

William James

In the Maelstrom of American Modernism

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According to Whitehead there are Four great thinkers in the Western tradition, Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz and William James. McDermott suggested more realistically that James was to American philosophy what Plato was to Greek. A fountainhead of inspiration. Anyway the author is an admirer of James and posits him right in the center of that maelstrom of modernist thought that took form in the end of the 19th century in America. His account puts his thinking in the centre of the narrative and his actual life as a charmed background. The result is pleasing and the biography reads part as a novel, part as a philosophical treatise with instructive digressions on the supportive cast such as C.S. Peirce, Royce, Holmes and not to forget the members of his own close-knit family, distinguished or exasperating or often both.

James thought of himself as a philosopher and his forays into science and psychology were just means to express his philosophical convictions. But the verdict by posterity of his philosophy is middling, while that on his psychology is great. The reason being, it is tempting to conclude, that after all James was a philosophical optimist, not to say a philosophical 'populist', eschewing system buildings and abstract speculations, stressing a pragmatic attitude to life embracing in a Whitmanesque spirit the great plurality of existence. James who was a neurasthenic, suffering most of his life from vague and often debilitating ailments no doubt of a psycho-somatic origin, consequently fought very hard against depression and indecision to achieve a healthy and sound life. A fight in which he incidentally proved to be remarkably successful. He claimed that reality is what is most congruent with your innermost feelings and abilities, and that faith is to be embraced as making that true what you want to be true. From a subjective and personal point of view such an attitude can be bracing and even, as we have noted, successful, but from the viewpoint of philosophy it is riddled with contradictions, which James no doubt was aware of and desperately tried to resolve¹. His idea that ultimately all there was were pure experiences, that there is no difference in kind between the thought and its thinker, both being made of the same stuff, and that consequently consciousness, which he had so vividly portrayed and investigated in his 'Principles of Philosophy' was just an illusion; this gallant attack on dualism and the embracing of an ever changing pluralistic universe, obviously much influenced by Bergson, logically led him ultimately into some kind of solipsistic *cul de sac* that could not have been more temperamentally antipodal to his intentions. This

¹ His most ambitious and specific writings on philosophy were published under the heading of 'radical empiricism, which I personally consider a philosophical failure. He later renounced ambitions to extend and elaborate those ideas and instead he published the far blander 'Pragmatism' which is less of a philosophy than a statement of attitude. A philosophy of philosophy so to speak.

must have been, as hinted above, an embarrassment to him.

It is as a psychologist James earned his laurels, and the basis for his reputation is the two volume work 'the Principles of Psychology' which was written at the height of his creative powers during the twelve year period stretching from 1878, when he was newly married to 1890. What is so great about this work, which still after more than a hundred years has not essentially dated but reads fresh? First and foremost it is a work that takes at its point of departure an uncompromising materialistic attitude to psychology. Thinking is what goes on in the brain, and the brain is a physical organ. Thus he rejects all transcendental claims, disposes of the notion of the soul, and all kind of idealistic or dualistic approaches. Psychology should just be a part of physiology which just a generation or so before had started to be seriously studied by the German schools. But adding to this materialistic approach is a keen understanding and appreciation of evolution through natural selection as recently proposed by Darwin. An evolutionary approach embeds human nature into a continuous organic web, and as a consequence mans place in the scheme of things is no longer distinguished and his separation from the animals no longer canonical. Humiliating as well as deeply disturbing as such a view may be it has its great rewards and advantages supplying a rich explanatory contexts for a host of phenomena. But is is not primarily as a hard-nosed positivistic scientist that the greatness of James resides. Reading through the volumes one cannot avoid the suspicion that much of the quantitative material in the treatise, mostly lifted from German scientists² is in the nature of paste-ons, a variety of measurements thrown at the reader, at best suggestive but seldom if ever conclusive. The great merit of James is after all his literary. While his brother Henry has been characterized as a literary man who was at the bottom a philosopher, William has been hailed as a psychologist who essentially was a man of letters. And true enough probably nothing tickled his vanity more than having the purely literary aspects of his work hailed. It is a work of literature because it is an exploration of consciousness by the tools available to a writer of fiction, namely introspection driven by intuition and imagination. As a consequence the work is studded with vivid and suggestive descriptions and the notion of 'the stream of consciousness' made fashionable a decade or so later in modern avant-garde literature was in fact coined by James in that very work.

A literary approach has many advantages, besides being the only available when it comes to consciousness, because it invites the reader to join a common ground as the latter can always compare with his or her own introspection and thus be called to make an independent assessment instead of taking things on trust³. Instruction thus becomes more intimate, stimulating the imagination and prompting questions. Thus the literary approach is not necessarily anathema to the scientific, it can rather, at least in favorable circumstances, reinforce it, because science is primarily one of putting questions and

² James hated laboratory work, which was part of the requirement of psychology at the time, and fittingly managed to attract and have hired a German - Hugo Münsterberg to cover for him.

³ The analogies of reading a mathematical text should be obvious. In mathematics there is also a common ground, namely a shared rational faculty, which allows in principle statements to be checked, judging arguments not on authority but as to their power to persuade.

forming guesses and formulating those appropriately⁴.

What made James into a mediocre philosopher made him into a great psychologist. Formal as well as inexorable logic, parsimony of explanation, abstract aesthetics, almost inhuman objectivity, exalted virtues crucial to any serious philosophical investigation, may rather impede than expedite an appreciation of the subtlety and complication of the phenomenon of consciousness, where indeed an empirical temperament, a delight in plurality, a natural inclination to prefer the muddled and messy explanation to the simple, and above all an indulgence in subjectivity prove to be far more fertile. James instinctively recoiled from what he called monism, to him the whole of the sensual entity which makes up our world should be embraced, and their differences exulted and not reduced. And here lies the explanation for what many people may view as a puzzling inconsistency in the thinking of James. Here we have the hard-nosed sceptic and materialist (although as many materialists James was not comfortable with the designation), the quintessential scientist, proving himself so gullible, spending so many years investigating spiritualism, and also with such sympathy investigating and reporting on the variety of religious experience as if that door was not permanently closed. James prided himself of having an open mind, and some of his open-mindedness is indeed a bit shocking to us moderns who have closed so many more doors. Spiritualism was alive and respected a hundred years ago to a degree puzzling to us. It was also a time during which hypnotic trances were commonplace and with that an appreciation of the fluidity of consciousness that has been lost on us⁵. James was active in establishing a society for the investigation of such para-psychological phenomena and did personally attend many a trance and associating with mediums⁶. James certainly had a will to believe, and how many of us would not want to be able to communicate with our dead friends and find comfort in the thought that somehow we may survive our bodily death, but he found himself deep down unable to do so. In the long history of spiritualism there is bound to be many completely inexplicable incidents which cannot be rationally explained, just as there is bound to be many a UFO⁷. Although James claimed years before Popper was born, that a single instance of a counter-fact explodes a universal statement (one single white crow disproving the general statement that all crows are black); an unexplainable incident is in fact not the white crow that punctures for ever our rationalistic scientific outlook. Science makes predictions in advance and those have to be tested, in retrospect all kinds of explanations can be cooked up for a phenomenon, but that is not how science progresses. A scientific investigation of unreal phenomena does not proceed by some kind of scientific inspection, all kinds of contraband can be smuggled across a barrier

⁴ i.e. making them amenable to empirical testing

⁵ It is still true that hypnotism is being practiced and that it actually has some therapeutic applications, although anesthesia has now routinely expropriated the larger target for such. It is now a marginal phenomenon in everyday life and does no longer challenge our everyday conceptions.

⁶ A certain Mrs Piper in particular who claimed to have transmitted messages from many of James dead colleagues and family members. She willingly subjected herself during a long career (she lived until 1950) to the scrutiny of scientists, and was never found out.

⁷ as a friend of mine once pointed out, UFO does literally mean an unidentified flying object, once a flying object as been identified as an UFO, it is no longer unidentified and hence not a UFO

of gullible scientists⁸. A scientific investigation of spiritualism should proceed differently. It is up to the spiritualists to stick their neck out and make predictions which then can be tested. In fact if there is something to it, we would like to harness that power in some reliable way, and if we cannot do so, it is beyond the ken of science (and engineering) no matter how intriguing certain isolated instances can be. It is doubtful whether James really appreciated this, because his extended investigations became rather inconclusive. His failure to properly doing so is a bit ironic in view of his pragmatic attitude to philosophy, with its emphasis on the practical consequences of ideas not on their roots. In short we cannot decide whether something is true or not by staring at it, and this was essentially the method of scrutinizing spiritualism, but only by working out its consequences and see how they comply with the other facets of life. The reason why spiritualism has gradually faded out is precisely because of its lack of (practical) consequences, an explanation which would have been deeply congruent with James thinking.

Next in fame to his 'Principles of Psychology' is surely his 'Variety of Religious Experiences' the published result of his Gifford lectures in Edinburgh. In one sense those are obviously congruent with his interest in spiritualism, in another sense profoundly different. While spiritualism can be subject to rational and scientific scrutiny and challenged to comply with a technically precise world view, religion does transcend such considerations. What James is after is not dogma or organized church or ossified theology, those are just second hand experiences, he is after the real thing, the mystic experiences as such, whose reality are hard to falsify, but whose significance can be gauged by collecting a wide range of testimony. This James certainly does, although more to present the variety of its expression than in an effort of drumming up numerical support. One may speculate as to James ultimate motivation. Did he actually believe in a transcendental reality, the glimpses of which may intermittently be the privilege of a few mystics, or is his approach more down to earth, reflecting a curiosity into the wider psychological reactions man is capable of. I suspect James was not entirely clear about those issues himself. He certainly combined a materialistic point of view (bottom-up) with an idealistic (top-down) meaning that our thoughts and consciousness (however illusory) presents the starting point of all our inquiry, and that the proper understanding of everything, in particular religion, is through a psychological approach.

As suggested above, James was deep down a 'feel-good' psychologist, and thus squarely embedded in an American intellectual tradition based on rugged self-sufficiency and optimism. His optimism, was as already noted, not something that had been given to him at birth, but something he had acquired through hard work. He well knew the bitter attractions of a melancholy temperament and the seduction of pessimism, at least intellectually as maybe a truer or definitely a harsher view of the universe. Pessimism and optimism may have been the poles of his life, with the former playing the role of a sink, the embrace of which he constantly tried to evade. His philosophy, with the sympathy of faith and religious feeling (as opposed to religiosity) bespeaks a temperamental attitude that personalized the universe. His pragmatism, a denotation carrying many unfortunate connotations such as

⁸ As has been remarked, illusionists (i.e. professional magicians) are far more successful in revealing fraud than naive scientists, who have no knowledge of and hence no imagination as to the stratagems of deception a magician is capable of.

expediency, is in fact somewhat congruent with fashionable post-modernistic tendencies, and to the post-modernist, philosophy is just an extension of social intercourse, hence its dismissal of Truth, with a capital T, as naive, and its obsession with convention, construct and duplicity. James may have balked at the modern Post-modernists, but many of their ideas (or lack thereof?) can be traced to the ramifications of James'.

No biography of James is complete without paying close attention to the close-knit family. A rapport so close between their members as if suggesting at least between themselves there was such a thing as a James Nation. The roots on his fathers side stem from an immigrant William James who made a fortune in Upstate New York and laid the foundations of the family wealth which enabled his father to pursue an eccentric life. The father - Henry Sr, had as a boy suffered a burning accident which had eventually resulted in the amputation of one of his legs and for the rest of his life he was limping along, if intrepidly, on a wooden leg. His early life had been one of dissipation leading him to be disowned by his father, and only by joining forces with an elder brother, was he able to contest the will and get his proper share. He then had been converted to an intellectual life, seeking and finding the friendship of many of the influential thinkers of the day on both sides of the Atlantic, such as Emerson and Carlyle. His philosophical-religious view were unorthodox and not a little quaint, his obsession with Swedenborgianism maybe being one of its milder forms. Without the success of his sons he would of course have been a dead-end and a forgotten and discarded player in American philosophical life. As it was he must have had a deep influence on his elder sons and thus be given the kind of reflected immortality accorded those playing supportive roles in the biographies of great men.

Five children within six years were born into the family. The oldest William in 1842, to be followed by Henry in '43, Wilkinson in 45, Robertson in 46, and finally the girl Alice in 1848. They were subjected to an uprooted childhood given intermittent educations based on the prevalent whims of their father. Henry James in later life referred to their childhood as that of hotel children. William James initially nurtured an ambition to become an artist, much to the consternation of his more ambitious father, and his drawings certainly reveal considerable talent. That ambition was later discarded and he instead sought a career as a natural scientist, studying chemistry at the Lawrence Scientific institute, later to be subsumed in Harvard, and earning a medical degree of doubtful value⁹. His one romantic episode in his youth was to join Agassiz on a 'fishing expedition' to the Amazonas¹⁰ It remains an isolated aspect of his formative years, indicating yet another avenue not pursued. Nevertheless, in spite of initial setbacks (contracting a mild form of small-pox) he must have enjoyed it, as his health soared. Otherwise the physical health of him and his brother Henry was not the best, constant complaints of indigestion, back troubles, headaches etc mar the epistolary documentation. Those ailments were invariable accompanied with low spirits, not to say depressions, but of course it is not so easy to

⁹ Harvard had a medical school, to which there were no requirements except the prompt paying of fees. Tests and examinations were intermittent and easily waived, many of the students only being half literate anyway. And in the final test satisfactory performance in only less than half of the required subjects was deemed sufficient to earn a license to practice.

¹⁰ That Swiss naturalist, lured to Harvard, was a determined foe of the ideas of Darwin and set to disprove evolution by making an extensive inventory of the fishes in the Amazon river.

distinguish between cause and effect here. Anyway James was slow to find himself, but his youthful moratorium was not wasted, no matter what he seems to have read a prodigious amount, and his reading was active and directed, and he frequently wrote lengthy essays on what he read. His reading was mostly philosophical, but of course sprinkled with generous doses of belles literature in particular poetry. It was during those years he got into contact with Darwinism, which at its time generated a great deal of controversy and discussion, and much vulgarization as to its championship¹¹. No proper education is solitary and even if formal instruction often can be dispensed with, contacts with other minds cannot¹². In this context the more or less Metaphysical Club figures prominently, headed by the slightly older Chauncy Wright, who was to die prematurely. In addition James made friends with Wendell Holmes¹³ and maybe most significantly with C.S.Peirce. The latter was an essential influence and by most professional philosophers considered a far more original and deeper thinker than James himself. This James must have been aware of, but nevertheless he tried to support the former through his troubled career, presenting such a contrast to the smooth professional path which eventually would be James'. James was careful to credit Pierce with the idea of pragmatism, identifying the seed in a popular article the later had written. Pragmatism did not appear in that article, and Pierce himself, in an effort to distance himself from James, preferred to refer to his own philosophy by the awkward term 'pragmaticism'. Much of the thinking, in particular the technical one pertaining to logic, left James cold, but he was very much taken by the emphasis on chance, and the possibility through evolution of creating order from chaos (which is the essence of Darwins evolution by natural selection as opposed to acquired characteristics). Both James and Pierce emphasized the central role of habit and habit forming. In the case of James in the psychological make up, we are as conscious beings very much identified by our habits; while Pierce was even willing to speculate that physical laws were actually ossified habits¹⁴ and hence that they had evolved into existence. Pierce is in some ways a fore-runner of Popper, and to Popper the scientists method of falsification is continuous with the more basic falsification provided by natural selection.

At the age of thirty James started to teach at Harvard, and he found to his delight and surprise that the task was deeply congenial to him and that he greatly enjoyed doing it and that he was good at doing it as well. Thus started James real association with Harvard, the employment of which was extend almost to his death. He was appointed by his former chemistry teacher - Eliot (1834-1926), whose tenure as a president at Harvard would contain the Harvard affiliation of James and be the longest such on record. During

¹¹ One thinks in particular of Spencer who coined the phrase 'the survival of the strongest' and who espoused Social Darwinism, giving Darwinism a bad name in liberal circles.

¹² Popper stresses that science is necessarily a social enterprise, it is impossible to pursue it single-handedly.

¹³ The future supreme justice and son of a doctor under whom James had studied. Holmes had at the age of seventeen discovered Plato and written a critical essay on him, which he had submitted to Emerson. The latter had returned it with the remark that if you snipe at a KIng you must kill him. Holmes and James were also in younger years rivals for the attention of a young lady, and they did drift apart.

¹⁴ similar speculations can also be found in James 'Principles of Psychology' but of course they are but peripheral to the main concern.

the presidency of Eliot the university changed irrevocably from a rather indifferent institute of learning¹⁵ to one of excellence. Student enrollment soared, as did the number of physical buildings. Harvard Yard was fenced off in the 1890's to further enhance its exclusiveness. Ph.D's were instituted. James was critical of the degree and did resist efforts to make it harder. He claimed that great minds could do without it, and that it would just prove to be the stumbling block of those large masses of people who had a love of books and learning but lacked originality themselves and would thus constitute its cannon fodder.

James getting on his keel in his early thirties enabled him a few years later, but not without extended soul-searching trauma to court and marry. A number of children were born providing him with paternal pride. Concomitant with the growing of his family, the practical aspects of which he was able to remain aloof (sometimes by extended visits abroad the guilt of which he dissipated by epistolary outpourings), he also engaged in his *magnum opus* - the Principles of Philosophy, which took him twelve years to complete. Thus it was not until 1890, when he was close to fifty, that he was able to publish his first book and thus come into the public view. The book was a success, initially perhaps more financial than scholarly, but maybe not really suitable as a text-book, the purpose for which it had initially been envisioned. Buoyed by his success James promptly prepared an abridged version for class-room use. Finally he had caught up with his brother Henry, who had already pursued a very successful literary career becoming financially independent.

Between the two brothers there were an unending rivalry, yet an enviable bond of closeness, that survived repeated taunts and minor quarrels. Incidentally the parallel successes of the two elder brothers is a source of fascination, indicating some kind of shared family talent. The two younger brothers, however, led failed lives¹⁶ and the youngest - the sister Alice, actually of some undeniable literary talent, made a career out of being an invalid, dying in her mid-forties from a malignant breast cancer. In addition to the immediate siblings there was also close to forty cousins, one of which - the lively Minnie Temple, became an object of crush for both of the brothers, but as she died from tuberculosis in her mid-twenties, but an interlude in their biographies. The biography gives no indication that any of the descendants of the extended James family have attained any kind of distinction, at least not comparable to William and James.

The subsequent career of James can be divided into four parts. In his early fifties his health improved, no doubt because of psychological reasons, he excelled in academic work, as well as going on lecture tours, a lucrative venue intimately connected to the sales of your publications in a mutually enforcing way. He loved physical exertions, getting himself a place in New Hampshire, as well as frequent excursions to the Adirondack,

¹⁵ Other institutes at the time, such as Johns Hopkins and Chicago, were more progressive and modern, founded on the German model

¹⁶ One explanation, sometimes offered, being that unlike the two elder brothers who were saved participation in the Civil War, the two younger ones were encouraged by their father to enlist as teenagers. As to many the experience would turn out to be traumatic for both of them, one of them - Wilkinson, being severely wounded and never really recovering. After the war both of them failed in business ventures, bleeding the family fortune, and the youngest - Robertson, became an alcoholic and womanizer, a constant worry to his brother William who took on the responsibility.

and not unsurprisingly developing crushed on younger women¹⁷. He also took political stands, in particular opposing the imperialistic ambitions of the McKinley and Roosevelt administrations, being appalled by the attack on Cuba and the Philippines¹⁸. His surge however was checked when he approached his late fifties. Exuberant excursions left him exhausted and an enlargement of the heart was diagnosed. Heart disease was running in the family, a younger brother - Wilkinson, had already died of it in his late thirties. For a few years he was partially incapacitated, in particular his Gifford lectures were postponed, but then he miraculously rallied, and enjoyed a second wind in his early sixties. He must have sensed that time was running out, that he was given but a reprieve, as he threw himself into frantic activity, abandoning Psychology for the more elated pursuits of Philosophy - his first intellectual love. He published much, all of it not of the highest calibre. But then as he was approaching his seventies, his conditions worsened again. In 1909 there was the famed psychoanalytic Congress at Clark University. Freud and Jung coming to the States for the first time. James met both of them, and took a stroll in the forest with Freud conversing with him in German. A walk that was documented as interrupted by repeated attacks of angina pectoris. Yet of the two, James found Jung the most congenial, probably the notion of a collective unconsciousness appealed to James.

By then he had not much more than a year to live, his last months of his life spent in a fruitless quest for rejuvenation in German Spas. He made it back to the States in a wheel-chair and died in August at their summer place in New Hampshire.

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¹⁷ Those crushes were obviously a sore point with his wife, from which he seems to have made few attempts to hide them. The biographer speculates whether they were ever consummated. No traces remain in that case, which may indicate that such traces have been extinguished. On the other hand there were no compelling expectations to actually consummate, which would be the case today, and had they been consummated, it is unlikely that they would have lasted for so long and been so naively expressed. The language in some of James letters to the young ladies are indeed so flowery, that even disregarding the conventions of the day, one suspect them to be of a compensatory nature.

¹⁸ This brings to mind the similarly high-minded initiatives of the present administration, obviously nothing new under the sun.