumerary, a straggler too late for the fair. Christianity took it, and made it the one power in us which appealed straight to the heart of God.<sup>25</sup>

No theory or worldview is fit for adoption and survival if it denies or otherwise violates man's fundamental convictions regarding his own powers and their place within the larger universe. So, what of evolution? Because beliefs about human nature are foundational for all intellectual systems, it is proper to investigate James's evaluation of evolutionary thinking in light of his pragmatist standards. He writes: "Nothing could be more absurd than to hope for the definitive triumph of any philosophy which should refuse to legitimate, and to legitimate in an emphatic manner, the more powerful of our emotional and practical interests."<sup>26</sup> Evolutionary thinking contributes to significant shifts in the understanding of both nature and scientific theory; it brings about major changes in attitudes, expectations, and standards with respect to science. Moreover,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 74.

precisely as a scientific theory, it is itself measured in light of this new perspective. We now turn to James's own decades-long engagement with and measurement of evolutionary thinking.

#### PRAGMATIST EVALUATION AND APPROPRIATION OF EVOLUTIONARY THINKING

*Early Interest and Support.* As Darwinism was emerging in the 1860s, James was in a privileged position to observe and reflect on its growing importance and controversial implications. When he entered the Lawrence Scientific School in 1861, the school's most prominent faculty member was Louis Agassiz, an anti-Darwinian who supported the religious interpretation of the fixity of species as an essential component of God's plan manifest in nature. Agassiz was well known and highly regarded worldwide, and represented an older generation that sought to support its religious convictions through scientific inquiry. Despite the influence of this respected and important figure, Agassiz, James and virtually all of his peers at Harvard tended to favor Darwinian theory.<sup>27</sup>

There is evidence that James's inclinations toward Darwinism were influenced by two other teachers at the Lawrence Scientific School, distinguished botanist Asa Gray and professor of comparative anatomy Jeffries Wyman. Both men took professional stances that sought to ease the tensions between science and religion that Darwin's thought seemingly implied or provoked. Within the professional scientific community, Gray gave voice to a commonsense objection to atheistic evolutionism: "How can we

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<sup>27</sup> See Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, 112-24.

suppose Chance to be the author of a system in which everything is so regular as clockwork?”<sup>28</sup> As a meticulous and dedicated collector of empirical observations, Gray admitted that the very data assembled in support of evolutionary theory give evidence of a natural world that is too well ordered and predictable to be the product of blind forces. He advanced a conception of a remote, disengaged divinity as the ultimate source of the cosmos—a really existing being, yet one that need not concern scientists in the practice of their science. He denied that Darwin’s theory requires atheism, and he affirmed that Darwinism at least permits a theistic reading. Offering an interpretive metaphor, he argued that the mechanism of natural selection need not be incompatible with a creator God: “Natural selection is not the wind that propels the vessel, but the rudder which . . . shapes the course.”<sup>29</sup> Like Gray, Jeffries Wyman adopted a compromise position that assigned science and religion to separate spheres, and, while personally religious, he was not concerned with squaring his religious beliefs with his scientific work. This approach of Gray and Wyman appealed to James, who as a student was interested in “the more basic task of learning science without advocacy or controversy.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Asa Gray, “Remarks on Darwin,” *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 4 (1 May 1860): 424, quoted in Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, 131.

<sup>29</sup> Asa Gray, *Darwiniana: Essays and Reviews Pertaining to Darwinism* (1876; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), quoted in *ibid.*, 132. Darwin himself speaks of the divine in the concluding paragraph of the *Origin*: “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms, or into one” (459). In her commentary, however, Gertrude Himmelfarb is not so sanguine regarding the sincerity of the reference to the divine here, for in her judgment the whole notion of divine creation or design in nature is antithetical to Darwin’s thought. The existence of a creator’s design in nature means that natural selection serves no purpose and is therefore meaningless: “the whole point of his theory being that, out of undesigned and random variations, selection created an evolutionary pattern.” See Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution* (1959; Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1996), 347 ff.

<sup>30</sup> Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, 138.

James's earliest published work concerning evolution, an 1865 review of Thomas Huxley's *Lectures on the Elements of Comparative Anatomy*,<sup>31</sup> is a case in point. The piece contains generally favorable language,<sup>32</sup> yet it offers insightful commentary on the nature of scientific inquiry as well as an alternative theistic interpretation of evolution.

On Huxley's project and perspective, James summarizes:

If naturalists were as divided as politicians are, Mr. Huxley would be said to belong to the left wing. He inclines generally to that view of the phenomena of life which makes them result directly from the general laws of matter, rather than from the subordination of those laws to some principle of individuality, different in each case. He disapproves of the common reasoning from final causes in biology. . . . He has faith in the doctrine of Transmutation of Species, and the instant Mr. Darwin's book appeared, he published an earnest plea that it might have a fair and respectful hearing.<sup>33</sup>

James notes that science is an endeavor in which both the senses and reason are operative; both analytic attention to facts and details and synthetic ordering thereof are crucial to scientific progress. Indeed, scientific inquiry always seeks for more than what is simply apparent: "Below the *fact* of resemblance, she will seek till she lays bare the *ground* of resemblance; she will regard classification as her starting point rather than her goal; and far from spurning all 'System,' she will proclaim that the creation of a perfect system is the very end of her existence."<sup>34</sup> In other words, it is the very nature of science

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<sup>31</sup> William James, "Review of T. H. Huxley's *Lectures on Comparative Anatomy*," in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 197-205 (originally published in *North American Review* 100 [January 1865]: 290-8).

<sup>32</sup> See especially the comments on the acceptability of applying the theory of transmutation of species to man, and on transmutation's growing support from former detractors, at *ibid.*, 198.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

to transcend the mere facts of sensory experience, and Huxley, among others, is a case in point illustrating this intrinsic impetus in the direction of system and generalization.

As a major champion of Darwin's thought, Huxley functions as advocate for a theoretic framework for ordering observed facts which "asserts that organic forms, like the forms of the waves of the sea, are the result of the common properties of matter."<sup>35</sup> This materialist interpretation of nature, James notes, "is but one feature of a still wider synthesis, towards which few will deny that a current seems setting from every quarter of Science, and which may be briefly described as declaring the Self-Competency of Nature."<sup>36</sup> James rightly notes that this trend is an atheistic one that extracts the divine from the phenomena of nature. More important, however, he checks the authority of this worldview and offers another perspective on evolution that is sympathetic to theism:

[G]rant that at present [evolutionary thinking] turns its back upon the Supernatural,—may it not nevertheless serve an excellent purpose, and in the end, by introducing order into the Natural, prove to be a necessary step in the way to a larger, purer view of the Supernatural? Perhaps it may never be established; but if it is, it will do away at any rate with that eternal muddling together of Natural and Supernatural. God will no longer be made to appear as on a level with Nature and acting as a mere rival to her forces. . . . May it not be that, finding Nature a great closed sack, as it were, *tota, teres atque rotunda*, without any *partial* inlets to the Supernatural, without any *occasional* Ends *within* her bosom, we shall be driven to look for final causes on some deeper plane underlying the whole of Nature at once, and there shall find them?<sup>37</sup>

The value of James's insight here is threefold. First, he suggests a plausible synthesis capable of standing against the atheistic, naturalistic trend of the day. Second, he advances an argument that might persuade some who are religiously minded that

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

evolution need not be the blasphemy they think it is. Finally, in the spirit of Asa Gray and Jeffries Wyman, he makes a reasonable case for the virtue of separating science and metaphysics as distinct modes of inquiry: let science do its work, for this need not undermine religious belief and may even offer it more rigorous support by guiding earnest seekers of metaphysical truth to contemplate objects beyond the physical world.

James deals with the topic of evolution in another 1865 review, this one of Alfred Wallace's *The Origin of Human Races*.<sup>38</sup> In this brief treatment James expresses approval of Wallace's use of the Darwinian mechanism of natural selection to support monogenism, the theory that the human race has descended from a single ancestral type. Opponents of monogenism point to the apparent permanence of diverse human races throughout history as evidence from which to infer that human races have originated and descended from different types. Wallace attempts to deflate this argument by explaining how the mechanism of natural selection itself may be responsible for the apparent permanence of species. James summarizes:

Mr. Wallace . . . shows that in mankind the causes of variation are no longer active, by pointing out that any further physical change must be checked as soon as certain conditions are fulfilled. These conditions are given when Man's affections and intellect are sufficiently developed to make him a truly social, instead of a solitary or a merely gregarious being.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, natural selection is stalled by the emergence of man's intellectual and emotional capacities. Within other species, individuals compete with one another for

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 202-3.

<sup>38</sup> William James, "Review of Alfred R. Wallace's *The Origin of Human Races*," in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 206-8 (originally published in *North American Review* 101 [July 1865]: 261-3).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 206.



limited resources, and natural selection preserves the most successful specimens of such competition, who in turn produce more robust offspring. Generation by generation, as the theory goes, individuals and by extension species in general passively grow better fitted to their environment. In man, however, the situation is different. As sympathetic and cooperative, humans circumvent natural selection insofar as less vigorous individuals are sustained through the support of the community: “the weaker, the dwarfish, those of less active limbs, or less piercing eyesight, do not suffer the extreme penalty which falls upon animals so defective.”<sup>40</sup> The force of natural selection is also impeded insofar as man is capable of adapting to the environment by using intellect to fashion clothing, tools, weapons, and so on. In comparison with these sorts of “external” adaptations that intellect produces, favorable bodily variations are far less crucial to survival, and natural selection diminishes to a vanishing point precisely as the progress of civilization proceeds. Thus, instead of promoting the survival and propagation of ever more perfect individuals, natural selection preserves the most socially and intellectually developed communities, whose qualities “[enable] them to be most independent of the external world.”<sup>41</sup>

All of this is to argue that polygenism need not be judged the most reasonable explanation of the apparent permanence or invariability of human races; natural selection operating in the manner Wallace describes could be an adequate account. James judges this argument of Wallace to be “most reasonable, indeed obvious,” and he adds, “so that

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 208.

in this case as in the case of Darwin's original law, what most astonishes the reader is the fact that the discovery was made so late."<sup>42</sup> The review is thus further evidence of James's early, favorable view of Darwinian theory.

James deals directly with Darwin in two 1868 reviews of the latter's *Variations of Animals and Plants under Domestication*.<sup>43</sup> The second and shorter review comments on Darwin's treatment of the phenomenon of atavism or reversion, whereby individual organisms exhibit traits that are primitive or have been absent for at least several generations. Given the underdeveloped state of genetic science at the time, Darwin's treatment is largely anachronistic. James notes some points of logical circularity in Darwin's presentation, and he offers a brief negative judgment: "But unfortunately the interpretation has just so much of the hypothetical element in it, in all the cases, that a sceptic who should refuse to accept it would have no trouble in presenting a legal and logical justification for his conduct."<sup>44</sup> Although James is generally well disposed toward Darwin, he does not hastily swallow his thought whole but maintains a measured and thoughtful approach.

In the first and more substantive review, James comments on Darwin's reply to "one of the weightiest objections" to the theory of natural selection, namely, the nearly universal prevalence of sexuality. The objection can be summarized as follows: Would not species' survival be better guaranteed if propagation did not require the union of the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> William James, "Two Reviews of *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, by Charles Darwin," in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 230-9 (originally published in *North American Review* 107 [July 1868]: 362-8, and *Atlantic Monthly* 22 [July 1868]: 122-4).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 238.

sexes? And if so, would it not stand to reason that natural selection should favor and promote those individuals capable of self-propagation? So at least it might seem, which leads one to question the efficiency—indeed the reality—of the mechanism of natural selection. If natural selection is a fact, then why hasn't it favored individuals that are competent to reproduce themselves? Reproduction by sexual union is the norm in nature among higher species, but if this fact "be due to natural selection, one is tempted to exclaim, then natural selection is capable of heaping up difficulties in the way of the subsistence of specific forms!"<sup>45</sup> Darwin's reply to this objection is, simply, that there must be some utility in sexuality, and for this reason natural selection has preserved it. James paraphrases: "we must be able to prove that when two distinct individuals contribute to form the germ, they communicate to it some property of vigor or viability, which in the long run more than compensates for that greater immediate fecundity which would obtain in a family whose members were capable of multiplying singly and separately."<sup>46</sup>

Once again James's language is generally approving, but the most important comment in this review may be read as somewhat critical. He briefly outlines Darwin's study of variation, and he comments: "We cannot say that we think the author does much in the work of penetrating the dense veil that covers the subject, though by various minor generalizations and groupings of facts he makes the matter somewhat more easy to

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. James also adds that Darwin views the physiological causes as "totally obscure" (231). Nonetheless, the empirical evidence clearly suggests that crossbreeding which mixes individuals of different habitats and bloodlines is beneficial, even though mixing that is "too abrupt" or "too incongruous" may give rise to sterile offspring (232).

handle.”<sup>47</sup> If the tone is critical, however, it may be that the subject matter at hand, not Darwin himself, is the reason why. *Is the “dense veil” covering the causes of variation even penetrable?* Here James signals an interest in and appreciation of Darwin that will deepen throughout his career but remain centered around this crucial question.

Regarding the causes of variation, Darwin considers and collects various remote factors such as changes in external conditions like climate or diet; but with respect to more proximate causes, less is said with any high degree of precision. James summarizes:

But the nearer causes which determine the particular form of the variation one cannot even guess at. We can only say, the parent organism, and consequently the reproductive system, receives a sort of commotion, which causes its elements to combine in unwonted ways, but the particular source of the shock is a vanishing moment in the determination of the result compared with the precise condition of the elements which receive it. The vagueness of all speculation here is obvious.<sup>48</sup>

The incompleteness of Darwin’s evidence and conclusions is evidently troubling, and James is generally unsatisfied with the current state of research on the subject.

It is important to note that this shortcoming of Darwin’s project will later be taken by James as a virtue. He says of Darwin’s presentation: “It is, doubtless, provisional, but nonetheless serviceable for that,”<sup>49</sup> thus implying a belief that variation might admit of explanation and a hope that the explanation might some day be attained. Still, James is

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 235. Further suggesting some belief in the possibility that the subject might be illumined, he also writes: “There is hardly a single ‘law’ promulgated by Mr. Darwin, which has not numerous inexplicable exceptions. . . . But this only shows how far we are from the elementary phenomena to be studied” (ibid., 234).

also open to the possibility that these aspects of nature are irremediably beyond the scope of human knowing. He writes:

The one strong impression that affects the reader . . . is that of the endless complication of the phenomena in question, and the (perhaps hopeless) subtlety and occultness of the immediate causes [of variation]. At first glance, the only ‘law’ under which the greater mass of the facts the author has brought together can be grouped seems to be that of Caprice,—caprice in inheriting, caprice in transmitting, caprice everywhere, in turn.<sup>50</sup>

James here homes in on what for him will be the most important and appealing aspect of Darwin’s thought in the development and deployment of his own thinking on evolution: the obscurity, and perhaps unknowability and spontaneity, of the causes of variation.

These early reviews are evidence of James’s fluency in both Darwin’s thought and the issues in the general discussion of evolution. Because they are only reviews, they do not afford James the occasion to reveal his own considered thoughts on the subject of evolution. But when taken in conjunction with his later work, the early spark of interest ignited by Darwin’s principle of variation—as seemingly spontaneous and deriving from within the individual organism—can be seen as the source from which James’s thinking on the evolution of man develops.

*Anti-Spencerian Arguments.* As a primary target of the young Professor James, the thought of Herbert Spencer sharpens his focus on the specific question of the evolution of man. In his own 1855 *Principles of Psychology*, Spencer lays out his “law of growth of intelligence,” which explains in largely reductive terms the emergence of

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 234.

mind in general, and specifically human consciousness.<sup>51</sup> While Spencer agreed with many aspects of the theory that Darwin was in the process of articulating, the points where the two diverge are crucial for James. In the lecture notes for a course he taught in 1878-79, which include a section on “Spencer’s Law of Intelligence,” James surveys and argues against Spencer’s view of the mind as passively shaped by the forces of its environment, and he uses Darwinian principles to support this argument. In James’s view, Darwin offers an alternate scientific conception of the relationship between mind and its environment that avoids the pitfalls of Spencer’s reductionism and is thus the better option to affirm.

According to Spencer, “inward relations” are molded by outer ones. That is to say, the principal agent in the process of evolution is the environment: mind emerges through a process of “adaptive equilibration,” whereby the various pressures of the environment shape the neural structures of organisms, which in turn influence the development of attendant anatomical and mental structures. This account is essentially mechano-materialist and implicitly deterministic, and thus it naturally prompts James’s objection. As his notes summarize: “Sp[encer]’s law makes the outer relations do all the work. The inner ones are plastic and without spontaneity.”<sup>52</sup> But such a conception is outmoded, says James, and “in Psychology he [Spencer] repeats the defects of Darwin’s predecessors in biology.”<sup>53</sup> The main error for which Spencer is to be blamed, in James’s

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<sup>51</sup> For a brief summary, see Richards, “The Personal Equation in Science,” 398-400.

<sup>52</sup> William James, “Spencer’s Law of Intelligence,” in *Manuscript Lectures*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt et al., *The Works of William James*, vol. 19 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 135.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

assessment, is his limited account of the causes of variation in terms of reactive adaptation. Moreover, this error is corrected by Darwin, whose key innovation is to explain evolution through the distinct but collaborative factors of spontaneous variation and natural selection.

As James reads him, Darwin offers a model of evolutionary progress that leaves room for the individual organism itself to make a genuine contribution. Variations that are spontaneous may be conceived as not externally imposed or determined but springing from within the living organism—for as *spontaneous*, they are not, properly speaking, functions of environmental forces. But James is careful to note: “Darwin never means that spont[aneous] var[iation]s are causeless; nor that they are not fatally implied in the environment since they and it are both parts of the same natural whole.”<sup>54</sup> Instead, Darwin’s thought draws out a subtler point regarding the limits of scientific knowledge. The ultimate causes of variations may elude the grasp of science, and the proper object of scientific investigation and knowledge is the environment’s preserving influence, which plays out as the process of natural selection. James lauds Darwin for refining the position of Spencer and others by

emphasiz[ing] the truth that the regulator or preserver of the variation, the environment, is a different part from its producer, [and] is moreover sensible to us and [a] matter of scientific discussion. To clump it together with the stimulus of [variations] and say ‘variations are caused by outward relations’ is to revert from scientific distinctness to speculative vagueness.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 137. Yet to ascend to this level and collect all forces—the internal and the external, those within the individual and those flowing from the environment—under the single form of “nature” is to generalize in a manner that is not properly scientific. Later in the same lecture notes, he writes: “But how useless for any particular scientific inquiry into the causes of a change is it to fall back on an empty universal abstraction and say: ‘Change is produced by Nature.’ We want to know in what part of nature to look for the cause—the proximate cause” (ibid., 139).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

The generalized statement that “variations are caused by outward relations” is simply too vague and indistinct to have any useful meaning, or indeed to be classified as “scientific.”<sup>56</sup> One virtue of Darwin’s theory is its greater precision in describing the function of the environment in the evolutionary process. Certainly, the environment plays a significant role, but according to the Darwinian script, that role is indirect and secondary. The “outward relations” of the environment do not directly produce variations; rather, through the process of natural selection, they simply cast their vote, as it were, in favor of certain already existing variations that render organisms more fit to survive. Having delineated the work of the external environment in this manner, James infers: “It is thus fair to say that the organism differentiates *itself*.”<sup>57</sup> In this manner, he employs Darwin’s biological principles to argue by analogy that Spencer’s evolutionary psychology may well be incorrect.

Furthermore, according to James, Spencer is worthy of indictment on pragmatist grounds. In the notes for the “Concluding Lecture on Spencer,” he writes:

Now common men care not much for explanation or unity. That is but one factor of philosophy. They want to expect / They want a rule for action which shall be congruous with their power—a rule for their will / And a sanction for that rule—an authority to enforce it. / A harmony of might & right. . . . Now mechanism evolving its products does not this.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Perry cites a related comment of James: “It is precisely because the action of the environment moulds the mind in so peculiar and distinct a way, that I object to allowing Spencer to say that it moulds it in every way” (Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* 1:478-9).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. See also Richards, “The Personal Equation in Science,” 402-4. Here it is noted that, while James understood that natural selection was typically taken as a deterministic process, he did not accept such an overall deterministic interpretation of Darwin, since the theory neither specifies nor depends on specifying the causes of variations.

<sup>58</sup> William James, “Concluding Lecture on Spencer,” in *Manuscript Lectures*, 159.



The system proposed by Spencer may be unified and coherent; yet because it characterizes human consciousness as the passive by-product of environmental forces, it “fails to define the future *congruously with our spontaneous powers*,” and “its ultimate principle . . . baffles or disappoints our dearest desires and most cherished powers.”<sup>59</sup>

There is no room for man’s freedom and self-determination under Spencer’s theory.

Standing as a far better scientific option, Darwin’s thought is attractive to James insofar as it suggests a nuanced alternative to the growing currents of materialist evolutionism, a movement of which Spencer was a major figure, by opening up a way to conceptualize the emergence of mind and its relation to the environment in a manner compatible with James’s fuller, nonreductive view of human nature.

In chapter 6 of the *Principles*, James presents a more comprehensive view of Spencer’s evolutionary account of the emergence of human consciousness and his own argument against that account. The analysis begins with a working hypothesis of many evolutionists: “all the new forms of being that make their appearance are really nothing more than results of the redistribution of the original and unchanging materials.”<sup>60</sup> Under this assumption, he notes, a problem of discontinuity arises as consciousness emerges, for “an entirely new nature seems to slip in, something whereof the potency was not given in the mere outward atoms of the original chaos.”<sup>61</sup> Thinkers like Spencer, however, seek to deal with this difficulty by positing a theory of what James slightly calls “mind-

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<sup>59</sup> James, “The Sentiment of Rationality,” 70.

<sup>60</sup> James, *Principles* 1:149.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

dust”—that “[e]ach atom of the nebula . . . must have had an aboriginal atom of consciousness linked with it”—and so the emergence of higher-level consciousness may be explained by a process of combinations analogous to, and perhaps even parallel with, the aggregations of matter.<sup>62</sup> James quotes Spencer at length in order to lay out the latter’s argument for the plausibility of the mind-dust theory. As summarized by James, his dialectical tactic is to appeal to the explanatory power of mind-dust: the fact that certain phenomena—the perception of musical notes, for example—are well explained under such a theory bolsters its plausibility.<sup>63</sup> James undercuts Spencer with the measured response, “Really we have no experimental proof by which to decide,” and he draws counter-evidence from his physiological studies to show that it is just as plausible to hold the mind-dust explanation superfluous in cases analogous to those in which Spencer claims it is useful.<sup>64</sup>

James notes, however, that a “still more fatal objection” lies in the logical unintelligibility of the mind-dust theory.<sup>65</sup> It is problematic to conceive of mind as an aggregation or combination of atoms of mind-dust, for such a state of affairs necessarily requires a cause separate from the units it comprises. On this point he quotes his contemporary Josiah Royce: “No summing up of parts can make a unity of a mass of discrete constituents, unless they exist for some other subject, not the mass itself.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 1:152.

<sup>63</sup> See *ibid.* 1:153-6.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 1:159.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 1:160.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 1:161.

Consider twelve men, each speaking one word: together they might form a sentence; but if they do, only a listener outside the group can appreciate it, since individually each of the twelve lacks consciousness of the meaning of the whole. Similarly, on their own, atoms of mind-dust are incapable of producing any higher state of consciousness. But mind is evidently self-consciousness—it does grasp this sense of the whole. Therefore, howsoever it emerges, the higher state of consciousness is “a new psychic entity, . . . *toto caelo* different from such an ‘integration’ of the lower states” as the mind-dust theory.<sup>67</sup> Despite the effort, in its failure to do justice to the special nature of human consciousness, the mind-dust theory also fails to explain anything regarding its origin.

Armed once again with Darwin’s thought, in chapter 29 of the *Principles* James continues to take aim at Spencer’s account of the evolutionary development of human consciousness. The question is the extent to which experiential contact with the environment is responsible for psychogenesis, particularly the formation of the structures of mental life that are unique to human beings. Quoting extensively, James establishes Spencer’s position as allied with that of Lamarck, who is best known for his theory regarding the inheritance of acquired traits.<sup>68</sup> Both Spencer and Lamarck favor what James calls the “front door” account of evolutionary development, namely, the view that individuals’ mental structures are adaptations that have been molded by environmental forces.<sup>69</sup> Further, according to this view such traits are heritable, and the evolved mental

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 1:164 n. 17.

<sup>68</sup> See Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy: An Exposition with regard to the Natural History of Animals*, trans. Hugh Elliot (1809; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 2:1226.

structures of man today are thus the cumulative effects of the mind-shaping experiences of his ancestors: “The effects of the most *uniform* and *frequent* of these experiences have been successively bequeathed, principal and interest; and have slowly amounted to that high intelligence which lies latent in the brain of the infant . . . and which, with minute additions, it bequeaths to future generations.”<sup>70</sup>

James’s critique of this position begins by highlighting Darwin’s key innovation in zoology—the introduction of variation, through “molecular and hidden” causes within individuals—as another possible explanation of evolutionary change. In contrast to the “front door” mode of adaptation that responds to environmental circumstances, James refers to development through these internal changes as the “back door” mode of development. Further, he argues that, in an approach to the question of psychogenesis, both modes deserve to be considered.<sup>71</sup>

James offers a straightforward thesis regarding the evolutionary history of man’s peculiar mental traits: “Our higher aesthetic, moral, and intellectual life seems made up of affections of this collateral and incidental sort, which have entered the mind by the back stairs, as it were, or rather have not entered the mind at all, but got surreptitiously born in the house.”<sup>72</sup> He goes on to draw supporting evidence by considering the emergence of elementary mental categories,<sup>73</sup> the natural sciences,<sup>74</sup> and the pure

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<sup>70</sup> In his own *Principles* 2:1222, James quotes from §207 of Spencer’s *Principles of Psychology*.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 2:1224-5.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 2:1225.

<sup>73</sup> He refers specifically to the basic perception and understanding of various sensations, volitions and affects, the concepts of time, space, number, difference and resemblance, causality, and so on. See *ibid.* 2:1226-30.

sciences, mathematics, and logic.<sup>75</sup> James notes that the intuitions of many might be inspired by or allied with the thought of Spencer—that is, based on the premise that the elements of mind are built up passively or reactively, in response to experience of the outer world—and he also grants that in many cases such intuitions are well founded and indeed correct. The crux of his argument, however, is that this account does not tell the whole story.<sup>76</sup> If we consider our own experience, he submits, we find that “abstract and general discoveries usually come to us as lucky fancies,”<sup>77</sup> not as simple inferences from our observations of the world. He states emphatically: “What we experience, what *comes before us*, is a chaos of fragmentary impressions interrupting each other; what we *think* is an abstract system of hypothetical data and laws.”<sup>78</sup> So many of our ideas and judgments indisputably exceed what is given in empirical experience of the world. Given this evidence from ordinary experience, James argues, elementary mental categories plausibly come into being in similar fashion, as “pure *idiosyncrasies*, spontaneous variations, fitted

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<sup>74</sup> See *ibid.* 2:1230-6.

<sup>75</sup> See *ibid.* 2:1237-53.

<sup>76</sup> As Robert J. Richards notes, James does not deny that we have an “evolutionary legacy” built into our mental structures, comprising an array of fixed sensory and emotional responses and basic rational abilities. Indeed, he notes, James’s doctrine on instincts—“complexes of reflex actions released by appropriate environmental stimuli”—reveals as much. See Richards, “The Personal Equation in Science,” 414-17. However, the crucial elements for rational thought—the ability to discern differences and to hold within consciousness a series of objects—could not have been forged through experience alone; “rather, they were necessary for coherent experience in the first place. These must have spontaneously flashed in our ancestors, permitting them to survive and prosper” (*ibid.*, 417).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 2:1228.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 2:1231.

by good luck . . . to take cognizance of objects . . . without being in any intelligible sense immediate derivatives of them.”<sup>79</sup>

James notes that the independent development of mental structures from within is particularly evident in the case of experimental science, where the supposed “natural” epistemological order is reversed. In this setting, raw experience does not shape the mind, strictly speaking; instead, prior conceptions and hypotheses largely shape the way experience is received and interpreted.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, many scientific insights are well explained as strokes of genius that spring from within; they are “not congruent either with the forms in which reality exists or . . . those in which experiences befall us, but . . . may nevertheless be explained by the way in which experiences befall in a mind gifted with memory, expectation, and the possibility of feeling doubt, curiosity, belief, and denial.”<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, such insights are not uniform but vary from person to person, even when individuals are privy to the same experiential data.<sup>82</sup> The primary activities of reasoning—abstraction and substitution—also reveal the mind as something self-directed and not entirely formed by the environment: “[W]e see that we can drop intermediaries, use remote terms just like near ones, and put a genus in the place of a species. This shows that the principle of mediate subsumption has nothing to do with the particular order of our experiences, or with the outer coexistence and sequences of terms.”<sup>83</sup> And:

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 2:1228.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 2:1234-5.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 2:1230.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 2:1244.

“The flight to this last kind over the heads of the intermediaries is the essential feature of the intellectual operation here. . . . [I]t has nothing to do with the time- and space-order in which the things have been experienced.”<sup>84</sup> Although they may draw upon experience of the external environment, human mental structures do not arise as simple effects or passive mirrors of that environment. Rather, James argues, they give evidence of something internal that is evidently at work.

James makes other points to argue against Spencer’s view. First, at its foundations, science is motivated by subjective preferences and principles, and so it reveals the independent activity and influence of mind. Again, he sounds a familiar note: “The popular notion that ‘Science’ is forced on the mind *ab extra*, and that our interests have nothing to do with its constructions, is utterly absurd.”<sup>85</sup> At the very least, science begins with man’s assumption of and preference for a world that is intelligible. As scientific inquiry progresses, other “postulates of rationality” undergird it, such as “*ex nihilo nihil fit*,” “nature is simple and invariable,” “nature acts by the shortest ways,” and so on.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, James notes, these metaphysical principles are reducible to aesthetic ones, for “what do all such principles express save our sense of how pleasantly our intellect would feel if it had a Nature of that sort to deal with?”<sup>87</sup> Also problematic for the Spencerian position is the fact that so much of nature remains a mystery,

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 2:1247.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 2:1260.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 2:1262-3.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 2:1265.

unexplained though conscientiously and extensively observed. If the “front door” account were true, it seems likely that far less in nature would remain obscure.<sup>88</sup>

Finally, James considers some of the empirical evidence that Spencer offers to support the theory that the evolution of mental instincts progresses by the inheritance of environmentally formed habits rooted in organic alterations of the brain and nervous system.<sup>89</sup> Without going into great detail, he weighs this evidence against that which Darwin offers to make the case for evolution by natural selection of variations that arise independently and from within. He concludes both that Darwin’s argument is more convincing, and that much of Spencer’s evidence can be construed as either ambivalent or irrelevant. Moreover, he notes that Spencer concedes, at least in particular cases, Darwin’s fundamental point. To illustrate, he quotes Spencer on the sentiment of pity: “This feeling is not one that has arisen through the inherited effects of experience, but belongs to a quite different group, traceable to the survival of the fittest simply—to the natural selection of incidental variations.”<sup>90</sup> In an addendum to the first edition of the *Principles*, James reaffirms his conviction regarding the “back door” origins of the structures of human consciousness, but he adopts a cautionary and tentative tone in doing so. He admits the merit of the argument that seemingly random variations would be insufficient to produce the complexity of structures observed especially in higher animals and humans. His bottom-line assessment, however, is that while this a priori argument

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<sup>88</sup> See *ibid.* 2:1263.

<sup>89</sup> See *ibid.* 2:1271-4.

<sup>90</sup> The quotation is from Spencer’s *Principles of Psychology* 2:623, at *ibid.* 2:1277.



might diminish the persuasiveness of Darwin's theory of natural selection, it offers nothing positively persuasive on the side of the Spencerian view.<sup>91</sup>

James offers further criticism of the latter in an 1879 review of Spencer's *The Data of Ethics*. The volume lays out Spencer's application of evolutionary thinking to the realm of human behavior, where the fundamental principle is said to be that the "perfect social state" is that "towards which evolution inevitably tends."<sup>92</sup> Spencer theorizes that only those behaviors and habits that are "life-subserving" will persist and be promoted through the natural evolutionary mechanism, and that these very same habits and behaviors will coincide with our notions of virtue. He argues on these evolutionary grounds that certain behaviors and projects, such as those of nations at war, are ill fated.<sup>93</sup> Under this model, man's virtue eventually will be innate and exercised automatically: "Mark that in this perfectly-evolved condition all our virtue is to flow spontaneously from our natural constitution. There will be no self-compulsion in our justice."<sup>94</sup> Feelings of moral obligation and the need for coercive threats of punishment are thus symptoms of an imperfect and intermediate stage of man's ethical evolution.

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<sup>91</sup> See *ibid.* 2:1278-80.

<sup>92</sup> William James, "Review of Herbert Spencer's *The Data of Ethics* (1879)," in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 349.

<sup>93</sup> James notes the problematic nature of this example, for evolutionary arguments may certainly support warfare as the means of determining the so-called survival of the fittest. See *ibid.*, 352.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

A host of problems and questions stem from such a picture of the “blind spontaneity” of human virtue.<sup>95</sup> Here, however, James sets aside many of these issues, and simply faults Spencer for his claims regarding the objectivity of ethical standards: “We can never on evolutionist principles altogether bar out personal bias, or the subjective method, from the construction of the ethical standard of right, however fatalistic we may be. For what is right means what succeeds, . . . [and what succeeds does so] through the determinate acts of determinate individuals.”<sup>96</sup> Spencer implies that the ethical standards of the perfect social state are extrinsically determined by nature, as the principles that are objectively most “life-sub-serving,” and that progress toward their full realization is similarly determined; in fact, however, ethical standards are ever the personal, embodied ideals of individual men, without whose actions they are never fulfilled.

A point made by James in his 1887 review of Jacob Schurman’s *The Ethical Import of Darwinism* can be seen as supplementing this criticism of Spencer. Schurman calls into question the assumption that morality is a feature of human consciousness preserved and promoted essentially because of its survival-value. On the origins of moral sense, James writes:

Even if it were true . . . that consciousness were an accident in an automaton, and conscience an accident of that accident—the utilities of the two accidents enabling them to survive—it would not follow (as the materialistic evolutionists keep saying or hinting) that survival is the whole meaning of morality. . . .

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<sup>95</sup> Elsewhere, James addresses these issues and clearly maintains that the behavior is moral only if individuals are free to choose their actions from a set of possible courses. See especially *Principles*, chap. 26; also Richards, “The Personal Equation in Science,” 420-2, and James O. Pawelski, *The Dynamic Individualism of William James*, 52-4.

<sup>96</sup> James, “Review of Herbert Spencer’s *The Data of Ethics* (1879),” 352-3.

[Quoting Schurman,] “All that natural selection requires is that something shall be useful; what else it may be, what other predicates it may have, wherein its essence consists, natural selection knows not and reckons not. Be virtue a proximate end or an ultimate end, natural selection tells us it will be preserved and perpetuated if it is useful; and it tells us no more.”<sup>97</sup>

James thus endorses Schurman to the extent that he casts doubt upon evolutionists such as Spencer, who fit human ideals into an interpretation of the social progress of man that interprets ethical standards in terms of biological utility. In Schurman’s view, which James approves, even under the assumption that the elements of human morality have arisen through an evolutionary process, these elements need not be construed as mere means for survival. Granted, according to a theory of natural selection, the fact that such ideals have been preserved indicates they are in some way biologically useful, but this fact does not preclude (a) their being valuable in some other respects or (b) their primary value consisting in one of those other respects.

James applies Darwinian principles more rigorously in a lecture entitled “Great Men, Great Thoughts and the Environment,”<sup>98</sup> in which he continues to take issue with the application of Spencer’s evolutionary thinking to the question of social progress. He begins by decrying the Spencerian explanation of such development as the function of an array of converging environmental factors. The central question is: “What are the causes that make communities change from generation to generation?” The Spencerian reply, according to James:

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<sup>97</sup> William James, “Review of Jacob G. Schurman’s *The Ethical Impact of Darwinism* (1887),” in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 408-9.

<sup>98</sup> Published in *The Will to Believe*, 163-89 (originally delivered to the Harvard Natural History Society and published in *Atlantic Monthly* 46 [1880]: 441-59).

The changes are irrespective of persons, and independent of individual control. They are due to the environment, to the circumstances, the physical geography, the ancestral conditions, the increasing experience of outer relations; to everything, in fact, except the Grants and the Bismarks, the Joneses and the Smiths.<sup>99</sup>

Such an explanation betrays a monistic worldview whereby all the events in the universe are inevitably bound up with one another as elements of one grand, all-encompassing network of causality. There are no accidents or contingencies in such a universe; within the system of the unified whole, each action is necessitated by its antecedents, and it in turn contributes to the necessity of those actions that follow it. But this worldview and explanation of events, James asserts, exceeds the finite perspective of any human individual and, for this reason, are unwarranted abstractions. Moreover, those who would attempt to describe any specific causal chain within such a monistic worldview necessarily “drop real causes to snatch at others, which from no possible human point of view are available or attainable.”<sup>100</sup> From their limited perspectives they can construct only partial, and hence inherently flawed, accounts. The Spencerian explanation of social change thus explains either too little—in positing a vast, vague, monistic universe in which “we have lost all the concrete facts and links”<sup>101</sup>—or too much, as soon as it attempts to pinpoint specific causes.

By contrast, James argues that the human perspective cannot encompass the comprehensive whole. It is foolish to cling to monism and, conversely, wise to adopt a pluralistic view that leaves room for nonnecessitated, unpredictable, independently

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 165.

occurring courses of events.<sup>102</sup> On James's reading, Darwin promotes the pluralistic view insofar as he helpfully distinguishes between those causes that produce variations and those that preserve (or destroy) them after they have been produced. The former are the inner, recondite causes of variation from within, which are simply accepted as factual though mysterious data, and the latter are the outer, environmental pressures of natural and sexual selection. James summarizes the achievement of Darwin in two parts. First: "to show the utter insignificance in amount of these changes produced by direct adaptation, the immensely greater mass of changes being produced by internal molecular accidents, of which we know nothing."<sup>103</sup> Second: "to define the true problem with which we have to deal when we study the effects of the visible environment on the animal. . . . [namely, is] the environment more likely to *preserve or destroy him*, on account of this or that peculiarity with which he may be born?"<sup>104</sup> Darwin thus corrects the errors of his predecessors, including Spencer, who fatally "committed the blunder of clumping the two cycles of causation together" and thus could not avoid the above-mentioned problems of monism.<sup>105</sup>

With respect to the question of social evolution, James offers an analogy that draws on Darwin. Great men—geniuses, reformers, revolutionaries, and so on—are conceived not as products of their environments but as contingent, seemingly

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 166-7.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 167.

spontaneous variations, and the precise causes of their greatness we simply do not seek to explain. The legitimate, answerable questions about them concern not the origins of their greatness, but rather the mutual influence of their greatness and their environments.

Once they come into existence, how are they *selected*? How do great men affect their circumstances, and how do their circumstances affect them? The great man may be conceived as something other than a product, namely, as a dynamic force interacting with the social and political environment that may then preserve or destroy him and his ideals.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, the role of the environment is carefully circumscribed, thereby avoiding the error committed by those thinkers whose accounts of the function of the environment fail to distinguish between necessary and sufficient conditions.<sup>107</sup> By this analogy, James both preserves the self-determining powers of the individual person and avoids the troubling vagueness or inconsistencies that spring from the monistic worldview.

Human consciousness, and by extension the development of human social forms and ideals, cannot have come about as the simple products or passive effects of environmental forces. The empirical philosophy that would argue otherwise, James

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<sup>106</sup> See *ibid.*, 170-4. Under this model, the pressures of the social and political environment are analogous to the pressures exerted by the natural environment in the process of natural selection. See also Eugene Taylor, "William James on Darwin: An Evolutionary Theory of Consciousness," in *Psychology: Perspectives and Practice*, ed. S. M. Pfafflin, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, no. 602 (1990): 14.

<sup>107</sup> James specifically indicts Grant Allen, a disciple of Spencer who promoted the general thesis and who intended to offer proof through anthropological studies of varied societies such as China, India, England, and Rome. On the error of this approach, James implies that plenty of counter-evidence exists: "Does an omelet appear whenever three eggs are broken? So of the Greek mind. To get such versatile intelligence it may be that such commercial dealings with the world as the geographical Hellas afforded are a necessary condition. But if they are a sufficient condition, why did not the Phoenecians outstrip the Greeks in intelligence?" (*The Will to Believe*, 178).

shows, fails to prove its point inasmuch as it is impotent to account for a host of mental structures—including propositions and ideals that are metaphysical, logical, mathematical, ethical, and aesthetic—none of which mirrors the so-called time- and space-order of things.<sup>108</sup> Whence these distinctive aspects of mind? James modestly admits that “at present we can give no account. Even in the clearest parts of Psychology our insight is insignificant enough. And the more sincerely one seeks to trace the actual course of psychogenesis, . . . the more clearly one perceives ‘the slowly gathering twilight close in utter night.’”<sup>109</sup> As a scientist, however, he remains committed to the possibility of a naturalistic account, and as a philosopher, he finds that Darwinian principles offer the best foundation.

*Positive Thought on the Evolution of Human Consciousness.* Although James appeals to Darwin in order to do battle with Spencer’s account of the emergence of human consciousness, and although the impact of Darwin is the focus of this dissertation, it is important to note that James is not informed by Darwinian thought alone. Indeed, the influence of the scientific perspective of German naturalism can be observed in James’s early career. At a critical point in the development of modern psychological research and the emergence of his own thought on psychology, James sided with the view of German naturalists, including Hermann von Helmholtz, Wilhelm Wundt, and Gustav Fechner, who opposed atomistic trends that would reduce psychology to physics,

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<sup>108</sup> James, *Principles* 2:1280.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. In this final line of the *Principles*, James quotes from William Wordsworth’s “The Excursion.”

physiology, and biology, and who affirmed that some other element, something nonmaterial or spiritual, is at the foundation of human consciousness. According to this view, while the underlying principle itself may be inaccessible through material investigations, its effects are still manifest; so empirical research regarding the latter is still worthy.<sup>110</sup> In an 1875 review of Wundt's *Grundzuge der physiologischen Psychologie*, James praises the renowned psychologist's attention to "what empiricists are too apt to ignore,—the thorough-going participation of the spontaneous mental element in determining even the simplest experiences."<sup>111</sup> The method of investigating the unseen by looking to effects is wholly compatible with James's pragmatism. Underscoring the value of such an approach, in other lecture notes James writes: "I merely wish to call to the attention of persons who are fearful of the reduction by physiology of higher to lower powers of the mind that H[elmholtz] & W[undt,] both absolutely incapable of sentimental bias, put forth a doctrine . . . which has been hailed by followers of Kant as the most striking experimental verification ever made of a doctrine originally deduced a priori, the doctrine of innate potentialities in the mind which sensations merely awaken into exercise."<sup>112</sup> The German naturalists affirmed and sought experimentally to corroborate the notion of an irreducible, inner principle of

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<sup>110</sup> See Stefano Poggi, "William James and German Naturalism," in *Nature in American Philosophy*, ed. Jean De Groot (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 75-85, especially 78.

<sup>111</sup> William James, "Review of Wilhelm Wundt's *Grundzuge der physiologischen Psychologie*," in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 300.

<sup>112</sup> William James, "Johns Hopkins Lectures on 'The Senses and the Brain and Their Relation to Thought' (1878)," in *Manuscript Lectures*, 9.



human consciousness. Darwin was important for James inasmuch as he offered yet another bona fide scientific perspective that was at least hospitable to this commitment.

In addition to using Darwin in his arguments against the reductive, materialist thought of Herbert Spencer, James draws on Darwin in the development of his own evolutionary account of the nature and role of human consciousness. In an 1878 series of lectures on “The Brain and the Mind,”<sup>113</sup> James begins to formulate his thought, which is fleshed out and refined in his 1879 piece “Are We Automata?”<sup>114</sup> and further in chapter 5 of the *Principles*. James’s motivation here stems, not surprisingly, from a concern to refute two answers to the problem of consciousness, namely, the reduction of consciousness to the workings of the nervous system and the overly facile, dualistic positing of an untraversable chasm between mind and matter. Although this might seem to be familiar ground for James, he moves now in a new direction insofar as he offers a positive account of consciousness that fits into a larger view of the evolution of man, in which consciousness is conceived as a variation that is vetted and retained through the process of natural selection.

James begins with an a priori argument that “because conscious beings survived, consciousness could not be an impotent epiphenomenon but the key to survival and fulfillment,”<sup>115</sup> and he argues a posteriori that consciousness evidently functions effectively as “an organ, superadded to the other organs which maintain the animal in the

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<sup>113</sup> See William James, “Lowell Lectures on ‘The Brain and the Mind’ (1878),” in *Manuscript Lectures*, esp. 23-30.

<sup>114</sup> Originally published in *Mind* 4 (1879): 1-22.

<sup>115</sup> Patrick K. Dooley, “William James on the Human Ways of Being,” 78.

struggle for existence.”<sup>116</sup> The essential feature of consciousness is its attentive and selective agency, whereby it focuses on some aspect of the environment that is of particular interest to the individual organism. It is generally admitted that this agency grows more complex as we ascend in the animal kingdom, in proportion to the anatomical complexity of species, with human consciousness exceeding the rest inasmuch as its range of objects includes those that are not only physical and practical but also ideal and theoretic—moral, aesthetic, intellectual, and so on. James notes, however, there are evident “defects” in the performance of the nervous systems of those creatures whose consciousness seems most developed. Experimental physiology and anatomy reveal that lower species have brains that are less sophisticated, but whose performances are generally more uniform and better determined than those of species with more sophisticated brains. The same inverse relation is evident in higher species, who possess neural machinery that is more intricate and open to a greater range of achievements,<sup>117</sup> yet precariously “indeterminate and unforeseeable in [its] performances.”<sup>118</sup> He summarizes:

In short, a high brain may do many things, and may do each of them at the slightest hint. But its hair-trigger organization makes of it a happy-go-lucky, hit-or-miss affair. It is as likely to do the crazy thing as the sane thing at any moment. A low brain does a few things, and in doing them perfectly forfeits all other use. The performances of a high brain are like dice thrown forever on a

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<sup>116</sup> James, *Principles* 1:142.

<sup>117</sup> More to this point on the virtue of the brain’s instability, he notes: “We may thus lay it down as an established fact that the most perfected parts of the brain are those whose actions are least determinate. It is this very vagueness which constitutes their advantage. They allow their possessor to adapt his conduct to the minutest alterations in the environing circumstances” (James, “Are We Automata?” 5).

<sup>118</sup> James, *Principles* 1:142.

table. Unless they be loaded, what chance is there that the highest number will turn up oftener than the lowest?<sup>119</sup>

The hair-trigger organization of a high brain would just as likely be a bane as a boon were it not for the intervention of higher-level consciousness, which “loads the dice” and thereby permits the potential excellence of the high brain to be actualized by bringing into focus those objects and actions that favor the best interests—survival and indeed flourishing—of the individual organism.<sup>120</sup>

In two respects, this picture fits nicely within a Darwinian frame in which consciousness is conceived as a variation that somehow emerges spontaneously from within, is useful to the individual possessing it, and is therefore preserved through natural selection. First, higher-level consciousness serves well as it compensates for the physiological instability of higher species’s brains and nervous systems, and for this reason it is appropriately explained as a feature that survives and is promoted through the process of natural selection. Second, it is important to note that in so serving the organism it betrays the limitations of even highly refined bodily matter. Attentive to materialistic interpretations of evolution, James is aware of the tendency to assume that survival and flourishing are ends sought by the body and its organs, “as if the body that

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 1:140.

<sup>120</sup> See *ibid.* 1:143. Distinctively, human consciousness selects and pursues ends that transcend survival and that might even be contraindicated for survival. In his interpretation of James, Patrick K. Dooley refers to these as ends of “fit-survival,” which promote the realization of man at his best and, by extension, the highest conceivable human community. This capacity to transcend mere survival stems from human consciousness’s unique degree of penetration into the richness of reality. Especially notable is the power of religious awareness to motivate certain behaviors that are exclusively human: “Belief in God unleashes energy and the courage to endure the uncomfortable path” (Dooley, “William James on the Human Ways of Being,” 82).

owns the brain had interests.”<sup>121</sup> He argues that this assumption is wrongheaded, however, inasmuch as some independent, observing entity is required for the specification of these ends and the means useful to attain them; for “the goal cannot be posited so long as we consider the purely physical order of existence. Matter has no ideals.”<sup>122</sup> Alone, the brain and the rest of the body function mechanistically and truly mindlessly—they are simple and intend nothing, and might just as soon move toward an organism’s destruction as its survival.<sup>123</sup> Consciousness operates in a wholly different manner insofar as it compensates for this indifference of matter; indeed, it transcends matter and thus cannot be pinpointed through material causes. Therefore, its emergence is best left accounted (or unaccounted) for as a seemingly spontaneous event, not precipitated by external conditions, the fundamental causes of which are simply opaque, at least from a strictly empirical perspective that looks for causes in the material order.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> See James, *Principles* 1:143. When “darwinizing” (shorthand for thinking in evolutionary terms, generically), he writes, “we speak about the utilities of its organs and how they help or hinder the body’s survival; and we treat the survival as if it were an absolute end, existing as such in the physical world, a sort of actual *should-be*, presiding over the animal and judging his reactions, quite apart from the presence of any commenting intelligence outside.”

<sup>122</sup> James, “Are We Automata?” 6.

<sup>123</sup> See *ibid.*, 7, and *Principles* 1:144.

<sup>124</sup> Relevant here is the thought of contemporary evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin, who argues that consciousness is a factor that exceeds an organism’s material nature and that enables the individual actively to determine its environment. For example, he writes: “[T]here are not enough genes to determine the detailed shape and structure of that nervous system nor of the consciousness that creates our environment, its history and the direction of its future. . . . History far transcends any narrow limitations that are claimed for either the power of genes or power of the environment to circumscribe us. Like the House of Lords that destroyed its own power to limit the political development of Britain in successive Reform Acts to which it assented, so the genes, in making possible the development of human consciousness, have surrendered their power both to determine the individual and its environment” (*Biology as Ideology: The Doctrine of DNA* [Concord, Ontario: Anansi Press, 1991], 123).

Insofar as James's own account of consciousness incorporates the principles of spontaneous variation and natural selection, its affinities with Darwinism are clear.

James's evolutionary account also assigns to consciousness a central and authoritative role. It is not only the case that its emergence defies materialistic explanation. Perhaps even more important, in its activities it has direct influence over various bodily and other material processes. Together with indeterminate brain and neural structures, higher-level consciousness orchestrates the movements and activities of the organism, affording them a unique degree of suppleness and fluidity: "They allow their possessor to adapt his conduct to the minutest alterations in the environing circumstances."<sup>125</sup> But consciousness is not simply reactive to the environment; indeed, it is independent and proactive—it moves the being from within. James cites the phenomenon of "vicarious function" as relevant circumstantial evidence in this regard. The phenomenon is observed in cases where part of the brain is removed and certain bodily functions are in turn severely inhibited, yet over time, full and normal function is restored. Evidently, in the absence of regenerated brain matter, something other than the bodily stuff is at work. Consciousness, he infers, directs the recovery of normal function by "taking cognizance of each functional error, [and] . . . exert[ing] efficient pressure to inhibit it if it be a sin of commission."<sup>126</sup> The body and its activities are not wholly self-

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<sup>125</sup> James, "Are We Automata?" 5. See also Mark Nielsen and R. H. Day, who summarize: "In this manner, consciousness is not merely interpreted as being a by-product of evolution, but by acting to interpret the relevance of stimuli, is a condition equivalent to the naturalistic, causal determinants" of the process of evolution (Nielsen and Day, "William James and the Evolution of Consciousness," 103).

<sup>126</sup> See *ibid.*, 16-17. Eugene Taylor adds that James also argues for this "salient utility" of consciousness in the process of evolution in an 1894 notice of William Bateson's *Materials for the Study of Variation*. See Taylor, "William James on Darwin," 15. Bateson argues against Darwin, through a series of examples, that

directed or autonomous, and in the developmental progress of the organism consciousness plays a decisive and dynamic role.<sup>127</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Tracing the development of his responses to and interaction with evolutionary thought, we have seen that James appears consistently as a thinker who is, in general, favorably disposed to Darwinism. From his earliest published writings he is conversant and thoughtfully engaged with what is the major issue in professional science at the time. From the start, his approach is both scientifically rigorous and philosophically honest, as is apparent in his reviews of Huxley and Wallace, in which he insists on turning exclusively to the data of experience and resisting the temptation to extrapolate from

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the chief variations responsible for the differentiation of species are not continuous but rather abrupt. James comments favorably on Bateson: “[I]t is clear that the triumph of views like Mr. Bateson’s will strengthen the hands of the anti-associationists and in general those who have contended for an autogenous origin of certain human faculties, of certain instincts and tastes, for example, or of conscience, the higher reason, and the religious sense” (William James, “Review of William Bateson’s *Materials for the Study of Variation* [1894],” in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 500). Bateson foreshadows the contemporary theory of “punctuated equilibrium” articulated by Stephen Jay Gould. Gould and colleague Niles Eldridge introduced the notion in 1972 (“Punctuated equilibria: an alternative to phyletic gradualism,” in *Models in Paleobiology*, ed. T. J. M. Schopf [San Francisco: Freeman Cooper, 1972]). More recently, Gould’s thought is presented comprehensively in his *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>127</sup> James O. Pawelski offers a nuanced reading in his detailed account of the selective agency of consciousness. He maintains that for James, consciousness itself, precisely as a faculty of selection, is not creative—its scope of efficacy is limited such that consciousness does not *directly* influence the external world. See Pawelski, *The Dynamic Individualism of William James*, 54-5. I think this reading is still at least compatible, however, with both the fundamental indeterminacy of consciousness—it is not compelled in its selections—as well as the view that consciousness has influence over the movements and development *internal to the conscious being himself*, and the view that consciousness may *indirectly* effect novelty in the world (such as, via internal bodily mechanisms that it may trigger). It is also similar to the explanatory metaphor offered by Andrew Bailey, who likens the brain to a chaotic system and consciousness to an “attractor” within such a system, a “set of points to which the system is especially ‘attracted’ within the space of possible outputs.” Under this model, consciousness is confined and operates within a given framework, that is, the initial conditions of the system on which it is greatly dependent, and its influence plays out within the brain system itself. See Andrew Bailey, “The Strange Attraction of Sciousness,” 422-3.

these to unwarranted metaphysical conclusions. James maintains that, although experiential data may be marshaled in support of supra-scientific abstractions—for instance, the atheistic worldview of many evolutionists or the theory of polygenism—one should not be dogmatic but remain open to the possibility that the data could be interpreted otherwise.<sup>128</sup> In his early review of Darwin’s own work, James is intrigued by the principle of variation that springs from within in a seemingly spontaneous manner, which may prove the best possible (non)answer to the question of evolution. While he dwells on the “occultness” of the immediate causes of variations in individuals, and the vagueness of Darwin’s explanation thereof, he also hints that these problems might simply be insurmountable owing to the limitations of human knowledge.

As James’s thought develops, however, that insurmountability is not merely accepted but embraced. Motivated by what has been called a humanitarian concern for “the primacy of the individual’s immediate experience and unquenchable thirst for freedom,”<sup>129</sup> James declares his conviction that the structure of reality is such that it does not permit us to account scientifically for every movement, development, or change in the life of individuals, on either the microbiological or the macrosocial scale. Given this conviction, he argues against the thought of Herbert Spencer, who is the prime expositor of the materialist evolutionary accounts that interpret all developmental changes as adaptations directly imposed by external, environmental conditions and forces. James decries the “arrogance of metaphysical evolutionism” such as Spencer’s, which implies

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<sup>128</sup> See Philip P. Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 101.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

both determinism and a reductive view of human nature, and neglects the more deeply and immediately experienced reality of human nature, specifically the freedom and indeterminacy of human consciousness.<sup>130</sup> In turn, James employs the Darwinian principle of variation in order to preserve the distinctive aspects of individuality that are otherwise squelched by Spencer's evolutionism, and to leave room for a nonreductive view of man.

James's thought on the matter culminates in the formulation of his own positive account of the evolution of consciousness, wherein he appropriates Darwin's principles in a manner that preserves these prior commitments regarding human nature. Drawing consistently upon these foundational ideas, James's thought on evolution thus unfolds as an application of his pragmatism. Moreover, it provides further evidence of the fundamental unity of James's thought, inasmuch as we observe him operating as a promethean pragmatist, but in a manner that is hospitable to the dimensions of man that transcend his physico-chemical nature and are characteristic of the antipromethean mystic.

In a brief essay entitled "The Rise and Impact of Evolutionary Ideas," Robert Scoon poses the question, "[I]s evolution a scientific law, or the denial of such law?" He offers the following response, which at least partly characterizes the perspective of James:

[I]n spite of the naturalism that disturbed so many thinkers, the theory of evolution has always contained a feature of variation and novelty, which, when strictly analyzed, looks like unpredictability and freedom to invent new organic arrangements, where "new" is to be understood simply as what did not before

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 101.



exist; and this attitude, when carried out rigorously, seems to imply either actual indeterminism or at best selection among limited possibilities at present unknown.<sup>131</sup>

For some, including James, evolutionary thinking effects or solidifies an important change in attitude regarding the nature of reality and the means of attaining knowledge of it. As we have seen, James's thought on the evolution of man betrays a deepening, "profound conviction of the inconclusiveness of any and all scientific accounts of either the genesis or destiny of our mental lives."<sup>132</sup> In his later writings, this trajectory extends to a wider metaphysical framework, drawing on the same fundamental conviction that "*inconclusiveness and indeterminateness* [reside] in the very bosom of thought and nature."<sup>133</sup> The present chapter has focused on James's consideration of the question of evolution largely from the perspective of the individual who evolves. The following chapter will conclude the treatment of the evolutionary thought of James by focusing on his discussion of the broader context in which, as he sees it, evolution plays out, namely, the open, pluralistic universe.

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<sup>131</sup> Robert Scoon, "The Rise and Impact of Evolutionary Ideas," in *Evolutionary Thought in America*, ed. Stow Persons (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 40.

<sup>132</sup> Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism*, 124.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

## CHAPTER 4

### EVOLUTION IN THE LATER THOUGHT OF JAMES

*What is the nature of the universe in which evolution occurs?* Toward the end of his life, James's philosophical concerns shifted somewhat, from considerations of psychological issues and religious phenomena to broader, metaphysical investigations into the nature of the universe. In addition to clarifying and defending his version of pragmatism—in *Pragmatism* (1907) and its sequel, *The Meaning of Truth* (1909)—he spent the first decade of the twentieth century composing the essays and lectures that would comprise his well-known works *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909) and the posthumously published *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912).<sup>1</sup> The latter publications represent James's attempts to formalize his metaphysical vision through an exposition of his own philosophical synthesis, for which he coins the term “radical empiricism.”

In important respects, James's later thought coincides with certain aspects of the philosophy of Henri Bergson. The two men did not meet in person until James traveled to Paris in 1905, and though they lived on opposite sides of the Atlantic, each enjoyed a reputation with the other that preceded their meeting. In academic circles, both were well known and highly regarded for their writing and lecturing. During the final years of James's life, the two exchanged what in some cases may be judged effusively

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<sup>1</sup> With one exception, all of the material in *Essays in Radical Empiricism* was composed between 1904 and 1906. The volume's penultimate chapter, “Absolutism and Empiricism,” was originally published in *Mind* 9, no. 34 (April 1884).

complimentary correspondence, and this circumstance naturally piques interest in their reciprocal interest and influence. James first read Bergson's *Matière et mémoire* when it was published in 1896, but it wasn't until a 1902 rereading that he was struck by how important a work it was. In December of that year he initiated what would be an ongoing correspondence with a letter in which he wrote: "[*Matière et mémoire*] is a work of exquisite genius. . . . It fills my mind with all sorts of new questions and hypotheses and brings the old into a most agreeable liquefaction. I thank you from the bottom of my heart."<sup>2</sup> Along with the letter James sent copies of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and the essay "Human Immortality," both of which appealed to Bergson, who expressed his interest and gratitude: "I am anxious to tell you what a profound impression the reading of [*The Varieties*] has made on me. . . . You have, it seems to me, succeeded in extracting the quintessence of the religious emotion. . . . which appeared to by capable neither of analysis nor of expression, and which nevertheless you have been able to analyze and express." And: "I have sought—without thereby sacrificing the results of cerebral psychology—to show that the relation of consciousness to cerebral activity is quite different from what the physiologists and philosophers suppose: and I see that on this point, also, we follow two very close and probably convergent routes."<sup>3</sup>

Scholarly discussions of the relationship of James and Bergson tend to focus on the common elements in their development of certain religious themes, as well as shared convictions evident in their theories of knowledge, especially regarding the limits of

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<sup>2</sup> From a personal letter to Bergson, dated 14 December 1902, quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James, Briefer Version* (New York: Harper & Row, 1935), 341-42.

<sup>3</sup> From a personal letter to James, dated 6 January 1903, quoted in *ibid.*, 342.

conceptualization.<sup>4</sup> According to his student and biographer Ralph Barton Perry, James's friendship with Bergson was among the most significant of James's later years, and Perry cites from their correspondence to show evidence of "cross-fertilization" in their thought.<sup>5</sup> For example, comparing his own project in *Pragmatism* to that of Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, James writes these convincing words of a self-professed disciple:

How jejeune and inconsiderable it seems in comparison with your great system! But it is so congruent with parts of your system, fits so well into the interstices thereof, that you will easily understand why I am so enthusiastic. I feel that at bottom we are fighting the same fight, you a commander, I in the ranks.<sup>6</sup>

With modesty and deference, Bergson confirms the spirit of this insight: "When you say that 'for rationalism reality is ready-made and complete for all eternity, while for pragmatism it is still in the making,' you provide the very formula for the metaphysics to which I am convinced we shall come."<sup>7</sup> Still, Perry maintains, "James's Bergsonism was of the spirit and not the letter."<sup>8</sup> I happen to agree with this assessment,<sup>9</sup> but in fairness a full consideration of this relationship would merit a monograph study. Here I am primarily interested only in sketching Bergson's influence on the development of James's

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, James Deotis Roberts, *Faith and Reason: A Comparative Study of Pascal, Bergson, and James* (Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1962), 25-59; Milic Capek, "Process and Personality in Bergson's Thought," in *Personalism Revisited: Its Proponents and Critics*, ed. Thomas O. Buford and Harold H. Oliver (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 291-304; idem, "Stream of Consciousness and 'Durée Réelle'," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 10 (1950): 331-53; Pete A. Y. Gunter, "Bergson's Reflective Anti-Intellectualism," *Personalist* 47 (1966): 43-60.

<sup>5</sup> See Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 338, 343.

<sup>6</sup> From a personal letter to Bergson, dated 13 June 1907, quoted in *ibid.*, 346.

<sup>7</sup> From a personal letter to James, dated 27 June 1907, quoted in *ibid.*, 347.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>9</sup> Certainly James would have reservations about important aspects of Bergson's thought. See pp. 204-205 below.

thought concerning the open, pluralistic nature of the universe, itself the setting for evolution.

Much of what follows takes us afield of the direct discussion of James's thought on evolution, but the intent is to lay the grounding of a proper understanding of the sources and origin of James's pluralism, the final phase and completion of his thought on evolution. I begin with an examination of Bergson's thought as laid out in his "An Introduction to Metaphysics" (1903) and *L'évolution créatrice* (1907). In these works he identifies the shortcomings of intellect and scientific analysis, and he develops his understanding of reality as expansively creative. Intellect and science are suited to grasp only the material dimensions of reality; moreover, in doing so they necessarily take a partial, and hence distorted, view of the whole. Yet the whole exceeds its material dimensions, according to Bergson; and so, to grasp the fullness of reality, one needs to transcend intellect and take what he calls an intuitive approach. This sort of approach alone is capable of grasping the expansive, creatively evolving nature of reality, that is, the movement of life in and through matter in such ways that are not limited or determined by material conditions.

In the second section of this chapter I briefly survey the material in James's *A Pluralistic Universe* and *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, from which it is apparent, I argue, that Bergson is an important source for James's later thought. Here we observe that the mystic comes to the fore, as James draws on Bergson's insights regarding the shortcomings of intellect and conceptualization to do battle with the monistic philosophical worldview that interprets reality as a closed system or single unitary fact.

It is worth repeating that the “mysticism” in play here is strictly secular; it may be compatible with, but need not imply, any particular religious brand of mysticism. Essentially it is a receptive openness to all aspects or dimensions of reality, material and immaterial, that may be present in experience. Much like Bergsonian intuition, the mystical approach articulated in James’s later thought is one that transcends the partial or fragmented grasp afforded by intellectual concepts, and it is thus better attuned to the fullness of reality. James’s criticism of monism and advocacy of mysticism over and above intellectual conceptualization lay the foundation for the articulation of his own metaphysical vision of the open, pluralistic universe. Given the influence of Bergson, it is no coincidence that, in important respects, the latter resembles Bergson’s account of creative evolution. For both thinkers, reality is not a closed system; although it entails material dimensions, it is not confined to or constrained by the limits of matter.

This discussion of James’s later thought, for which Bergson is an important source, serves to round out the discussion of his thought on evolution insofar as the open universe he argues for is the appropriate setting for the type of nonmechanistic evolution we have already seen him affirm. James’s thought on the evolution of man—as a nonreduced being whose nature and development necessarily involve some degree of freedom and spontaneity—is incompatible with closed monism, and in fact requires the open, pluralistic context that James details in these later works.

Here also we observe the unity of James’s thought and the resolution of any possible tension between the promethean pragmatist and the antipromethean mystic. The pluralistic universe is such that fully grasping it requires transcending the limits of

intellect and conceptualization, and in this activity of transcendence the antipromethean mystic comes to the fore. If James himself ever embodied this persona, it is likely he did so, or at least most closely approached it, with these insights at this phase of his life. More important, he is evidently at work as a promethean pragmatist, actively articulating and constructing a positive, progressive vision of the both whole and how it is most authentically approached and known. Once again, we see there is no real tension between the pragmatist and the mystic; at the very least, here we see clearly James qua pragmatist arguing for the legitimacy and value of the mystic's approach to reality.

#### BERGSON ON INTUITION AND EVOLUTION

To summarize the thought of Henri Bergson, it may be helpful to distinguish two triads: "intellect–science–matter" and "intuition–metaphysics–life." The activity of intellect is science, which is the arresting schematization of certain aspects of the world's material dimensions. The activity of intuition, by contrast, is metaphysics, whereby one is attentive to the movement of the principle of life in and through its opposite, matter. According to Bergson, evolution is properly grasped through metaphysical inquiry—it is the object, so to speak, of intuition, not intellect or science. In what follows I examine the development of Bergson's thought on the themes of intuition and evolution. This will serve as the basis for my argument, in the following section, that the influence of Bergson is significant in James's later thought on evolution.

*Intuitive Self-Reflection.* In his 1903 essay “An Introduction to Metaphysics,”

Bergson sets out to clarify his thought on the nature of metaphysics, an issue that hinges on the distinction he makes between intellectual analysis and intuition. He begins with the comment that throughout the history of philosophy thinkers have generally agreed in distinguishing these two ways of knowing a thing, which he also refers to as relative and absolute types of knowledge. The former is the activity of intellect, which consists in forming an external perspective with respect to an object—“going all around it.” The latter, by contrast, may be described as an internal penetration or knowledge of an object gained “by entering into it” and grasping “from within, inside it, in what it is in itself.”<sup>10</sup>

He offers the example of a literary character. Such an individual is typically the object of the relative type of knowledge; readers know him by means of the series of traits and events that the author details. The relative type of knowledge Bergson contrasts with “the simple and indivisible feeling I should experience if I were to coincide for a single moment with the personage himself.”<sup>11</sup> This intimate type of knowledge would supercede the former, rendering that presentation of details superfluous insofar as it would already be implicitly given in the absolutely known “inner meaning of the

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<sup>10</sup> Henri Bergson, “An Introduction to Metaphysics,” in *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Maybelle L. Andison (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1946), 159-60. This piece originally appeared as an article in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* in 1903, and is reprinted as a chapter of *Le pensée et le mouvant: essais et conférences*, in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970). In the latter volume, “L’introduction à la métaphysique,” 1393: “Le première implique qu’on tourne autour de cette chose; la seconde, qu’on entre en elle”; and 1394: “le mouvement ne sera plus saisi du dehors et, en quelque sorte, de chez moi, mais du dedans, en lui, en soi.”

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 160. “L’introduction à la métaphysique,” 1394: “le sentiment simple et indivisible que j’épouverais si je coïncidais un instant avec le personnage lui-même.”



original” as “perfectly what it is.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, what is known in this absolute, intimate manner cannot properly speaking be represented through language, for “[s]ymbols and points of view then place me outside it; they give me only what it has in common with others and what does not belong properly to it. But what is properly itself, what constitutes its essence, cannot be perceived from without, being internal by definition, nor be expressed by symbols, being incommensurable with everything else.”<sup>13</sup>

Intuition is thus contrasted with analysis: The former is a “sympathy by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it”;<sup>14</sup> the latter is an intellectual grasp of one or several partial views of an object, “which reduces the object to elements already known, that is, common to that object and to others.”<sup>15</sup> Further, intuition gets at the essential mobility of reality, whereas intellect arrests that mobility by representing it with snapshot-like concepts.<sup>16</sup> For Bergson, this distinction is essential for defining metaphysics, the *modus operandi* of which is the intuitive “possessing of reality

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 161. “L’introduction à la métaphysique,” 1395: “Mais l’absolu est parfait en ce qu’il est parfaitement ce qu’il est.”

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 160. “L’introduction à la métaphysique,” 1394: “Symboles et points de vue me placent donc en dehors d’elle; ils ne me livrent d’elle que ce qui lui est commun avec d’autres et ne lui appartient pas en propre. Mais ce qui est proprement elle, ce qui constitue son essence, ne saurait s’apercevoir du dehors, étant intérieur par définition, ni s’exprimer par des symboles, étant incommensurable avec toute autre chose.”

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 161. “L’introduction à la métaphysique,” 1395: “la *sympathie* par laquelle on se transporte à l’intérieur d’un objet pour coïncider avec ce qu’il a d’unique et par conséquent d’inexprimable.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 162. “L’introduction à la métaphysique,” 1395: “l’analyse est l’opération qui ramène l’objet à des éléments déjà connus, c’est-à-dire communs à cet objet et à d’autres.

<sup>16</sup> See *ibid.*, 168; “L’introduction à la métaphysique,” 1402 ff.

absolutely,” in contrast to positive science, not to mention much of professional philosophy, which trade in concepts and proceed by intellectual analysis.<sup>17</sup>

Intuition of one’s self is the primary instance of metaphysical awareness, according to Bergson. He describes this type of self-reflection by contrasting it with the many and varied instances of intellectual self-awareness, each of which reveals the self in limited and partial ways. Intuitively one is known as something more than a sum of parts. I might be aware of and associate with my self an array of perceptions, memories, habits, feelings, bodily matter, and so on, and I might be inclined to conceive of my self as a concatenation thereof, but the intuition of my self is quite different. Bergson writes:

if I pull myself in from the periphery and towards the center, if I seek deep down within me what is the most uniformly, the most constantly and durably myself, . . . [w]hat I find beneath these clear-cut crystals and this superficial congelation is a continuity of flow comparable to no other flowing I have ever seen. It is a succession of states each one of which announces what follows and contains what preceded. . . . In reality none of them do [sic] begin or end; they all dove-tail into one another.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Jacques Maritain (in *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, trans. Maybelle L. Andison, with J. Gordon Andison [New York: Philosophical Library, 1955]) offers an extended critique of both the nature and defense of Bergson’s intuitive philosophy. He diagnoses its errors as stemming from the fact that Bergson’s thought is a reaction to the false metaphysics of Kant and atomistic epistemology of Descartes. Direct philosophical intuition of reality cannot but proceed by means of concepts, Maritain maintains, and so to distinguish between intellect and intuition as Bergson does is to commit the “capital sin” of “break[ing] asunder what is one. . . . [For i]t is one and the same activity in us, especially immanent and virtually productive, that engenders concept and perceives what is, that perceives in conceiving and conceives in perceiving. It conceives in order to perceive, it abstracts, it enunciates, it reasons in order to perceive. All, in it, that is elaboration and disposition of ideas, is regulated by intellection and is a means of intellection” (ibid., 33). Moreover, Bergson mischaracterizes intellect as restricted to knowledge of matter and its laws. See ibid., 15-48.

<sup>18</sup> Bergson, “An Introduction to Metaphysics,” 163. “L’introduction à la métaphysique,” 1397: “Mais si je remasse de la périphérie vers le centre, si je cherche au fond de moi ce qui est le plus uniformément, le plus constamment, le plus durablement moi-même, je trouve tout autre chose. C’est, au-dessous de ces cristaux bien découpés et de cette congélation superficielle, une continuité d’écoulement qui n’est comparable à rien de ce que j’ai vu s’écouler. C’est une succession d’états dont chacun annonce ce qui suit et contient ce qui précède. . . . En réalité, aucun d’eux ne commence ni ne finit, mais tous se prolongent les uns dans les autres.” The similarity to James’s notion of the stream of consciousness is notable here. See chapter 2, p. 77 ff.

Two related features of the self revealed through this intuitive grasp are notable, namely, its complexity and its ever-changing continuity. The self is complex inasmuch as it is, in a sense, the spring or source from which flow all the partial views that intellect may take—the perceptions, memories, habits, feelings, bodily matter, and so on. It is the unity of their multiplicity, containing them all, notwithstanding the prospect of paradox or contradiction. For Bergson, one's present state is really "the best illuminated point of a moving zone which comprises all that we feel or think or will—all, in short, that we are at any given moment. It is the entire zone which in reality makes up our state. Now, states thus defined cannot be regarded as distinct elements."<sup>19</sup> Nor, I might add, are they properly called "states," for the word denotes the opposite of the ever-changing character of the self that is intuitively grasped.<sup>20</sup>

To speak of one's present "state" is perhaps to be metaphorical, at best, given that intuition reveals the self as pervasive change that somehow hangs together intractably, not unlike William James's stream of consciousness. In this respect the intuitive grasp of one's self is the first intimation of that temporal character of reality which Bergson refers

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<sup>19</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (1911; Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), 3. The original appears as *L'évolution créatrice*, in Bergson, *Oeuvre*, 497: "le point le mieux éclairé d'une zone mouvant qui comprend tout ce que nous sentons, pensons, voulons, tout ce que nous sommes enfin à un moment donné. C'est cette zone entière qui constitue, en réalité, notre état. Or, des états ainsi définis on peut dire qu'ils ne sont pas des éléments distincts." Again, this characterization of one's present state strikingly resembles James's notion of the full self, which he contrasts to the conceptual "I." See below, p. 225 ff.

<sup>20</sup> See also Milic Capek, who ties the rejection of this so-called psychological atomism to the thought of James. Both Bergson and James view psychological "states" as parts arbitrarily carved out of the whole of experience, and both object to the alleged or at least implicit immutability of such states. They affirm the continuous changing nature of the self in experience, and they resist the artificial unification of that experience by a "fictitious" philosophical abstraction like substance, soul, or ego. See Milic Capek, "Process and Personality in Bergson's Thought," 292-4.

to as *durée* or duration. In chapter 1 of *Creative Evolution* he offers a simple definition:

“Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances.”<sup>21</sup> The enduring self is continuously compounding, always moving irreversibly forward. One’s memories are an especially apt source for revealing duration, insofar as the experience of recollection signals that one’s conscious life is always being archived and carried forward: “These memories, messengers from the unconscious, remind us of what we are dragging behind us unawares. . . . [E]ven though we may have no distinct idea of it, we feel vaguely that our past remains present to us.”<sup>22</sup> As such—as enduring—one experiences an ever-new present, for strictly speaking it is impossible to repeat any moment of one’s existence insofar as the present continually accumulates upon the past. Yet intuition still reveals the undeniable continuity and unity of one’s self, the flowing connectedness of all the moments of one’s life, a “moving, changing, colored and living unity.”<sup>23</sup> This is the nature of reality that endures—ever-new, nonrepeating, irreversible—quite unlike, say, the movement of a clock, which proceeds in a mechanical, ever-repeating fashion that may even be reversed.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 4. *L’évolution créatrice*, 498: “La durée est le progrès continu du passé qui ronge l’avenir et qui gonfle en avançant.”

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 5. *L’évolution créatrice*, 498: “Ceux-là, messagers de l’inconscient, nous avertissent de ce que nous traînons derrière nous sans le savoir. . . . [L]ors même que nous n’en aurions pas l’idée distincte, nous sentirions vaguement que notre passé nous reste présent.” Again, recall the similarity of James’s thought on this unrepeatable nature of our experience. See above, chapter 2, p. 62 ff.

<sup>23</sup> Bergson, “An Introduction to Metaphysics,” 169. “L’introduction à la métaphysique,” 1402: “cette unité mouvante, changeante, colorée, vivante.” In the words of Leszek Kolakowski, time as duration is “neither homogenous not divisible; it is not properly abstracted from the movement but it is in fact what each of us is: we know it intuitively, from direct experience” (Leszek Kolakowski, *Bergson* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1985], 3).

This intuitive grasp of the duration of one's self may be the primary instance of metaphysical awareness, according to Bergson, but it is important to note that such awareness is not necessarily limited to the self-reflective gaze. Rather, the intuition of one's own duration may serve as a conduit for a broader attunement to reality in general.<sup>24</sup> To explain how this may come to pass, he begins with the objection: "[A]re we not going to shut the philosopher up in exclusive self-contemplation?"<sup>25</sup> To think intuition would so constrain the philosopher, he replies, "would be to fail to recognize the particular nature of duration"<sup>26</sup>—a failure owing to the attempt to subject duration to intellectual analysis. Using concepts to make sense of duration, intellect divides off and encapsulates one's own duration as distinct from the rest of reality. But this is the conceptualizing act of intellect, whose nature it is to arrest, segment, and categorize the given flow of reality. Duration itself is properly grasped by intuition alone, not by intellect.

Bergson concedes that logic may not require that there be multiple durations in reality.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, if there is such a multiplicity, it is knowable through intuition alone. He offers an analogy:

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<sup>24</sup> It is notable, or at least arguable, that Bergson's methodology closely resembles the pragmatic humanism of James, according to which the content of self-awareness has primacy among the determinative prior ideas that guide all further development in philosophy.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 184. "L'introduction à la métaphysique," 1416: "[N]'allons-nous pas enfermer la philosophe dans sa contemplation exclusive de lui-même?"

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. "L'introduction à la métaphysique," 1416: "Ce serait méconnaître la nature singulière de la durée, en même temps que le caractère essentiellement actif de l'intuition métaphysique."

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.*, 187; "L'introduction à la métaphysique," 1418-19.

[T]here might exist no other duration than our own, as there might be no other color than orange, for example. But just as [an intuitive] consciousness of color, which would harmonize inwardly with orange instead of perceiving it outwardly, would feel itself caught between red and yellow, would perhaps even have, beneath the latter color, a presentiment of the whole spectrum in which is naturally prolonged the continuity which goes from red to yellow, so the intuition of our duration, far from leaving us suspended in the void as pure analysis would do, puts us in contact with a whole continuity of durations.<sup>28</sup>

Intellect, from an external perspective, grasps that which it carves out and makes stable and discrete, largely for the practical purposes of science;<sup>29</sup> intuition, by contrast, grasps from within the continuity of what is in flux—the essence of duration—and thus constitutes metaphysical contemplation, which Bergson describes as a means toward self-transcendence.<sup>30</sup>

To summarize briefly: Bergson develops a metaphysics centered on life itself, the vital principle, the *élan vitale*. This principle is the object of intuition—and hence of metaphysical reflection—and it is the common principle bridging the gap between one's self and reality in general. In one's self, one is conscious of the principles of life and matter, and of the fact that life operates over and above the forces of the latter. For Bergson, it is important to note, the intuited principle of life is universal and one. It is defined as a tendency opposed to matter; and as we shall see in the next part of this

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. "L'introduction à la métaphysique," 1419: "A la rigueur il pourrait n'exister d'autre durée que la nôtre, comme il pourrait n'y avoir au monde d'autre couleur que l'orangé, par exemple. Mais de même qu'une conscience à base de couleur, qui sympathiserait intérieurement avec l'orangé au lieu de le percevoir extérieurement, se sentirait prise entre du rouge et du jaune, pressentirait même peut-être, au-dessous de cette dernière couleur, tout un spectre en lequel se prolonge naturellement la continuité qui va du rouge au jaune, ainsi l'intuition de notre durée, bien loin de nous laisser suspendus dans la vide comme ferait la pure analyse, nous met en contact avec toute une continuité de durées que nous devons essayer de suivre soit vers le bas, soit vers le haut."

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, 181-3; "L'introduction à la métaphysique," 1414-16.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

section, the evolution of life is the progressive movement of this tendency through various material forms, each of which is a particular instantiation of life's general striving to propagate itself by distributing greater amounts and degrees of indeterminacy into matter.<sup>31</sup> So according to Bergson, the universe evolves not mechanistically but creatively, growing in novel, unforeseen directions.

*The Evolution of Life: Reality as Expansively Creative.* As we have seen in "An Introduction to Metaphysics," Bergson describes the practice of metaphysics by contrasting it with science: The former is intuition's grasp of so-called enduring reality, whereas the latter is the intellect's analysis of reality which transposes the essentially moving nature of that reality into static concepts and mathematical functions. In *Creative Evolution*, he reiterates this distinction and provides a substantive example of metaphysical reflection.

By critiquing various themes and issues in contemporary evolutionary thinking, he offers an extended reflection on, and indeed defense of, his understanding of reality as duration. The vision of that reality which emerges is one that includes, but is not confined to, the necessitated, mechanistic order of matter—one that is also hospitable to the free, spontaneous, undetermined movement of life that generates novelty and is thus essentially creative. By identifying matter and its laws as the objects of natural science,

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Leszek Kolakowski, who writes that life for Bergson is "not a contingent by-product of physical laws . . . : it is a manifestation of creative energy. Though the human mind is a work of biological evolution, this evolution itself is the work of mind" (Kolakowski, *Bergson*, 8-9). There is no circularity in this statement if we understand "mind" here as convertible with "life," and human mind as a particular instantiation of the principle of "mind" of life in general.

Bergson helps to clarify how and why reflection on the evolution of life exceeds scientific analysis and is properly within the purview of philosophy.

According to Bergson, the opposed principles of matter and life jointly comprise reality, and so a strictly materialist worldview is partial and incorrect. In chapter 1 of *Creative Evolution*, he offers a philosophical argument for the plausibility of this view, which he follows up with supporting evidence drawn from reflections on current scientific research. Consideration of the contrast between organic and inorganic bodies—the nature of individual, organized beings and how this differs from matter in general—reveals life as a principle distinct from matter. Living beings are themselves integrated wholes, and as such, they exist and operate with unique autonomy, resisting description in terms of simple, mechanistic processes. Yet this is not to deny that living bodies are corporeal and thus subject in some degree to the laws of matter. As Bergson writes:

Doubtless [the living body], also, consists in a portion of extension bound up with the rest of extension, and intimate part of the Whole, subject to the same physical and chemical laws that govern any and every portion of matter. But while the subdivision of matter into separate bodies is relative to our perception, while the building up of closed-off systems of material points is relative to our science, the living body has been separated and closed off by nature herself. It is composed of unlike parts that complete each other. It performs diverse functions that involve each other. It is an individual, and of no other object . . . can this be said.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 12. *L'évolution créatrice*, 504: “Sans doute il consiste, lui aussi, en une portion d'étendue reliée au reste de l'étendue, solidaire du Tout, soumise aux mêmes lois physiques et chimiques qui gouvernent n'importe quelle portion de la matière. Mais, tandis que la subdivision de la matière en corps isolés est relative à notre perception, tandis que la constitution de systems clos de points matériels est relative à notre science, le corps vivant a été isolé et clos par la nature elle-même. Il se compose de parties hétérogènes qui se complètent les unes les autres. Il accomplit des fonctions diverses qui s'impliquent les unes les autres. C'est une *individu*, et d'aucun autre objet . . . on ne peut en dire autant.”



The “individuality” spoken of here may be thought of as the collective autonomy of a being’s parts, which includes among other things the capacity of those parts to contribute to reproduction, that is, the perpetuation of life outside and independent of one’s own body.<sup>33</sup> In such activities we see evidence of a principle overcoming what might be called the drag of matter, by initiating movements and processes that matter alone is incapable of bringing about.

Isolated and closed not by intellectual analysis but by nature, an organic being is a system whose temporal existence unfolds in a manner that eludes formulaic encapsulation. Again, this is the unique temporal existence that Bergson refers to as *durée* or duration. The concrete time of enduring, living beings is radically different from the abstract, homogenous time of inorganic beings. The error of scientific analysis is to deny this difference—as when, for example, “[t]ime is assumed to have just as much reality for a living being as for an hour-glass, in which the top part empties while the lower fills, and all goes where it was before when you turn the glass upside down.”<sup>34</sup> Science errs to the extent that it analyzes and maps the duration of organic beings along the abstract, homogenous timeline appropriate only for inorganic beings. Truly, the unfolding of the existence of an organic being is manifestly different insofar as mysteries persist, particularly in the understanding of the processes of growth and aging. There is no consensus regarding “what is gained and what is lost between the day of birth and the

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<sup>33</sup> See *ibid.*, 13; *L’évolution créatrice*, 505.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. *L’évolution créatrice*, 509: “Le temps a juste autant de réalité pour une être vivant que pour un sablier, où le réservoir d’en haut se vide tandis que le réservoir d’en bas se remplit, et où l’on peut remettre les choses en place en retournant l’appareil.”

day of death.”<sup>35</sup> Science might assume that the changes undergone by a being throughout its life are ultimately explicable in terms of material processes, but truly, Bergson asserts, the explanations of these phenomena “must lie deeper.”<sup>36</sup> Matter is the *what* that ages, not the *why* of aging, and so physico-chemical principles alone are insufficient to explain these life-processes.

In the physical sciences, the laws of matter render “certain aspects of the present . . . calculable as functions of the immediate past.”<sup>37</sup> Traditional science operates by analyzing phenomena in terms of their material components, which by their very nature lend themselves to predictability according to the laws of matter. But given this *modus operandi*, science expressly deals only with what is material; strictly speaking, it has no concern for or authority regarding whatever, if anything, is immaterial. With respect to the study of life, Bergson maintains that “calculation touches, at most, certain phenomena of organic destruction. Organic creation, on the contrary, . . . we cannot in any way subject to mathematical treatment.”<sup>38</sup> He points to the limits of science, evident in such cases as its failures to synthesize life and to explain or predict the movements of even the simplest of organisms,<sup>39</sup> as compelling reasons to concede that life is indeed a

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 20. *L'évolution créatrice*, 511: “certains aspects du présent . . . sont calculables en fonction du passé immédiate.”

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. *L'évolution créatrice*, 511: “le calcul a prise, tout au plus, sur certains phénomènes de *destruction* organique. De la *création* organique, au contraire, . . . nous n'entrevoions même pas comment nous pourrions les soumettre à un traitement mathématique.”

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 35.

constitutive principle of reality distinct from and opposed to matter. Acknowledging the retort of science, namely, that its present limits might be due only to temporary ignorance, Bergson responds: “But [these limits] may equally well express the fact that the present moment of a living body does not find its explanation in the moment immediately before.”<sup>40</sup> It is at least as plausible, and perhaps even more so, that an immaterial principle of life injects an element of indeterminacy or spontaneity into a process that would otherwise proceed mechanically, so that each moment of a living being’s existence is in fact “incommensurable with its antecedents.”<sup>41</sup> Yet science balks, for it finds this proposition incompatible with its habit of material reduction and analysis.

Bergson diagnoses this prejudice as stemming from the fact that science is concerned largely with those functional activities of living beings that are largely repetitive and hence amenable to mechanistic interpretation and analysis.<sup>42</sup> He notes, however, that histologists, embryologists, and naturalists, who study the structures of life, its genesis, and its evolution, take a broader view and are less inclined to subscribe to a reductive interpretation, for they observe in these phenomena aspects of the unpredictable creativity of life that confounds materialism.<sup>43</sup> This point of view is much in line with his own. By means of his own philosophical criticisms of mechanistic and finalistic interpretations of evolution, he fleshes out his own so-called vitalistic position: that

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 20. *L'évolution créatrice*, 511: “Mais elles peut aussi bien exprimer que le moment actuel d’un corps vivant ne trouve pas sa raison d’être dans le moment immédiatement antérieur.”

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

“evolution” itself necessarily entails—or indeed *is*—this activity of life’s creativity, over and against the resistance of matter.

According to Bergson, the mechanistic interpretation of evolution “is to regard the future and the past as calculable functions of the present, and thus to claim that *all is given*.”<sup>44</sup> The mechanistic interpretation presupposes an exclusively materialist worldview, in which all events in the universe unfold after the fashion of a cascading of set of dominoes laid out in an elaborate scheme. The process is an orderly succession of interrelated phases, all playing out according to determinate laws of nature. With sufficient accumulation of data, the disposition of the universe at any given time could be determined through careful computation. Such a system leaves no room for novelty or the unforeseen—words that represent “merely the infirmity of a mind that cannot know everything at once.”<sup>45</sup>

Mechanism is often taken as the opposite of finalism—the interpretation of nature whereby events are not the result of blind mechanism but rather the progressive realization of a preestablished plan; but Bergson, interestingly, maintains that finalism “is only inverted mechanism. . . . [for i]t substitutes the attraction of the future for the impulsion of the past.”<sup>46</sup> Granted, mechanism and finalism are not equivalent, inasmuch as finalism lacks the “fixed rigid outlines” of theoretically perfect predictability that

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 37. *L'évolution créatrice*, 526: “L’essence des explications mécaniques est en effet de considérer l’avenir et la passé comme calculables en fonction du présent, et de prétendre ainsi que *tout est donné*.” This characterization coincides with the monism or absolutism that James opposes. See below, p. 199 ff.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. *L'évolution créatrice*, 528: “Le finalisme ainsi entendu n’est qu’un mécanisme à rebours. . . . Il substitue l’attraction de l’avenir à l’impulsion du passé.”

mechanism entails.<sup>47</sup> Yet, in Bergson's estimation, finalism is no different with respect to the issue of novelty and indeed creativity: If a plan is preestablished and the unfolding of events is the faithful realization of that plan, then the supposition is, once again, that *all is given*. Diversion from the course, spontaneity, novelty, creativity—these all are excluded from such a context.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, he objects to finalism on empirical grounds, insofar as the realization of a plan implies progressively greater and greater harmony, which is evidently not the case in the natural world. He notes: "Life, in proportion to its progress, is scattered in manifestations which undoubtedly . . . are complementary to each other in certain aspects, but which are none the less mutually incompatible and antagonistic."<sup>49</sup> Classic predator-prey relationships confirm this insight. Also, certain forms of life such as fungi serve as counterexamples to finalism: "No doubt there is progress [in the movement of life] . . . ; but this progress is accomplished only on the two or three great lines of evolution on which forms ever more and more complex . . . appear; between these lines run a crowd of minor paths in which, on the contrary, deviations, arrests, and set-backs,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 40. It is for this reason that Bergson says his own thought "will therefore necessarily partake of finalism to a certain extent" (ibid.).

<sup>48</sup> Both interpretations stem from the inherently practical nature of intellect, according to Bergson, for they are ways of modeling nature after man's own activity. In our own lives, and especially in our productive and scientific endeavors, we operate both finalistically and mechanistically, seeking to harness and to organize the resources of nature by setting goals, deliberating about the best means of achieving them, and enacting step-by-step programs toward those goals. Ibid., 44: Ours is "an intellect which proceeds at the same time by intention and by calculation, by adapting means to ends and by thinking out mechanisms of more and more geometrical form."

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 103. *L'évolution créatrice*, 583: "La vie, au fur et à mesure de son progrès, s'éparpille en manifestations qui devront sans doute . . . complémentaires les unes des autres sous certains aspects, mais qui n'en seront pas moins antagonistes et incompatibles entre elles."

are multiplied.”<sup>50</sup> Thus Bergson argues that, to the extent that finalism means that events in the universe move in a coordinated fashion toward the ever more perfect realization of a plan, it is manifestly untrue.

He also takes on the intellectual legacies of Darwin and of Lamarck, critiquing both versions of evolutionary thinking in order to support his own view that life or the *élan vitale* is a single, unified principle operating in opposition to matter. His point of departure is the puzzle of morphological analogies: How have certain species, some primitive and others more refined, which are thought to have emerged along divergent lines of evolution, come to possess organs of strikingly similar function—for example, the eyes of a mollusk and of a horse?

As Bergson characterizes it, Darwinism posits that an organism’s features have been assembled through a blindly mechanistic series of accidental variations, either several gradual ones or fewer sudden ones, weeded out and preserved through a process of natural selection.<sup>51</sup> According to Bergson, however, morphological analogies pose a problem for this theory, whether the variations are many and gradual or fewer and abrupt. Regarding the former option, he asks two questions. First, if a variation is so slight as to

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 104. *L’évolution créatrice*, 583: “Sans doute il y a progrès . . . , mais ce progrès de s’accomplit que sur les deux ou trois grandes lignes d’évolution où se dessinent des formes de plus en plus complexes . . . : entre ces lignes courent une foule de voies secondaires où se multiplient au contraire les déviations, les arrêts et les reculs.”

<sup>51</sup> It is fair to note that Bergson’s assessment here is largely simplified and anachronistic. The contemporary discussion of the sources or causes of evolutionary change is rife with debates about the relative significance of the factors of variation and selection, and it takes into consideration a more nuanced range of factors falling under the generic term “variation.” See, for example, Peter Godfrey-Smith, “Three Kinds of Adaptationism,” in *Adaptationism and Optimality*, ed. Steven Hecht Orzack and Elliott Sober (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 335-57.

be imperceptible, how or why should it be retained by natural selection?<sup>52</sup> Second, “How could the same small variations, incalculable in number, have ever occurred in the same order on two independent lines of evolution, if they were purely accidental?”<sup>53</sup> With respect to the option that evolution occurs through fewer abrupt variations, he concedes that this might be statistically less improbable than the former, because sudden variations would more likely introduce functions deserving to be preserved by natural selection, and because fewer of them would be required.<sup>54</sup> Yet it is still highly improbable that the same coordinated, intricate series of variations would occur along independent lines of evolution.<sup>55</sup> In summary, his assessment is that “in neither case can parallel development of the same complex structures on independent lines of evolution be due to a mere accumulation of accidental variations.”<sup>56</sup> The notion that a blind mechanism spinning out variations could produce an elaborate organ like an eye in one line of evolution is difficult enough to believe. This difficulty is compounded when such an achievement is supposed to occur in separate lines of evolution, absent some “good genius” overseeing the processes.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 64-5. *L'évolution créatrice*, 550: “Comment supposer en effet que les mêmes petites variations, en nombre incalculable, se soient produites dans le même ordre sur deux lignes d'évolution indépendantes, si elles étaient purement accidentelles?”

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 69. *L'évolution créatrice*, 554: “Ni dans un cas ni dans l'autre, le développement parallèle de structures complexes identiques sur des lignes d'évolution indépendantes ne pourra tenir à une simple accumulation de variations accidentelles.”

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 68. Later in the text he summarizes the puzzle of morphological analogies and concludes: “The more we reflect upon it, the more we shall see that this production of the same effect by two different

Compared with the theory of accidental variations, Bergson favors the Lamarckian notion that evolution occurs by a process of adaptation to the environment. Such a theory of adaptation may not positively affirm the existence of an efficacious immaterial—or, one might say, supra- or counter-material—principle, but it at least leaves room for the possibility of one, whereby an individual organism can exert some sort of effort to adjust its corporeal nature to its circumstances.<sup>58</sup>

However, the Lamarckian account is not without its problems, hinging mainly on the proposition that evolution occurs by the inheritance of adaptations or acquired traits. Aside from the fact that inheritance of acquired traits is generally discredited a priori on the basis of advanced genetic science,<sup>59</sup> Lamarckism is deficient to the extent that it relies on the adaptive efforts of individuals to explain the evolution of entire species. In this critique we see Bergson laying the ground of his argument for the single, unified life principle or *élan vitale*. On the inner source of adaptation he writes:

But if this cause is nothing but the conscious effort of the individual, it cannot operate in more than a restricted number of cases. . . . [Evolution requires] some

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accumulations of an enormous number of small causes is contrary to the principles of mechanistic biology (ibid., 74; *L'évolution créatrice*, 558). And: “[P]arts differently situated, differently constituted, meant normally for different functions, are capable of performing the same duties and even of manufacturing, when necessary, the same pieces of the machine. . . . Whether we will or no, we must appeal to some inner directing principle in order to account for this convergence of effects” (ibid., 76; *L'évolution créatrice*, 559-60). In response to this common criticism of evolutionary thinking, contemporary scientists have affirmed the plausibility of the evolution of a complex organ like the eye. See, for example, “The Evolution of Eyes,” special issue of *Evolution: Education and Outreach* 1, no. 4 (October 2008): 351-559.

<sup>58</sup> See ibid., 77.

<sup>59</sup> See ibid., 78-83. The central issue is whether an adaptation or acquired trait imprints on the gametes and is thus transmitted to offspring. In many cases, it evidently does not and is not so transmitted. At the time of his writing, Bergson is aware of arguments on both sides of the question. But even in cases where acquired traits appear to be passed on, he notes, “it is just here that the trouble begins” (ibid., 79). For an examination of such traits shows that these are generally habits or the effects thereof, which raises the question of whether what is passed on is a habit itself or simply natural dispositions or potencies for such a habit. If the latter, then it seems that what is inherited is not really an adaptation or acquired trait at all.



sort of effort, but an effort of far greater depth than the individual effort, far more independent of circumstances, an effort common to most representatives of the same species, inherent in the germs they bear rather than in their substance alone, an effort thereby assured of being passed on to their descendants.<sup>60</sup>

Evolution as we know and observe it is far better explained by the *élan vitale*—the unified “original impetus of life” that pushes forth and diverges across the many and varied material forms of different lines of evolution, from the most primitive to the most refined.<sup>61</sup> It is the aforementioned “good genius” that solves the mystery of morphological analogies, explaining what Darwinian blind mechanism and Lamarckian adaptation and inheritance cannot, namely, the parallel convergence in diverse species of a complex of parts that form analogously functional organs.

For Bergson, the evolution of life is the movement of the *élan vitale*—the distinctively biological principle that is wholly other than physico-chemical principles—in and through the material world. Therefore, a proper grasp of evolution is an achievement of metaphysics, not science. Scientific analysis of evolution as an embodied, material process is not illegitimate, for indeed evolution is manifest in corporeal forms; but it is proper to note that science cannot but take a partial, and hence distorted, view: “Though the whole be original, science will always manage to analyze it into elements or aspects which are approximately a reproduction of the past. . . . Anything that is irreducible and irreversible in the successive moments of a history

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 86-7. *L'évolution créatrice*, 569: “Mais si cette cause n'est que l'effort conscient de l'individu, elle ne pourra opérer que dans un nombre assez restreint de cas. . . . Un changement héréditaire et de sens défini . . . doit sans doute se rapporter à quelque espèce d'effort, mais à un effort autrement profond que l'effort individuel, autrement indépendant des circonstances, commun à la plupart des représentants d'une même espèce, inhérent aux germes qu'ils portent plutôt qu'à leur seule substance, assuré par là de se transmettre à leurs descendants.”

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 87.

eludes science.”<sup>62</sup> Bergson insists that evolution is “creative,” that is, the progressive introduction of novelty in the universe; its movement is evidently among the irreducible and irreversible moments that science itself is incapable of comprehending.

To flesh out an understanding of so-called creative evolution, it is perhaps helpful to think of Bergson’s characterization of the evolution of life as a paradoxical embodiment. Evolution is the ongoing process whereby life, which is essentially free and indeterminate, propagates itself by entering into and commandeering its opposite, matter, which is unfree and determined by physico-chemical laws. Life’s mission, as it were, is “to create with matter, which is necessity itself, an instrument of freedom, to make a machine which should triumph over mechanism, and to use the determinism of nature to pass through the meshes of the net which this very determinism has spread.”<sup>63</sup>

Bergson also speaks of life as the “inversion” of matter and “an effort to re-mount that incline that matter descends.”<sup>64</sup> Take, for example, a simple plant, which defies inertia and gravity as it shoots new growth upward and outward. In general, the comparison of organic and inorganic beings shows that the former are somehow the enlivening of the very same substrate that makes up the latter, and that this enlivening consists in enabling the substrate to transcend its purely material limitations. As for the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 29-30. *L'évolution créatrice*, 519: “Si le tout est original, elle [la science] s’arrange pour l’analyser en éléments ou en aspects qui soient *à peu près* la reproduction du passé. . . . Ce qu’il y a d’irréductible et d’irréversible dans les moments successifs d’une histoire lui échappe.”

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 264. *L'évolution créatrice*, 719: “Il s’agissait de créer avec la matière, qui est la nécessité même, un instrument de liberté, de fabriquer un mécanisme qui triomphât du mécanisme, et d’employer le déterminisme de la nature à passer à travers les mailles du filet qu’il avait tendu.”

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 245. *L'évolution créatrice*, 703: “Tout nos analyses nous montrent en effet dans la vie un effort pour remonter la pente que la matière descend.” See also *ibid.*, 249.

paradoxical aspect of life's embodiment, Bergson writes: "[Life] is riveted to an organism that subjects it to the general laws of inert matter. But everything happens as if it were doing its utmost to set itself free from those laws."<sup>65</sup> Life seeks to expand itself—that is, its essential indeterminacy—precisely through a process whereby of necessity it subjects itself to the constraints of matter.

Bergson catalogs the three main lines of evolution—vegetative, invertebrate, and vertebrate—each representing a different mode of life's "success" in achieving this end of the inversion of matter.<sup>66</sup> In general, the *modus operandi* of life in organized matter is the harnessing, storing, and releasing of energy in activity.<sup>67</sup> In plants, this tendency of life is supported by nutritive processes that draw directly from the air, earth, and water; and so plants exist in torpor, fixed in locations hospitable to their nutritive processes. Animals, by contrast, are locomotive, for they require that the nutritive elements of the earth first be fixed by plants (or by other animals), and they must be able to move in order to seek and gain nourishment.<sup>68</sup>

Within the animal kingdom, life subdivides into the "opposite and complementary" tendencies of instinct and intelligence, the former characteristic of

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. *L'évolution créatrice*, 703: "[La vie] est rivée à un organisme qui la soumet aux lois générales de la matière inerte. Mais tout se passe comme si elle faisait son possible pour s'affranchir de ces lois."

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 129. These lines of evolution, he maintains, are more and more dissociated instantiations of the flow of the *élan vitale*. In commenting on Aristotle's biology he stakes a controversial metaphysical claim: "The cardinal error which, from Aristotle onwards, has vitiated most of the philosophies of nature, is to see in vegetative, instinctive and rational life, three successive degrees of the development of one and the same tendency, whereas they are three divergent directions of an activity that has split up as it grew. The difference between them is not a difference of intensity, nor, more generally, of degree, but of kind" (ibid., 135, emphasis removed; *L'évolution créatrice*, 609).

<sup>67</sup> See ibid., 115.

<sup>68</sup> See ibid., 108.

invertebrates and the latter of vertebrates.<sup>69</sup> Very briefly, instinct corresponds to the activity of life associated with a narrow range of tasks that can be performed by the body and certain tools that enhance natural bodily structures, whereas intellect corresponds to the activity of life that involves the fashioning and use of a much wider set of tools for an infinitely broader range of tasks. The instruments of intellect “can take any form whatsoever, serve any purpose, free the living being from every new difficulty that arises and bestow on it an unlimited number of powers.”<sup>70</sup> And so, intellect has the capacity most fruitfully to fulfill the tendency of life, that “certain effort to obtain certain things from the material world.”<sup>71</sup>

According to Bergson, the progress of evolution, that movement of life into and through matter for the sake of expanding its essential indeterminacy, culminates in the human species. Man is the material form in which the greatest indeterminacy and “the full breadth of life” are empirically manifest.<sup>72</sup>

The physiological intricacies of any higher vertebrate center around and are subordinate to the functioning of the brain and nervous system; such an animal “is essentially a sensori-motor system installed on systems of digestion, respiration, circulation, secretion, etc., whose function it is to repair, cleanse and protect it, to create an unvarying internal environment for it, and above all to pass its potential energy to

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 141. *L'évolution créatrice*, 614: “il peut prendre une forme quelconque, servir à n'importe quel usage, tirer l'être vivant de toute difficulté nouvelle qui surgit et lui conférer un nombre illimité de pouvoirs.”

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 100. *L'évolution créatrice*, 580: “le grand souffle de la vie.”

convert into locomotive movement.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the nervous system is the material locus of freedom and indeterminacy, as Bergson asserts: “A nervous system, with neurons placed end to end in such wise that, at the extremity of each, manifold ways open in which manifold questions present themselves, is a veritable *reservoir of indetermination*.”<sup>74</sup> Moreover, a highly developed nervous system is an economizing achievement whereby the *élan vitale* maximizes the efficiency of its movement. Such a nervous system is a complex “switchboard” (*carrefour*) that coordinates a direct proportion of automatic and voluntary activity; as more of the processes required to sustain the organism are automated, more effort and energy are freed up for voluntary activity.<sup>75</sup> It is important to note that the mechanisms of the brain and nervous system are not the essence but merely the conditions of this activity, which is proper to the force of life itself.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 124-5. *L'évolution créatrice*, 601: “on pourra dire qu’un organisme supérieur est essentiellement constitué par un système sensori-moteur installé sur des appareils de digestion, de respiration, de circulation, de sécrétion, etc., qui ont pour rôle de le réparer, de la nettoyer, de le protéger, de lui créer un milieu intérieur constant, enfin et surtout de lui passer d’énergie potentielle à convertir en mouvement de locomotion.” Notwithstanding Bergson’s earlier use of the terms “teleology” and “finalism,” I submit that there is a genuine teleology implicit in this sort of a description of the higher vertebrate body.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 126. *L'évolution créatrice*, 602: “Un système nerveux, avec des neurones placés bout à bout de telle manière qu’à l’extrémité de chacun d’eux s’ouvrent des voies multiples où autant de questions se posent, est un véritable réservoir d’indétermination.”

<sup>75</sup> “Switchboard” is Arthur Miller’s translation of “*carrefour*.” See *ibid.*, 183-4, 252, and 261.

<sup>76</sup> See *ibid.*, 261 ff. Something other than matter itself is evidently at work. It is helpful to draw out the contrast between the human brain and that of another species which might closely resemble it. Bergson offers the analogy of two steam engines, one an early version that requires a boy to operate its taps, and the other a later version that requires no such attendant. Materially, these mechanisms are quite indistinguishable, but indeed there is all the difference in the world “between a mechanism which engages the attention and a mechanism from which it can be diverted” (*ibid.*, 184; *L'évolution créatrice*, 651). So too might the brains of a human and some other primate closely resemble one another, but evidently—on the basis of the wide range of activities that man can accomplish—something over and above matter is correlated with and operative alongside the mechanism of the human brain.

The material form of man is most hospitable to the tendency of the *élan vitale* that appears as intellect, which serves most fully both to transform and to transcend matter. Bergson reflects on concepts and language in general as the instruments of freedom proper to intellect. They are the products of intellect that are the keys to man's own harnessing of the necessity of nature, as they are essential in the development and progress of science. Through scientific conceptualization and analysis, man's intellect grasps and unlocks the natural world and appropriates its forces to his own ends; and in so doing it executes the mission of life, namely, the effort to wrest and invert the necessity of matter.<sup>77</sup>

Moreover, language is the key to man's unique intellectual, moral, and aesthetic contemplation, for it "furnishes consciousness with an immaterial body in which to incarnate itself and thus exempts it from dwelling exclusively on material bodies, whose flux would soon drag it along and finally swallow it up."<sup>78</sup> Thus, the achievements of the *élan vitale*, as intellect, in and through the material form of man are a vast, perhaps immeasurably large, range of possibilities. They include but are not limited to the practically useful ends of science that are transformative of man's natural environment, and they may even extend to and be transformative of man himself. Bergson writes, for example, of the potential effects of scientific or technological advances:

Though we derive an immediate advantage from the thing made, as an intelligent animal might do, and though this advantage be all the inventor sought, it is a

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<sup>77</sup> See *ibid.*, 161-2.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 265. *L'évolution créatrice*, 719: "Il le doit à son langage, qui fournit à la conscience un corps immatériel où s'incarner et la dispense ainsi de se poser exclusivement sur les corps matériels dont le flux l'entraînerait d'abord, l'engloutirait bientôt."

slight matter compared with the new ideas and new feelings that the invention may give rise to in every direction, as if the essential part of the effect were to raise us above ourselves and enlarge our horizon.<sup>79</sup>

The evolution of life culminates in man, but this culmination is not a rounding out or completion. Rather, the evolution of life culminates in man insofar as man takes up the mission of life and carries on the process of its creative flowing through the universe. Bergson writes: “Everywhere but in man, consciousness has had to come to a stand; in man alone it has kept on its way. Man, then, continues the vital movement indefinitely, although he does not draw along with him all that life carries in itself.”<sup>80</sup> Man continues creatively to introduce novelty into the universe; but even in man, the paradox of life’s embodiment persists, as the material conditions of his being naturally restrict life’s movement and fulfillment. Even so, these limitations are still compatible with Bergson’s vision of the universe as the setting in which the evolution of life pushes forward, in and through the activities of man, in unforeseen and indeed unforeseeable directions.

Granted, Bergson’s so-called vitalistic interpretation is quite different from James’s own thinking on evolution, which was detailed in the preceding chapter. Bergson argues for a single, unified principle of life operative across diverse species, propelling into being, as it were, new and varied material forms. This is something which

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 183. *L’évolution créatrice*, 650: “Si nous retirons un avantage immédiat de l’objet fabriqué, comme pourrait le faire un animal intelligent, si même cet avantage est tout ce que l’inventeur recherchait, il est peu de chose en comparaison des idées nouvelles, des sentiments nouveaux que l’invention peut faire surgir de tous côtés, comme si elle avait pour effet essentiel de nous hausser au-dessus de nous-mêmes et, par là, d’élargir notre horizon.”

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 266. *L’évolution créatrice*, 720-1: “Partout ailleurs que chez l’homme, la conscience s’est vu acculer à une impasse; avec l’homme seul elle a poursuivi son chemin. L’homme continue donc indéfiniment le mouvement vital, quoiqu’il n’entraîne pas avec lui tout ce que la vie portait en elle.”

we do not find in James and which, I might also argue, James the radical empiricist would be loathe to accept, inasmuch as it is a speculative positing of a nonempirical entity to explain or account for what is observable in the world. Also, one cannot ignore the fact that Bergson criticizes as inadequate the Darwinian principle of spontaneous variation, which we have already seen is of special interest for James. Even so, the positive influence of Bergson on James cannot be denied, and this is evident most clearly as James draws on Bergson's insights regarding the limitations of intellectual analysis in formulating his own argument against monistic philosophy. Moreover, as we shall see, James's argument against monism, inspired at least in part by Bergson, culminates in his own articulation of a pluralistic metaphysical vision of reality—the completion of his thought on evolution—which resembles, not coincidentally, that of Bergson's creative evolution. For both Bergson and James, evolution is a process that emerges in and through matter, but it is not governed or restricted by the necessity of material conditions.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF BERGSON ON JAMES'S LATER THOUGHT

James draws on Bergsonian insights in his own critique of monistic philosophy, which in turn serves as the foundation for the articulation of his metaphysical vision of the open, pluralistic universe. It should not be surprising, then, that the latter resembles in important ways Bergson's creative evolution, which we have already examined above. As we shall see, for James as well as for Bergson, reality is not a closed system. Rather, Jamesian pluralism and Bergsonian creative evolution both entail an understanding that



the possibilities for the manifestations of life are open-ended, neither limited nor determined by material conditions.

In what follows I shall not principally be concerned with James's thought on pluralism, *per se*, but only insofar as this theme pertains to the question of evolution. My aim here is to trace the foundation and sources of pluralism, precisely because it provides a context for the culmination of James's thought on evolution. To this end, I detail James's later thought in three parts. First, I examine his perspective on philosophical monism, which he also variously and interchangeably refers to as absolutism and idealism. This discussion is necessary, for it is the basis of the second part, where I consider his arguments against monism. It is here, as we shall see, that James explicitly credits Bergson as an important source for his own thinking, particularly with respect to the issue of the shortcomings of intellect and intellectual conceptualization. Finally, I trace the development of James's positive thought in response to monism. Here I examine his method of so-called radical empiricism and the pluralistic worldview to which it leads, and I draw out important parallels with Bergson's creative evolution. As mentioned above, this discussion completes the study of James's thought on evolution, for the open, pluralistic universe is the proper setting for the type of evolution we have already seen him affirm.

*The Emergence and Appeal of Monism.* Before entering into his exposition and defense of the pluralistic worldview, James begins by sketching its philosophical foils. In order properly to understand and confront monism, James begins by tracing its origins. Lecture I of *A Pluralistic Universe*, entitled "The Types of Philosophic Thinking,"

provides something of a genealogy of philosophical systems. It is an introduction that may be read as an exercise of James's pragmatist "will to believe": Searching for a God who satisfies the human needs for both a sense of meaning or purpose and a feeling of intimacy or comfort throughout life's travails, James critiques various philosophical worldviews, and ultimately affirms his own pluralistic vision in accordance with these personal interests and preferences.<sup>81</sup>

James begins with the factors that motivate the development of comprehensive philosophical systems. Initially, he explains, in their primitive experience humans are struck by what might be called the clutter of reality: "Tempests and conflagrations, pestilences and earthquakes, reveal supramundane powers, and instigate religious terror rather than philosophy. Nature, more demonic than divine, is above all things *multifarious*. So many creatures that feed or threaten, that help or crush, so many beings to hate or love, to understand or start at."<sup>82</sup>

Subsequently, philosophy is born as the human intellect awakens and seeks to arrange this apparent disorder of primitive experience. When philosophizing, humans act as artisans or craftsmen, "selecting objects and tracing relations so as to gratify our intellectual interests. We *carve out* order by leaving the disorderly parts out."<sup>83</sup> All men philosophize with the same general goal in mind—namely, making themselves more "at home" in the world—but because of congenital differences in temperament, they

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<sup>81</sup> See James O. Pawelski, *The Dynamic Individualism of William James*, 117. See also p. 110 ff. above.

<sup>82</sup> William James, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt et al, *The Works of William James*, vol. 4 (1909; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 15.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

necessarily diverge in their philosophical accounts. “Different men find their minds more at home in very different fragments of the world,”<sup>84</sup> James writes, and competing worldviews emerge as men build their philosophical homes with different cosmic materials.

The first basic division among worldviews, James notes, distinguishes materialism and spiritualism. These are the products of men whose temperaments are respectively cynical and sympathetic.<sup>85</sup> The fundamental difference between materialism and spiritualism hinges on the status of the human soul. Materialistic systems seek order by excluding soul from their accounts of reality, at best treating it as “as a sort of outside passenger or alien,” while spiritualistic approaches integrate soul as an important and perhaps central element. Furthermore, spiritualistic philosophies maintain that the fullness of human nature is somehow bound up with the rest of the world—“that the intimate and human must surround and underlie the brutal.”<sup>86</sup> So, with respect to the goal of home-making, the potential of spiritualistic philosophy far exceeds that of materialism.<sup>87</sup> Also, insofar as they seek to explain how soul fits into the cosmic scheme,

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> In *Pragmatism*, these are the “tough-minded” and “tender-minded” characters. See above, chapter 1, p. 30 ff.

<sup>86</sup> James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 16.

<sup>87</sup> James expands on this failure of materialism at *ibid.*, 19: “Materialism holds the foreign in things to be more primary and lasting, it sends us to a lonely corner with our intimacy. . . . From a pragmatic point of view the difference between living against a background of foreignness and one of intimacy means the difference between a general habit of wariness and one of trust. One might call it a social difference, for after all, the common *socius* of us all is the great universe whose children we are. If materialistic, we must be suspicious of this socius, cautious, tense, on guard. If spiritualistic, we may give way, embrace, and keep no ultimate fear.”

spiritualistic philosophies undertake a task larger and arguably more difficult than that of materialistic philosophies.

James continues by identifying two stages or subdivisions of spiritualistic philosophy, dualism and pantheism. The former is traditional, scholastic theism, which he quickly limns:

The theistic conception, picturing God and his creation as entities distinct from each other, still leaves the human subject outside of the deepest reality in the universe. God is from eternity complete, it says, and sufficient unto himself; he throws off the world by a free act and as an extraneous substance, and he throws off man as a third substance, extraneous to both the world and himself. . . . God and his creatures are *toto genere* distinct in the scholastic theology, they have absolutely *nothing* in common; nay, it degrades God to attribute to him any generic nature whatever; he can be classed with nothing. There is a sense, then, in which philosophic theism makes us outsiders and keeps us foreigners in relation to God.<sup>88</sup>

According to James, dualistic philosophy alienates man in this fashion, painting him as essentially divided from God, and having at best a unilateral, not reciprocal, relationship to him. From a pragmatist point of view, the independent and self-sufficient God of dualism fails to deliver both the meaning and the intimacy that man craves.<sup>89</sup>

This explains why dualism so often loses out in competition with pantheistic conceptions that grant man greater closeness and access to the divine, thereby conferring a greater sense of unity: “God as intimate soul and reason of the universe has always

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>89</sup> Pawelski summarizes this point at *The Dynamic Individualism of William James*, 117: “The problem with such a God is that he is simply too big. In accordance with James’s view, theism’s claim that both God and truth are complete and independent of us leaves us with no ultimately meaningful purpose. Metaphysically, all is decided, and nothing is left for us to do but to work to establish the ethical will of God on earth as it is metaphysically established in heaven. . . . [And b]ecause he is independent of us, he cannot be affected by our prayers or moved by our pleas for aid. Thus, he is simply too big to provide us with help and comfort when we need it.”

seemed to some people a more worthy conception than God as external creator. So conceived, he appeared to unify the world more perfectly, he made it less finite and mechanical, and in comparison with such a God an external creator seemed more like the product of a childish fantasy.”<sup>90</sup> Without much discussion, James affirms that the contemporary mind is inclined to adopt such a view, and he broadly attributes this trend to “[t]he vaster vistas which scientific evolutionism has opened, and the rising tide of social democratic ideals, [which] have changed our type of imagination.”<sup>91</sup> As creation is conceived not biblically but scientifically, and as egalitarian sentiments become more widespread and deeply felt, a pantheistic vision placing man in direct and mutual communion with the divine grows more popular.

Pantheism subdivides further, into what James refers to as monism and pluralism. Monism and pluralism agree in uniting the human and divine elements of reality,<sup>92</sup> but for James it is their disagreement that is crucial. For James the terms monism, absolutism, the philosophy of the absolute, and monistic idealism are convertible—all refer to the metaphysical vision in which reality “becomes fully divine only in the form of totality, and is not its real self in any form but the *all*-form.”<sup>93</sup> Pervasive, divine immanence is another way of expressing this vision, where God ultimately coincides with the absolute sum-total of reality’s constitutive parts. Under this view, *that there is nothing* is the only alternative to the all-inclusive fact of reality, which subsumes each of

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<sup>90</sup> James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 18.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>92</sup> See *ibid.*, 20.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

the apparently fragmented, accidental, and perhaps even conflicting “finite data of our experience” under the mantle of the “all-form.”<sup>94</sup>

James considers the thought of some prominent monistic thinkers from the history of philosophy. He names names: Spinoza (the “first great absolutist”), various nineteenth-century thinkers such as R. H. Lotze, J. M. E. McTaggart, Josiah Royce, and F. H. Bradley, and of course Hegel, the preeminent expositor of this monistic brand of thought, who merits consideration in a lecture devoted to himself alone.<sup>95</sup> James commends these thinkers for their vision, which transcends the naïve impressions of a world in flux and imposes a clean conceptual order upon the chaos of perceptual experience—“a world in which reason holds all things in solution and accounts for all the irrationality that superficially appears by taking it as a ‘moment’ into itself.”<sup>96</sup> Undeniably, this order is aesthetically pleasing and may even be emotionally inspiring.<sup>97</sup> What is more, such a system seemingly fulfills an “intellectual duty” to collect and make sense of all the troubling loose ends of experience; for this reason, it is a worthy fulfillment of centuries of philosophizing.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, James especially lauds the Hegelian insight and success at overcoming the “ordinary logic of identity” through the dialectical method, whereby concepts are not taken as “the static self-contained things

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<sup>94</sup> See *ibid.*, 53.

<sup>95</sup> Spinoza, Lotze, McTaggart, Royce, and Bradley are treated in Lecture II of *A Pluralistic Universe*, “Monistic Idealism.” Lecture III is entitled, “Hegel and His Method.”

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>97</sup> See *ibid.*, 28, where he cites Emerson as an example of such reactions.

<sup>98</sup> See *ibid.*, 29.

that previous logicians supposed, but [rather] germinative, and pass[ing] beyond themselves into each other.”<sup>99</sup> No doubt, monism has a certain appeal.

Such praise notwithstanding, the overwhelming thrust of James’s critique is negative. In Lecture II he takes aim at monism’s conceit that it is the exclusive true account of reality: “The great *claim* of the philosophy of the absolute is that the absolute is no hypothesis, but a presupposition implicated in all thinking, and needing only a little effort of analysis to be seen as a logical necessity.”<sup>100</sup> Taking care to explain that he does not wish to argue against monism as a hypothesis,<sup>101</sup> he attacks the assertion of its logical necessity on several levels. It is here that the influence of Bergson is especially clear, as James draws upon Bergson’s commentary on the inadequacy of intellectual conceptualization. Echoing Bergson, James argues that intellect alone grasps reality in a partial way, one that is indeed shallow and distorted. Penetrating the fullness of reality requires a different tact: Enter James’s advocacy of the mystical approach to reality, a mode that mirrors Bergson’s intuition. In turn, James fleshes out his pluralistic view of

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 46. At *ibid.*, 47, James writes: “What he did with the category of negation was his most original stroke. The orthodox opinion is that you can advance logically through the field of concepts only by going from the same to the same. Hegel felt deeply the sterility of this law of conceptual thought; he saw that in a fashion negation also relates things; and he had the brilliant idea of transcending the ordinary logic by treating advance from the different to the different as of it were also a necessity of thought. The so-called maxim of identity, he wrote, is supposed to be accepted by the consciousness of everyone. But the language which such a law demands, ‘A planet is a planet; Magnetism is magnetism; Mind is mind,’ deserves to be called silliness. No mind either speaks or thinks or forms conceptions in accordance with this law, and no existence of any kind whatever conforms to it. We must never view identity as abstract identity, to the exclusion of all difference. . . . If thinking were no more than registering abstract identities, it would be a most superfluous performance. Things and concepts are identical with themselves only in so far as at the same time they involve distinction.” Notwithstanding all his opposition to Hegel’s monism and monism in general, James echoes this aspect of Hegel’s thought in Lecture IV of *A Pluralistic Universe*, as he details his own anti-intellectualism in order to bolster the pluralistic worldview. See pp. 205-15 below.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>101</sup> “Please observe that I go no farther now,” he writes at *ibid.*, 41.

the universe, thereby making the case for its plausibility and indeed superiority to monism. And, as we shall see, this pluralism resembles in important ways the creative evolution of Bergson discussed earlier in this chapter.

*James's Critique of Monism.* In arguing against monism's claim of logical necessity, James points out that it shares the humanistic nature of all philosophy; that is to say, like all metaphysical systems, it emerges as a function of particular humans' innate temperaments and preferences. He writes: "All philosophy is the expression of man's intimate character, and all the definitions of the universe are but the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it."<sup>102</sup> Monistic philosophers are men who happen to be given to so-called rationalism—"the habit of explaining parts by wholes"—which has dominated the history of philosophy, in contrast with empiricism—"the habit of explaining wholes by parts."<sup>103</sup> These temperaments and habits are not deduced from prior principles; rather, they themselves are the fundamental starting points. Monistic philosophy stems, James explains, from two axiomatic principles: (a) the conviction "that the world must be rational and self-consistent," and (b) "a loyal clinging to the rationalist belief that sense-data and their associations are incoherent, and that only in substituting a conceptual order for their order can truth be found."<sup>104</sup> Monism is grounded in faith and

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 7-8 (emphasis removed).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 38.



feeling, and cannot automatically and without examination of these principles make a justifiable claim that it is more authoritatively reasonable than its alternatives.

James also takes aim at certain arguments of monists seeking to destroy their opposition. For example, consider the *reductio* formulated by Lotze: Suppose that distinct beings, *a*, *b*, *c*, and so on, exist independently of each other in the world, as those who argue against monism maintain. Given this supposition, consider the questions of whether, and precisely how, an entity *a* might act on another entity *b*. Can *a* ever act on *b*? If so, what is “acting”? One says that “acting” is exerting influence in some fashion. But this “influence,” then, is yet a third thing, which prompts the further question: How is it that this “influence” acts on *b*? The answer: by some other “influence,” and so on. Barring the absurdity of an infinite regress, we move to a final question, which James paraphrases:

And how in the end does the chain of influences find *b* rather than *c* unless *b* is somehow prefigured in them already? . . . The change in *b* is a *response*, due to *b*’s capacity for taking account of *a*’s influence, and that again seems to prove that *b*’s nature is somehow fitted to *a*’s nature in advance. *A* and *b*, in short, are not really as distinct as we first supposed them, not separated by a void. Were this so, they would be mutually impenetrable, or at least mutually irrelevant. . . . They must therefore belong together beforehand, be co-implicated already, their natures must have an inborn mutual reference each to each.<sup>105</sup>

The original supposition of distinct, independent entities thus gives way to a monistic world in which all things are ultimately bound up together as “parts of a single real being,” and any interaction among them is regarded as that being’s self-contained, “immanent operation.”<sup>106</sup> According to this argument, then, monism is true.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

In James's estimation, however, the monist who makes this argument commits the sin of "vicious intellectualism." A version of the straw man fallacy, vicious intellectualism is described by James as "[t]he treating of a name as excluding from the fact named what the name's definition fails positively to include."<sup>107</sup> It is necessary, according to James, to return to the initial supposition of Lotze's *reductio* and consider more carefully the nature of the original distinction between *a* and *b*. They might be *said to be* distinct and independent, but truly,

neither abstract oneness nor abstract independence *exists*; only concrete things exist, which add to these properties the other properties which they possess, to make up what we call their total nature. . . . Only when we know what the process of interaction literally and concretely *consists* in can we tell whether beings independent in definite respects . . . can or cannot interact.<sup>108</sup>

James further clarifies and fortifies this opposition to Lotze in his indictment of Royce, who similarly asserts that the world must be conceived as either complete union or complete disunion. Homing in on the deceptive, "purely verbal character of the operation," he writes:

Because the *names* of finite things and their relations are disjoined, it doesn't follow that the realities named need a *deus ex machina* from on high to conjoin them. The same things disjoined in one respect *appear* as conjoined in another. Naming the disjunction doesn't debar us from also naming the conjunction in a later modifying statement, for the two are absolutely co-ordinate elements of the finite tissue of experience.<sup>109</sup>

So, in some respect *a* and *b* might be distinct and independent entities, yet in some other respect they might also be joined and dependent; and if this might be the case, we are not

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 35.

required to posit “a single real being” with “immanent operation” in order to make sense of the notion that *a* can act on *b*. Thus, James exposes the monists as mischaracterizing the alternatives to their worldview and peddling a false dichotomy of absolute unity versus absolute disunity.

James also calls into question what I might call the “net rationality” of monism. His critique begins with his noting that there are four dimensions of reality—intellectual, aesthetic, moral, and practical—and that philosophers seek an account of reality that maximizes the “balance of rationality” in these four areas.<sup>110</sup> No single account achieves simultaneous maximal rationality in all four dimensions, for that which “we gain in one coin we . . . pay for in another,”<sup>111</sup> and monism is no exception to this rule.

True, it may offer an aesthetically sublime picture of the world that serves to bestow upon the universe a sense of moral order. For example, James quotes Royce: “We long for the Absolute only in so far as in us the Absolute also longs, and seeks, through our very temporal striving, the peace that is nowhere in Time, but only, and yet absolutely, in Eternity. . . . Through this my tribulation the Absolute triumph, then, is won. . . . In the Absolute I am fulfilled.”<sup>112</sup> But even though the monistic vision might serve as an emotional salve for men of temperaments like Royce’s, there is no denying that the moral and intellectual dimensions of its rationality are compromised by certain highly troubling and perhaps unresolvable problems.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Josiah Royce, *The World and the Individual* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1901), 2:386 and 409, quoted at *ibid.*, 56.

Particularly compelling are the persistent speculative problems of moral evil and intellectual error. The absolute's relation to the world of finite experience is a paradox, for "[i]ts perfection is represented as the source of all things, and yet the first effect of that perfection is the tremendous imperfection of all finite experience."<sup>113</sup> No part of the world of finite experience is understood as alien, in origin or being, to the absolute, and so we cannot but wonder and even lament: Why should an ideally perfect whole comprise itself of the finite, flawed, and fallible parts of our sensory experience? Arguably, monism is morally and intellectually more irrational than rational, which leaves open the possibility that an alternative might surpass it in net rationality. Another blow to monism thus consists in exposing the fact that it is not a decidedly superior alternative.

Perhaps the simplest yet most damning objection is that monism is sheer artifice, an abstraction never found in humans' experience but arrived at by a process of conceptual extrapolation. Indeed, its artificial nature is obvious insofar as the complete unity of all things that monism posits is flatly contrary to the world of sensible experience. James notes that "philosophers have always aimed at cleaning up the litter with which the world is apparently filled,"<sup>114</sup> but almost invariably, in so doing they have concocted rationalist systems that tailor the world to suit their needs, rather than honestly cleaving to the data of experience. Monistic thinkers, he asserts, are no exception.

James expands on this line of criticism in Lecture IV of *A Pluralistic Universe*, entitled "Bergson and His Critique of Intellectualism," which provides clear evidence of

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 26.

James's intellectual debt to Bergson. Here James draws upon Bergson's insights to support his own critique of monistic philosophy. He analyzes the common pathology of such rationalist worldviews and offers a general thesis: All rationalist systems are produced by transposing perceptual data to a conceptual order, and this process may be advantageous from a practical perspective but inapt from a metaphysical one. In support of this conclusion, he makes use of Bergson's discussion of Zeno's paradox. He begins with a summary of the well-known puzzle of Achilles and the tortoise:

Give that reptile ever so small an advance and the swift runner Achilles can never overtake him, much less get ahead of him; for if space and time are infinitely divisible (as our intellects tell us they must be), by the time Achilles reaches the tortoise's starting point, the tortoise has already got ahead of *that* starting point, and so on *ad infinitum*, the interval between the pursuer and the pursued growing endlessly minuter, but never becoming wholly obliterated.<sup>115</sup>

According to James, the crux of Bergson's solution to this paradox is simply to note that the infinite divisibility of space and time on which it hinges is a fabrication of intellectual analysis and never found in sensible experience. Infinitesimally incremental change is not part of the world we sensibly perceive but rather a derivative of "[o]ur ideal decomposition" of that world.<sup>116</sup> The paradox is better interpreted, then, as no more than a sophism, for it is predicated on false, intellectualist premises. The problem suggested is real only if infinite divisibility is a natural fact, which it is not.

Fleshing out this argument, James moves beyond the image of Achilles and the tortoise and explains that the puzzle more generically concerns any process of change. Another image helps to illustrate. If we consider the elapsing of twenty seconds of time,

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 104.

for example, we arrive at essentially the same paradox: Given the intellectualist principle that time is infinitely divisible, we seem forced to conclude that the twenty seconds of time cannot ever elapse. For, as the story goes, in order for the whole segment of time to elapse, its first half must elapse first; and in order for that first half to elapse, *its* first half must elapse; and so on, infinitely. James summarizes:

And this ever-rearising need of making the earlier half elapse *first* leaves time with always something to do before the last thing is done, so that the last thing never gets done. Expressed in bare numbers, it is like the convergent series  $1/2$  plus  $1/4$  plus  $1/8$  . . . , of which the limit is one. But this limit, simply because it is a limit, stands outside the series, the value of which approaches it indefinitely but never touches it.<sup>117</sup>

In the natural world, by contrast, change does not occur by infinitesimally divisible increments but rather by units that are discrete wholes. Indeed, as James writes, “nature doesn’t make eggs by making first half an egg, then a quarter, then an eighth, etc., and adding them together. She either makes a whole egg at once or none at all, and so of her other units.” Similarly, “bottles and coffee-pots empty themselves by a finite number of decrements, each of a definite amount. Either a whole drop emerges or nothing emerges from the spout.”<sup>118</sup> Change in our sensible experience occurs and is perceived by thresholds, he asserts, and even though we might be able to subject it to infinite division under our conceptual analysis, in itself it exists as an all-or-nothing affair.

This discussion is relevant to James’s indictment of monistic philosophy inasmuch as it serves as an entrée for explicating monism’s fundamental problem, namely, the failure of its conceptual order (and any conceptual order, for that matter) to

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

do the work for which it is intended—that is, to provide a unifying account of sensible experience. He rounds out his reflections on Zeno’s paradox with a consideration of the inapt application of concepts to the phenomena of motion. With Bergson, James contends that reality is far richer and more complex than any conceptual system intellect can draw up; further, a more authentic grasp of such reality is something accomplished by mystical penetration or Bergsonian intuition, not intellection.

Here he begins by highlighting the contrast between an immediate experience of motion and its conceptual definition. As immediately experienced, motion is “originally a turbid sensation,” perhaps akin to the phenomenon of vertigo.<sup>119</sup> A man who experiences vertigo feels “that movement *is*, and is more or less violent or rapid, more or less in this direction or that, and is more or less alarming or sickening.”<sup>120</sup> The experience is thus of the bare fact of motion, along with certain of that fact’s qualitative features. James notes further that a man may still “intellectualize” the incongruities of his feeling of motion and his real position, location, and other physical circumstances, thereby learning to overcome the affliction, so that he might at least be able to walk without staggering. Analogously, one may get some understanding of motion in general by analysis and mathematical definition, when it is “conceived as ‘the occupancy of serially successive points of space at serially successive instants of time.’”<sup>121</sup> But this

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

mathematical definition clearly departs from the original felt experience and, James insists, from sense-reality in general.

Indeed, the mathematical definition of motion, as successive points of space at successive instants of time, flattens the original experience by reducing what is given in at least three dimensions to just these two. Moreover, this is a way of defining the phenomenon of motion in terms of immobile elements, which prompts James's objection: "Whatever motion may really be, it surely is not static; but the definition we have gained is of the absolutely static."<sup>122</sup> And so, the conceptualized definition of motion is entirely other than the phenomenon it supposedly tracks. While there is "great practical merit" in such an abstract scheme, which James concedes, this merit should not overshadow the fact that the abstract scheme as such fails to grasp the essential nature of the phenomenon originally given. He credits Bergson with this insight:

The stages into which you analyze a change are *states*, the change itself goes on between them. It lies along their intervals, inhabits what your definition fails to gather up, and thus eludes conceptual explanation altogether. . . . To know adequately what really happens we ought, Bergson insists, to see into the intervals, but the mathematician sees only their extremities. He fixes only a few results, he dots a curve and then interpolates, he substitutes a tracing for a reality.<sup>123</sup>

Thus, the real phenomena are never penetrated but simply skimmed over. Conceptual schemes provide a means of grasping some part of the fullness of reality, and indeed they are requisite for our navigation through that reality, but we cannot pretend that they are anything more.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 106.



Further, James argues that conceptualization fails not only because it interpolates without grasping the essential phenomena but also because it presumes too much and extrapolates without sufficient justification. Concepts may have predictive value in limited contexts and thus be of great practical benefit, yet they are still formed on the basis of experience that is “retrospective and post mortem.”<sup>124</sup> They may trace the original phenomena, but because they do not penetrate them, they reveal nothing about why or how the phenomena operate. James writes: “We cannot learn from them how life made itself go, or how it will make itself go.”<sup>125</sup> The predictive value of concepts requires that the ways of life’s “making itself go” be unchanging, yet “[t]he essence of life is its continuously changing character.”<sup>126</sup> Indeed, “in the deeper sense of giving *insight* they have no theoretic value, for they quite fail to connect us with the inner life of the flux, or with the real causes that govern its direction.”<sup>127</sup> James thus argues that, in the metaphysical search for a unifying account of the phenomena of sensible experience, the path of concepts necessarily leads to a dead end, and in this regard the confluence of James’s and Bergson’s thought cannot be denied: Intellect and its conceptual schemes provide only partial, and hence distorted, views of the whole.

And so James argues that monism’s claim of logical necessity is absurd, for monism is just another instance of the dead-end conceptual mind-game, played so often, though in different ways, throughout the history of philosophy. Virtually all of Western

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 110.

philosophy has betrayed a bias toward conceptual order—a preference for fixity over change, for universals over particulars, and so on.<sup>128</sup> Monistic philosophers are no exception. James describes them as thinkers who “have invariably sought relief from the supposed contradictions of our world of sense by looking forward to an *ens rationis* conceived as its integration or logical completion.”<sup>129</sup> To understand the motive, however, is not to justify the crime.

In making this extended case against monism, James is laying the foundation for his own pluralistic worldview. Central to its development is the transcending of intellect and its concepts, and the adoption of a mysticism or, perhaps better put, an epistemological attitude that is receptively open to the diversity of experiences, sensory or otherwise, that reality may present. This attitude closely resembles Bergsonian intuition, and “radical empiricism” is another term James uses to describe it. On the nature of this shift in approach, he writes:

[I]f, as metaphysicians, we are more curious about the inner nature of reality or about what really *makes it go*, we must turn our backs upon our winged concepts altogether, and bury ourselves in the thickness of those passing moments over the surface of which they fly, and on the particular points of which they occasionally rest and perch.<sup>130</sup>

What might we accomplish by turning our backs in this manner? James argues that if we turn directly to the continuity of sensible experience, and if we are intellectually honest, we shall adopt a vision of the universe that is quite unlike that of the unified, all-

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<sup>128</sup> See *ibid.*, 106.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

inclusive, single real being that monism posits. In short, we shall repudiate monism and adopt pluralism.

*Radical Empiricism and the Pluralistic Universe.* In contrast to philosophy that proceeds by abstraction and conceptualization, James's method of so-called radical empiricism is devoted to this task of directing the philosophical gaze toward the data of experience and keeping it fixed there, so to speak, in a quasi-meditative stance that resists constructing simplifying schema and seeks to grasp the fullness of reality as experientially given. In other words, it is the mystic's approach to reality, and it is not unlike Bergsonian intuition: Neither skims over surfaces or lays out conceptual frameworks that distort reality by flattening it; rather, both seek to penetrate and understand from within the richness and complexity of reality. "Life is confused and superabundant, and what the younger generation appears to crave is more of the temperament of life in its philosophy," James writes in "A World of Pure Experience," the first essay of the collected *Essays in Radical Empiricism*.<sup>131</sup> Radical empiricism is James's answer to this craving for a "living" philosophy congruous to sensible experience.

Unlike the artificial, concept-driven systems of other philosophers, which depart from and thus fail to give any adequate account of the "inner life of the flux," radical empiricism is intended to be a wholly experience-based approach that remains close to the suppleness and fluidity of reality. It is empiricism insofar as it "lays the explanatory

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<sup>131</sup> James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 21-44. Originally appeared in *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* 1 (1904): 533-43, 561-70.

stress upon the part, the element, the individual, and treats the whole as a collection and the universal as an abstraction.” It is radical insofar as it insists on “neither admit[ing] into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclud[ing] from them any element that is directly experienced.”<sup>132</sup> The “ordinary” empiricism of thinkers like Hume and Berkeley tends to neglect the experientially given conjunctive relations among things and to emphasize their disjunctions. In turn, it leads to the backlash of rationalism, which seeks to reinstate unity and “correct [empiricism’s] inconsistencies by the addition of trans-experiential agents of unification.”<sup>133</sup> Both types of philosophy thus err, while radical empiricism alone evenhandedly endeavors to recognize the genuineness of both the connections and the divisions that experience reveals.

As described and practiced by James, the method of radical empiricism paves the way for a pluralistic vision of the universe, a vision not unlike Bergson’s creative evolution, as we shall see. Such a universe is patterned after our daily, concrete experience, in which we grasp a world whose parts are “loosely” connected, or more precisely, a world in which some parts are connected, others not.<sup>134</sup> When we turn to experience, he argues, what we find is a great variety of relations—“of time, space, difference, likeness, change, rate, cause, and what not”—that are all just as much parts of

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 22. One might question whether it is really possible to adequately execute, achieve, or live up to this radical standard, but I think it is fair to say that James intends it more modestly as a *modus operandi*, as a guiding principle in an ongoing process of philosophizing that may never be completed.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> See *ibid.*, 39. James expressly notes that his own pluralistic view hinges on the notion that there are *some* real connections among things in the universe. Contrary to other versions of pluralism, his own view does not deny all connections; rather, it affirms that there are some and denies that all is connected. See *ibid.*, 40-1.

that experience as the things or terms related are.<sup>135</sup> This is evident when we consider the immediately felt continuity of the stream of consciousness. Anyone who reflects on his own personal history recognizes the continuity that is implicit in change: “What I do feel simply when a later moment of my experience succeeds an earlier one is that tho they are two moments, the transition from the one to the other is *continuous*.”<sup>136</sup> In contrast, however, a similar sort of private reflection also reveals the experience of discontinuity: “[W]hen I seek to make the transition from an experience of my own to one of yours. . . . I have to get on and off again, to pass from a thing lived to another thing only conceived, and the break is positively experienced and noted.”<sup>137</sup>

Experience presents to us a world that is neither monolithic nor atomistically fragmented, but rather connected in some spots and not in others. Radical empiricism simply takes reality’s disjunctions along with its conjunctions, and does not see either as problematic or needing to be overcome by the imposition of some neat philosophical system with no loose ends. It does not model reality as a completed whole, but instead gives birth to the vision of a pluralistic universe, admitting that “the absolute sum-total of things may never be actually experienced or realized in that shape . . . , and that a disseminated, distributed, or incompletely unified appearance is the only form that reality

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 25. More broadly, we feel this continuity over the span of our lives, as James writes at *A Pluralistic Universe*, 129: “events separated by years of time in a man’s life hang together unbrokenly by the intermediary events. Their *names*, to be sure, cut them into separate conceptual entities, but no cuts existed in the continuum in which they originally came.”

<sup>137</sup> James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 25.

may yet have achieved.”<sup>138</sup> James confesses this is “but a sorry appearance. . . . [It is] a turbid, muddled, gothic sort of an affair, without a sweeping outline and with little pictorial nobility.”<sup>139</sup> And yet for all its aesthetic shortcomings, the pluralism is a more genuine and honest way of accounting for reality as experienced.<sup>140</sup>

James refers to his own project as a “mosaic philosophy,” the image of a mosaic being a metaphor that helpfully draws out a crucial difference between pluralism and the various forms of rationalism:

In actual mosaics the pieces are held together by their bedding, for which bedding the substances, transcendental egos, and absolutes of other philosophies may be taken to stand. In radical empiricism there is no bedding; it is as if the pieces clung together by their edges, the transitions experienced between them forming their cement.<sup>141</sup>

By turning to pure experience, radical empiricism develops a philosophical vision of reality that does not require an intellectual abstraction such as the absolute to bind together its parts. Truly, any such artifice is a rationalist solution to a problem that rationalism itself has wrought; it is a laborious cure for a needless affliction. Pluralism overcomes this serious shortcoming of monism.

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<sup>138</sup> James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 25.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>140</sup> Pluralism gives a more authentic account of reality as experienced—particularly regarding our own experience of ourselves, so to speak. Monism places us in the role of “readers” of reality; but at the crux of our experience of ourselves is the feeling that we are “the very personages of the world-drama,” and pluralism restores us to that role (*ibid.*, 27). James writes at *ibid.*, 28: “It is surely a merit in a philosophy to make the very life we lead seem real and earnest. Pluralism, in exorcising the absolute, exorcises the great de-realer of the only life we are at home in, and thus redeems the nature of reality from essential foreignness.”

<sup>141</sup> James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 42.

Given that the challenge of philosophy is to maximize the rationality of our account of the universe, James suggests the following justification for a radically empirical approach:

May not the flux of sensible experience itself contain a rationality that has been overlooked, so that the real remedy would consist in harking back to it more intelligently, and not in advancing in the opposite direction away from it . . . to the pseudo-rationality of the supposed absolute point of view[?] <sup>142</sup>

Monism is superfluous inasmuch as it resolves a false problem; and we are better off, James argues, avoiding the problem entirely by adopting conscientious radical empiricism.

The development of this pluralistic vision complements James's thought on the evolution of man insofar as it sets the scene for the type of evolution he defends. The pluralistic universe is not a closed system; rather, it entails the spontaneity, indeterminacy, and indeed novelty that we have already seen James affirm in his evolutionary thinking. In this regard, it is quite like Bergsonian creative evolution, where life moves and develops in an open-ended fashion, unconstrained by the conditions of matter. Recall Bergson's words to James, quoted earlier: "When you say that 'for rationalism reality is ready-made and complete for all eternity, while for pragmatism it is still in the making,' you provide the very formula for the metaphysics to which I am convinced we shall come."<sup>143</sup> In both Bergson's creative evolution and James's pluralistic universe, the process of evolution is not a function of matter and its laws. If it were, then reality would indeed, at least virtually, be "ready-made." But for Bergson and

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<sup>142</sup> James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 38.

<sup>143</sup> See p. 176 n. 4.

James, the actualities that come into being are unpredictable—they elude the perspective of intellectual analysis and conceptualization.

In characterizing this vision James begins, “Pluralism lets things really exist in the each-form or distributively.” That is to say, it rejects the grandiose monistic conception of a universal, all-inclusive, “great total conflux” of being.<sup>144</sup> According to the pluralistic account, “nothing real is absolutely simple, . . . every smallest bit of experience is a *multum in parvo* plurally related.”<sup>145</sup> It reflects the progressive, temporal, “strung-along” yet still continuous and concatenated nature of our experience,<sup>146</sup> and it gives a world in which the future relations among things are a variety of real possibilities. In contrast to the monistic “all-form [which] allows of no taking up and dropping of connexions,” the pluralistic each-forms are contingently related, and so open-ended possibilities virtually populate the future:

a thing may be connected by intermediary things, with a thing with which it has no immediate or essential connexion. It is thus at all times in many possible connexions which are not necessarily actualized at the moment. They depend on which actual path of intermediation it may functionally strike into: the word ‘or’ names a genuine reality.<sup>147</sup>

Yet the open-endedness of this system does not compromise its unity. Howsoever its future possibilities might come to pass, they are always actualized by paths of real

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 146, 145.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.



connections.<sup>148</sup> The universe pluralistically construed thus hangs together in much the same manner as our everyday experience of the continuity of consciousness. While it is “not a universal co-implication, or integration of things *durcheinander*,” it is still cohesively unified.<sup>149</sup>

As an open-ended system, the pluralistic universe is continuously in the process of generation and growth. This is a world in which undetermined and unpredictable evolutionary paths may be paved. It is a dynamic, multivariable, and multidimensional setting, not unlike Bergson’s creative evolution, that exceeds the limits of any conceptual abstraction, as evidenced by the fact that certain logical principles, which function quite nicely in the abstract realm of concepts, break down in the real world. For example, James writes:

More than the more is more than the less, equals of equals are equal, sames of the same are the same, the cause of a cause is the cause of its effects, are other examples of this serial law [of “skipt intermediaries”]. Altho [sic] it applies infallibly and without restriction throughout certain abstract series, where the ‘sames,’ ‘causes,’ etc., spoken of are ‘pure,’ and have no properties save their sameness, causality, etc., it cannot be applied offhand to concrete objects with numerous properties and relations, for it is hard to trace a straight line of sameness, causation, or whatever it may be, through a series of such objects without swerving into some ‘respect’ where the relation, as pursued originally, no longer holds.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Elsewhere he notes the common objection that pluralism destroys the world’s “rational continuity” by introducing novelties “jumping abruptly in, ex nihilo.” This objection, however, rests on a false premise, and he offers the following reply: “Novelty, as empirically found, doesn’t arrive by jumps and jolts, it leaks in insensibly, for adjacents in experience are always interfused, the smallest real datum being both a coming and a going, and even the numerical distinctness being realized effectively only after a concrete interval has passed” (ibid., 153).

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 151.

Logical principles fail in the realm of the living flux, where things regularly interpenetrate and modify one another. In the pluralistic universe, relations among things are tenuous—things are partially and variably related, and they constantly adjust (or adjust to) one another in and through their relations. Moreover, our epistemological relation to these things is similarly dynamic: “In every series of real terms, not only do the terms themselves and their associations and environments change, but we change, and their meaning for us changes, so that new kinds of sameness and types of causation continually come into view and appeal to our interest.”<sup>151</sup> Pluralism thus maintains that the contingent nature of the future derives from the adjustable, ever-changing nature of the relations among things in the world.

James offers a concrete example that serves both to illustrate pluralism and to support its plausibility. A friend, he writes, proposes that the study of human history might be made scientific if only sufficient data from two historical periods could be collected, and the curve between the two periods accurately traced as a function of the data. Modeling the advance of history in this manner, a science of history might then be used to predict the future by extrapolation. Yet, James notes, any aspirations toward such a science are patently absurd: “We all feel the essential unreality of such a conception of

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 152. James also writes at *ibid.*, 117: “What really is not things made but things in the making. Once made, they are dead, and an infinite number of alternative conceptual decompositions can be used in defining them.” He thus argues further for the pluralistic universe in the form of a *reductio* that homes in on certain conceptual difficulties, such as those discussed in Lecture IV—regarding Zeno’s paradox, in particular, and the attendant problems of conceptualizing motion and change, as we have seen earlier (pp. 164-66 above). Concepts might appropriately name that which is static or past, but with respect to the ever-flowing movement of life—which “buds and burgeons, changes and creates” (*ibid.*, 118)—they necessarily miss the mark.

‘history’ as this.”<sup>152</sup> By contrast, pluralism denies that any such predictive model is achievable, and so it comports with humans’ intuitive sense of the complexity and perhaps even fundamental inscrutability of the movement of history.

James moves from this reflection to an important implication: “if such a synechistic pluralism . . . be what really exists, every phenomenon of development, even the simplest, would prove equally rebellious to our science should the latter pretend to give us literally accurate instead of approximate, or statistically generalized, pictures of the development of reality.”<sup>153</sup> The pluralistic universe is slippery, difficult to grasp and to predict. But from the vantage point of radical empiricism, this is its virtue, for this is the world of our experience—one that defies easy formulas and routinely confounds prognosticators.

## CONCLUSION

To summarize, pluralism pragmatically means indeterminism, and for this reason, the pluralistic universe is the proper context for the account of evolution that James affirms. We saw in chapter 1 that, as a pragmatist, James maintains that the meaning of any philosophical position is wholly identified with its upshot, that is, the practical consequences it effects in the world. A pragmatist assessment of the merits of pluralism is thus centered on the following question: If pluralism is true, what difference does it make for us? The answer: If pluralism is true, then we live in a world that is chancy, a

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

world in which events occur through lines of development that are not always or thoroughly mechanically predictable. It is a world whose order, if such order truly exists, is not completely knowable by us by means of scientific analysis. Intellectual analysis and conceptualization do not completely plumb its depths, and events too often surprise us, as their causes are too often unseen and elusive in this world, whose laws are not rightly identified with—or, perhaps it is better to say, confined to—the determinate laws of matter.

So the pluralistic universe is hospitable to James's view of human nature and his thinking on the question of the evolution of man. As we saw in chapter 2, he affirms that man is a more than physico-chemical being, who in his immaterial dimensions both exercises freedom and enjoys some degree of communion with a wider, spiritual environment. Moreover, as we saw in chapter 3, he affirms that a Darwinian-style account of evolution coalesces best with this view of man inasmuch as the principle of spontaneous variation leaves room for these distinctive human features and activities that transcend the material realm. Now, I argue, it is evident that pluralism completes James's thought on the evolution of man, for it is precisely within the pluralistic universe that spontaneous variation, the reality and efficaciousness of human freedom, and the continuity of consciousness with broader immaterial dimensions of reality all make sense.

When we turn to consider our own selves from the vantage point of radical empiricism, what we find, James argues, is something much more expansive than we ordinarily assume. Just as any part of the pluralistic universe does, our own being

“overflows its own definition.”<sup>154</sup> He distinguishes between what may be referred to as the conceptualized “I” and the fuller self that is felt but never intellectually conceived, strictly speaking:

My present field of consciousness is a centre surrounded by a fringe that shades insensibly into a subconscious more. I use three separate terms here to describe this fact; but I might as well use three hundred, for the fact is all shades and no boundaries. Which part of it properly is in my consciousness? If I name what is out, it already has come in. The centre works in one way while the margins work in another, and presently overpower the centre and are central themselves. What we conceptually identify ourselves with and say we are thinking of at any time is the centre; but our *full* self is the whole field, with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can only feel without conceiving, and can hardly begin to analyze.<sup>155</sup>

Conceptualization necessarily fails to grasp the whole field that comprises our being.

Our being thus exceeds any formalized conceptual definitions, including those constructed and imposed by traditional science. As constitutive parts of a pluralistic universe, we live and move and interact dynamically, and our temporal development is unconstrained to the extent that it does not unfold entirely along fixed lines or according to predictable patterns. James’s pluralistic vision thus completes his thought on man and evolution, for it is the pluralistic universe in which our nature and our life transcend the physical realm and its laws.

The present chapter also allows us to observe, in this final phase of James’s career, the consistent unity of his thought and the absence of any real tension between the promethean pragmatist and the antipromethean mystic. Given that fully grasping the pluralistic universe requires transcending the limits of intellect and conceptualization,

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 130.

James's pluralism calls for the antipromethean mystic's approach. It may be impossible to determine whether James himself ever embodied this persona or carried out such transcendent activity, but ultimately it is of no significant consequence either way. What is evident is that, at this stage in his life, he is at work as a promethean pragmatist, actively articulating and constructing a positive, progressive vision of both the whole and how it is most authentically approached and known. Once again, there is no real tension between the pragmatist and the mystic; at the very least, precisely as a pragmatist James argues for the legitimacy and value of the mystic's approach to reality.

## CONCLUSION

The overarching argument of this dissertation is that James's thought on the evolution of man may be read as an application of his pragmatism, and that in studying James from this perspective, we survey the full breadth of his thought and are able to observe a fundamental unity therein. As we have seen, the pragmatist and the mystic personae are both represented in his writings throughout his career, but there is no real tension between the two. James himself is a practicing pragmatist, but precisely as such he is both open to the mystical dimensions of human experience and committed to integrating these in the development of his thought on evolution.

Chapter 1 detailed the meaning of "pragmatism" as articulated by James. As we saw, in one important sense the term refers to a temperament, which James situates between the poles of so-called tough-mindedness and tender-mindedness. The pragmatist temperament is well disposed to the empirical scientific mindset that insists on rigorous standards of evidence and experimentation, but it is also sympathetic to those religious sensibilities that affirm the reality of an unseen order. In another important sense the term "pragmatism" refers to a theory of truth. The truth of one's ideas, for the pragmatist, consists in their being both verifiable and satisfying—but verification and satisfaction mean, simply, that one's ideas are properly grounded in objective, extramental reality, such that they enable one to navigate successfully through the world. Moreover, as a theory of truth, Jamesian pragmatism stresses the constraining role that

one's previously formed and accepted ideas play in the process of one's inquiries into and determinations about reality. In clarifying these senses of Jamesian pragmatism, this chapter laid the groundwork for understanding how James's thought on evolution is an application of his pragmatism: for it is as one of pragmatist temperament that he affirms the immaterial dimensions of human nature, and as one who subscribes to a pragmatist theory of truth he respects this understanding of human nature and integrates it into his evolutionary thinking.

Chapter 2 developed James's nonreductive view of man as a being whose consciousness both exercises freedom and enjoys continuity with a wider, spiritual environment. As I argue, James's philosophical anthropology serves to resolve any tension between the pragmatist and the mystic personae in two ways. First, his affirmation of human freedom highlights the active nature characteristic of the pragmatist, yet his recognition of human spirituality underscores the passively receptive nature typical of the mystic. There is no tension, however, between pragmatism and mysticism, as both bespeak man's supramaterial nature: a being who can act freely and who is open to experiencing wider dimensions of reality must indeed exceed its material elements. Second, it is precisely as one of pragmatist temperament that James is open to the broader, immaterial dimensions of human nature, including those that make possible mystical experience. Again, we observe no opposition of or tension between pragmatism and mysticism.

Following this account of James's nonreductive view of human nature, chapter 3 argued that this understanding is pragmatically determinative with respect to his thought



on evolution. As we saw, he favors an evolutionary account that comports with this affirmation of human freedom and spirituality. He argues extensively against materialist interpretations of evolution, such as that of Herbert Spencer, which entail or imply determinism. Moreover, in developing his own positive thought he draws on something he finds attractive in Darwinism, namely, the principle of spontaneous variation. It is this element of spontaneity that opens the door to the indeterminacy and freedom of human nature that is a key feature of his anthropology. James thus favors an evolutionary model in which the progress and activity of life can and do exceed the constraints of physico-chemical matter. In this way, his thought on evolution develops pragmatically, with deference to his prior commitments regarding the immaterial dimensions of human nature.

Chapter 4's brief survey of James's pluralistic metaphysics completed my consideration of his thought on evolution. This is a fitting way to round out the discussion, for it is within metaphysics that the question of evolution is properly taken up. Here Henri Bergson is an important source for James. As Bergson, for one, articulates well, science is restricted to the consideration of material objects. So, if man is more than his matter, any inquiry into the fullness of his nature and its origin necessarily lies outside the purview of science. Since James affirms that man is indeed more than his matter, these questions of human nature and the evolution thereof are most fully treated by philosophy, not science.

In his elaboration of the pluralistic nature of the universe, James lays out a metaphysics that provides the context for a more thorough understanding of his earlier

thought on human nature and the question of evolution. His program of radical empiricism, as we have seen, is his answer to the failure of other philosophical systems properly to grasp the fullness of reality. It is a mystical approach of sorts, one that remains open and receptive to whatever features and dimensions of reality experience might present. Confined to neither sensory experience nor the conceptual mappings of reality based thereupon, James's radical empiricism leads to a vision of the pluralistic universe that runs counter to the all-inclusiveness and sometimes mechanistic implications of absolutist or monistic philosophy. The pluralistic universe is the world of primitive experience minimally abstracted or systematized—its parts and events hang loosely together through the open-ended, contingent progress of time. What is important to note is that only this sort of setting is hospitable to human freedom, to the meaningful and efficacious continuity of consciousness with a wider spiritual environment, and to the spontaneous variations that drive the process of evolution—all important elements of James's earlier thought. This later achievement of James both fulfills and unifies his thought with respect to the question of evolution.

Examining the thought of William James on the issues of human nature and evolution is a worthy enterprise, for we see that he brings to bear both his pragmatist temperament and the pragmatist doctrine of truth, thereby affording us a more robust and intellectually honest approach than might otherwise be found. James lived and worked in the nascent Darwinian era, and throughout his career was interested in addressing the philosophical challenges posed by nineteenth-century evolutionary thinking. His consideration of evolution is especially significant insofar as it took place during the

period in which Darwinism was subject to serious, critical examination—before it had gained the privileged status it presently enjoys and before the discussion of evolution devolved to the ideological battle it has largely become. A central feature of his pragmatism is the conviction that the truth of our ideas and beliefs lies in what these enable us to do, that this truth is measured in terms of its impact on our living.

Correlatively, no theory can be accepted as true if it is incompatible with the foundations and sources of our active life. In James's view, these foundations and sources are our immediate awareness of and convictions about human freedom and spirituality, as well as the indeterminacy and spontaneity that these elements presuppose. For James, those who hold to a thoroughly reductive and deterministic model of evolution do so both dogmatically and falsely. Such a model is not empirically justified, for it is inconsistent with the immediate intuition of the presence and efficacy of free, human agency.

In James we thus witness an evenhanded, contemporaneous perspective on early evolutionary thinking that affirms the plausibility of such a theory, but while also affirming the distinctive, supramaterial dimensions of human nature. Importantly, too, we observe him shining a light on the limited scope of scientific inquiry. Empirical science may often overreach, and its confidence may indeed be a conceit, for truly, science is competent to investigate only the material dimensions of reality. Whatever else there may be to reality is properly cordoned off for philosophical investigation. James thus offers a coherent and well-argued defense of philosophy in general, and of the philosophical approach to the questions of human nature and evolution specifically. Cleaving faithfully to the data of experience, and perhaps more faithfully than science

itself does, James finds that these data take us far afield, beyond the material facts of the world, and indeed beyond the ken of science.

In this study of James's corpus we have surveyed the breadth of his philosophical investigations, and I maintain that in their diversity of contexts and subject matter we find coherence and unity. This coherence and unity, moreover, is attributable to the fact that James was a thoroughgoing pragmatist. While it is reasonable to maintain that discord and tensions would likely arise from a mode of philosophizing that is a function of personal willfulness or caprice, such is not the essence of pragmatism as articulated and practiced by James. Quite different from what critics may make it out to be, Jamesian pragmatism is a form of intellectual honesty that strives to answer to and represent nothing but reality as experienced. The unity and coherence of James's thought are no coincidence; indeed, the nonschismatic nature of his corpus follows precisely upon his pragmatism.

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