

Genuine Reality

A Life of William James

L.Simon

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It must have been in the spring of 1999, while I was at Ann Arbor, when I read a review of a book on William James in NYR and learned that in his youth he had suddenly been seized with a terror of existence, something I was quick to identify with those sudden flashes of metaphysical dread I had in my own youth been subjected to, and which were so painful, even more painful than the intermittent dread of death, that they could only be sustained for a brief moment. It was as if one suddenly became conscious of consciousness and what it really entailed, and one felt a cosmic vertigo. Those attacks, or whatever they should be called, were rare, and once they passed they left almost no residue of fear, as if the mind was as incapable of recalling them as it is of recalling pain, only leaving a nagging worry about not being quite normal. There might be a word for it, a prosaic term such as panic attack, which would bring it down to earth; but I preferred not to think of them as that, but as something more elevated and of a definite metaphysical origin and not a mere malfunctioning of neurons. Although I still as an adult, especially if finding myself alone in unfamiliar surroundings, sometimes feel this alienation as if the world around me is not quite real, or rather all too real (the distinction is hard to make), those attacks of impending panic can always be fought off with a modicum of will and biting my lips; those real metaphysical dreads, on the other hand, are forever gone, as if the imaginative and suggestive powers of adolescence are never really matched by those of adulthood. Nevertheless this brief allusion to James terrors instilled a strong sense of identification and thus a relief from loneliness as well as a resolution of acquainting myself more closely with the man at some future date. Such identifications with great men, or at least socially acclaimed ones, are often far more tempting than appropriate, and one should hence be weary of attributing too much significance to them.

I do not remember the title of the book which was reviewed almost nine years ago, it might very well be the one presently considered, and if so I am sorry to be disillusioned. The kind of dread of personal existence James suffered, he suffered not in his adolescence but in his twenties, and as to its momentary intensity it is hard to judge and its subject matter was not cosmos as a whole, but the more mundane fear of insanity, yet the consequences seem to have been far more serious, possibly involving internment in an institution, although the author has failed to come up with conclusive evidence.

It is hard to write a life, and every written life is bound to be but a pale reflection of the real authentic life, deprived of all the colors and smells that a real life entails. Autobiography provides of course a better approximation, it is at least a view from the inside, but the truth to which it approximates is often more of a poetic one than a factual. Still why do we read biographies? On one level we simply crave facts and information, the most succinct of which is provided by the years of birth and demise. Such information

may be provided by an encyclopedia. On a deeper level it is the desire to imaginatively live another life, to follow the universal narrative from cradle to grave, yet to survive its passing. We are granted but one life, our own, often a unsatisfying and obscure one, whose only saving grace may be its authenticity. So what do we really demand from such a deeper narrative level? We demand to be given a sense of time and place, and the changes of the same. This appeals to our sensual nature and our instincts for empathy and identification. But we also want more, something different, namely instruction. Of our own lives we can seldom make sense as they can never be viewed with sufficient detachment, but other lives can somehow be explained. Explanation involves simplification, the kind of simplification we would abhor to be subjected to ourselves, but biography is not life, it is a representation of life, and at its best it is art. And art involves precisely artful simplification. One particular instruction most readers want is to be alerted to crucial developments. When exactly did a seemingly ordinary individual transform himself into greatness? Were those features always present, and it was merely a question of recognition, or were those qualities acquired? And if so, by luck or determination?

What are the significant aspects of James development? His father was a disinherited son of a very wealthy Irish immigrant, and who eventually was able to regain some of what was due to him. This Henry James Sr had suffered in his early teens an amputation of his leg which redirected his boyhood energies to a more intellectual bent. In fact all through his adult life he sought to be recognized as a public intellectual purveying a highly idealistic philosophy with strong monistic tendencies. He cultivated the acquaintance of the already recognized, such as Emerson and Carlyle without really ever reaching a larger public. His relative wealth allowed an unconventional lifestyle involving frequent trips overseas. The children were constantly uprooted and suffered from a discontinuous education not only because of constant migrations but due to their father's efforts to provide them with an education consistent with his progressive ideas. His anti-authority ideals never preventing those to be imposed by relentless paternal authority.

Not surprisingly the James children were racked by neurotic symptoms displaying marked neurasthenic personalities. William James initially wanted to be an artist, a choice of career that his father thought a bit too narrow compared to his own lofty ideals, then he studied medicine, but the career, in spite of its secure professional rewards did not appeal to him. He joined an expedition led by Agassiz to Brazil, but realized that he was not cut out to be a naturalist. Depressions followed, a desperate trip to Germany to find himself, and so finally at the age of thirty being given a teaching post at Harvard assigned courses in anatomy. Much to his surprise he realized he had a talent for teaching, that he attracted students, and that the regular duties alleviated his depression and gave at least to his daily routines a meaning. Of course there had been no indications before that he would be partial to perform in front of a class, but it is clear that this discovery was indeed a lucky break, exactly what he needed to infuse stability into his self-tortured life, which compared to that of his younger sibling Henry was painfully unsuccessful. The latter had by this time already established himself as a financially successful writer of fiction, and thus providing a formidable rival ¹.

¹ Still in spite of this competition, they remained close throughout their lives, even if William never approved as much of his brothers novels, as the latter approved of Williams writings.

One does expect that a man is erotically adventurous in his twenties, but James seems not have displayed any such zest. To a certain extent this reflect social mores and expectations, but of course where there is real zest, such conventions are flouted, while where there is none, social expectations provide a supportive alibi. Eventually, after a rather tortured courtship James married at the age of 36, and a woman to boot, his father had recommended to him. Marriage and the ensuing domestic life was very good for him. Socially, sexually and thus doing wonders to his flagging self-esteem². Due to comfortable financial circumstances and the social expectations of the time he was protected from too direct a confrontation with his growing breed³ The roles in marriage were well delineated, the wife being expected to supply emotional support to her husband but not intellectual, and in this regard the marriage was fairly conventional. This did not prevent him from showing intellectual curiosity in other women as he got established and often championing their causes; initiatives which in retrospect have earned him appreciations of contemporary political correctness . His teaching duties at Harvard quickly moved from medicine to psychology which tied up with his philosophical interests. Psychology being in a state of flux, perched between philosophical speculation and physiological research. James although welcoming the latter also saw the danger of it reducing to a mindless accumulation of trivial facts without the benefit of a philosophical guidance. He also realized the need to establish himself ⁴ and decided that the best way of so doing was to write a textbook on psychology, the courses of which attracted a growing audience of students. This labour lasted for twelve years, during which time he had been able to raise his salary and to find alternative sources of income, the pursuit of which he never disdained, and enabling the family to move into spacious quarters with a big library for his study where he was able to finish the project to be published as the Principles of Psychology in 1890.

The remaining twenty years of his life were those of successive academic and public triumphs marred in the last years of declining cardiac health. James had always lusted for fame. Public recognition gave him the sense of worth he craved. Praise he sought, and preferably the unqualified. Like most men taking themselves seriously he was sensitive to flattery. He was also vain and set great store in being well-dressed. He was unlike his frugal wife partial to occasional extravagance. So what was his fame really based on?

Fame means public recognition, and the latter was a natural outgrowth from the popularity he naturally earned as an inspiring teacher, not always well-prepared or coherent, but with a charismatic personality and a willingness to have his views challenged and an engrossing interest in his students. His public lectures were very well received and he became astute in exploiting his market worth. Psychology was a fascinating subject, and James ambivalent attitude to religion enabled him to attract both atheists and believers without repelling either. The modern reader is puzzled by his interest for psychical research, where he displayed a similar ambivalence of skepticism and the will to believe. In fact his patience for testing medics and their claims of transmitting the voices from the

² The lack of which of course did not preclude arrogance.

³ When he on a later travel temporarily without the support of his wife had direct responsibility thrown on him, he found the experience harrowing.

⁴ he never earned any academic degree which was of course no impediment when he started out his career, but by the time of his fifties would have prevented him from getting any purchase whatsoever.

other side of the veil is astonishing, unless you accept the fact that James was not only open to such extra-sensory phenomena but nourished a desperate will to believe in them⁵. But what was closest to his heart was after all his philosophy, which was geared towards a practical and purposive variety, renouncing grand theoretical systems, and displaying an openness for the plurality of existence. Being inspired by his excentric friend C.S.Peirce, he called it pragmatism⁶. But among professional philosophers he incurred much criticism. It was argued that his thinking was muddled and illogical, to which James protestations that philosophy transcends logic carried little weight. Especially his notion that truth was what was useful attracted a lot of protests, to which he in vain tried to argue that he was being misunderstood.

He had the ambition of writing a textbook on philosophy as well, aimed at the undergraduate. Believing that philosophy should be addressed to the common man and involve common sense, and only by renouncing academic jargon could ones thoughts be clarified. But apart from writing an introduction the project was cut short by ill-health and eventual demise, leaving scattered manuscripts to be edited for posthumous publication. The result turned out to be just another collection of philosophical essays having very limited import.

James died from heart-disease as did two of his brothers, and the suspicion that it was hereditary seems rather well-founded. The first signs of it appeared at the age of fifty-seven after two strenuous hikes in the Adirondack Mountains⁷ that left him with chest pains. He tried a variety of cures, involving lymphatic injections, 'mind-cures' and residences in German Spas, as any skeptical philosopher being more than willing to leave such garments at the door, when his own bodily health was concerned. For a few years the symptoms subsided but in the last few years angina became common reducing him to an invalid during his last summer abroad. He died in his sleep in August 1910 back at his beloved retreat in New Hampshire.

His death was felt as a deep personal loss among the many, not only those closest of kin. Clearly as already indicated he possessed great personal charisma, something that is very hard to convey with any kind of precision and immediacy in a biography, but can only be indicated by testimonies. To some extent the secret of charisma is the mixture of weakness and strength, the former allowing for identification, the latter appearing sharper by contrast. And surely he had his weaknesses, many of which have already been touched upon. But personal charisma, at least not the direct kind, cannot survive into posterity. What is it that makes the reading and reflective public still revere him? His theoretical constructs obsolete already at their inceptions, and clearly one hundred years of research in psychology must have superseded his pioneer attempts most of them based on nothing more solid than introspection. But as with many people whose fame survive into posterity, their

⁵ One does not find in his Principles any open acknowledgment of such beliefs, but instead, for the modern reader, a disproportionate interest in hypnosis, a generally practiced skill at the time. Congruent with his openness to extra-sensory perception was a willingness to test mind-altering drugs for experimental purposes, which clearly would have endeared him to the generation of 1968.

⁶ Although friends Peirce was critical of James philosophies, and decided to call his own pragmatism to distinguish it from the less subtle version that was James'

⁷ Keene Valley being a favorite retreat of his since youth. In addition to this he acquired a farmhouse in Chocorua N.H.

success is due to the very weaknesses that ought to have felled them. Psychology is still a subject proved fascinating due to the possibility of introspective knowledge, and recent preoccupations with the mysteries of consciousness have naturally revived his introspective approach, although of course as a philosopher he was inclined both to deny the existence of consciousness as well as posit a more general consciousness enveloping us all⁸.

December 2, 2007 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

⁸ It is hardly surprising that at the famous 1909 congress of psychology in Clark, James would find Jung more sympathetic than Freud, whose emphasis on sexuality repelled him.