

Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy

ESSENTIAL READINGS AND INTERPRETIVE ESSAYS

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WILLIAM JAMES

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James's Life: Cultural Context and Philosophical Background

The thought of William James is the vestibule to the speculative break-throughs of the twentieth century. He anticipates the directions of modern physics, psychoanalysis and depth psychology, modern art, and the emphasis on relations rather than on objects or substances. James is a process philosopher, by which we mean that he assesses the journey, the flow, to be more important than the outcome or the product.

A contemporary of Henri Bergson, whom he influenced, and a goad to the subsequent work of John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead, James was also a decisive factor in the thought of Niels Bohr, Edmund Husserl, Miguel de Unamuno, Maria Montessori, and a countless host of lesser figures. Long an underground thinker, William James rivals Emerson as a writer who is read widely by nonprofessional philosophers. The appeal of the writings of William James transcends disciplinary boundaries, for commentators on science, psychology, art, politics, ethics, and religion find his works as stimulating as do philosophers. In fact, the work of William James is never subject to such artificial discipline boundaries as that found in a typical university curriculum. He wrote for reflective people, no matter their occupation or persuasion. As such, James is the thinker who most appeals to the average person seeking wisdom and depth in his or her own, personal experiences.

Nonetheless, James's thought is not without its technical virtuosity and requires more than a casual reading or scanning to reveal its profounder import. In this volume we have presented the major highlights of James's positions on psychology, ethics, metaphysics, and the theory of knowledge. The selections have been taken from the critical edition of *The Works of William James* published by Harvard University Press, texts that have been scrupulously edited and represent James's final thought on each issue. The limits of space do not allow us to present James's rich views on religion, psychical research, and his prescient commentary on European-American culture as found in his *Letters*.

Before detailing the major lineaments of James's thought, it will be helpful to our understanding if we discuss his cultural and family context. The biographical details of the life of a major thinker is always of some assistance in enabling us to grasp the issues, the responses, and the omissions found in the work. In the case of William James, the details are of paramount importance, for his life and his work were entwined in an unusually intimate way. Without attempting any psychobiography and without any speculation as to hidden meanings or hidden interpersonal relationships, we can still provide a portrait of James as an engaged, sometimes depressed and yet always alert person.¹

William James was the son of Henry James, Sr., and Mary Robertson Walsh, both of Scottish-Irish Protestant lineage. William was the oldest of five children and felt the burden of making a career worthy of the expectations of his father, who, ironically, never had one himself. Having a comfortable inheritance and having had his leg amputated as a youth, Henry James,

Sr., concentrated on talking and writing imposing, verbose, and little-read theological books. He was a friend and confidant of the great literary figures in the American nineteenth century, for example, Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, James Russell Lowell, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The family was inundated by ideas and was taken on frequent trips to Europe, where they received tutoring, especially in languages. The second son in the family was Henry James, Jr., the justly famous writer.² Two other sons, Garth Wilkinson and Robertson, lived star-crossed lives, mostly because of their experience in the American Civil War, a painful odyssey in which neither William nor Henry participated. The fifth child was Alice James, who suffered from neurasthenia until her death, from cancer, in 1892. She left behind a brilliant diary and many elegant letters. Trapped in a male-dominated family, her considerable literary talents found little room for public expression and she remained a victim throughout her life.³

Returning now to the life of William James, it is important to focus on his early years, from his birth in 1842 until 1870, when he reached an emotional crossroad at the age of twenty-eight. James was privately educated and in fact had no college degree, although he studied at Harvard College periodically. He did manage to sit for the examination required for a medical degree, which he received in 1869, while promising never to practice, for he regarded the state of nineteenth-century medicine as largely humbug. Nonetheless, he read widely and in several languages, especially French and German. In 1867, he began publishing unsigned reviews of some of the books he was reading. It was at this time, however, that James was under a cloud of depression and was suffering from deep feelings of insecurity and inadequacy.

Sometime toward the end of the decade, James underwent a frightening personal experience, called in nineteenth-century parlance a *vastation*. Taken from the work of the mystic-philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg, a *vastation* refers to the projecting of the inner self outward, usually in a grotesque form. Notably, this experience of William James was strikingly similar to one had by his father at approximately the same age in his own life. James records this experience surreptitiously, as though it came to him by an unknown French correspondent. We now know that it is an autobiographical report from William James and we offer it here in full.

Whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them inclosing his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. *That shape am I*, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him. There was such a horror of him, and such a perception of my own merely momentary discrepancy from him, that it was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely, and I became a mass of quivering fear. After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation; and although the immediate feelings passed away, the experience has made me sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others ever since. It gradually faded, but for months I was unable to go out into the dark alone.

In general I dreaded to be left alone. I remember wondering how other people could live, how I myself had ever lived, so unconscious of that pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life. My mother

in particular, a very cheerful person, seemed to me a perfect paradox in her unconsciousness of danger, which you may well believe I was very careful not to disturb by revelations of my own state of mind. I have always thought that this experience of melancholia of mine had a religious bearing. . . . I mean that the fear was so invasive and powerful that if I had not clung to scripture-texts like "The eternal God is my refuge," etc., "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden," etc., "I am the resurrection and the life," etc. I think I should have grown really insane.⁴

The key line here is "*That shape am I*, I felt, potentially," James, early on, became convinced of the diaphanous and utterly fragile character of the classically alleged, rock-bottom personal self. With exquisite originality James diagnoses the fabric of self-consciousness only to discover that it is neither a redoubt nor a bunker. He doubts the existence of the traditional "soul" and opts rather for a more free-flowing movement between the focus of one's own self and the fringe that we visit. These visits to the fringe turn up radically different versions of our own selves, for, it turns out, we are actually multiple selves. The fundamental question that nags James at this time has to do with whether we have any control over the making of our own self. In early 1870, James makes an entry in his diary that reveals his pervasive dubiety about his ability to transcend the jejune character of ordinary life, with its routine and often hypocritical demands. Although he does not admit his suicidal tendency until a subsequent entry, James in February of 1870, depressed by the death of his young and beautiful cousin Minny Temple, drew a tombstone in his diary and dallied with his own demise. The text reads as follows:

Feb. 1, 1870

. . . Today I about touched bottom, and perceive plainly that I must face the choice with open eyes: shall I frankly throw the moral business overboard, as one unsuited to my innate aptitudes, or shall I follow it, and it alone, making everything else merely stuff for it? I will give the latter alternative a fair trial. Who knows but the moral interest may become developed . . . Hitherto I have tried to fire myself with the moral interest, as an aid in the accomplishing of certain utilitarian ends.⁵

James hereby laments the bland nineteenth-century Protestant ethic that suffuses his life. Proper manners, career, and systemic hypocrisy are the constant accompaniments of his consciousness and his conscience. In that both his reading and the turbulence of his interior life taught him that there must be more, evermore, James casts a wistful glance at suicide but then, fortunately, begins to read the works of the philosopher Charles Renouvier, for whom the will is not so much an agent of approbation as it is an agent of change. In April of 1870, James makes a diary entry that is to be decisive for both his life and his thought.

April 30, 1870

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second "Essais" and see no reason why his definition of Free Will—"the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts"—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will. For the remainder of the year, I will abstain from the mere speculation and contemplative *Grublei* in which my nature takes most delight, and voluntarily cultivate the feeling of moral freedom, by reading books favorable to it, as well as by acting. After the first of January, my callow skin being somewhat fledged, I may perhaps return to metaphysical study and skepticism without danger to my powers of action. For the present then remember: care little for speculation; much for the *form* of my action; recollect that only when habits of order are formed can we advance to really interesting fields of action—and consequently accumulate grain on grain of willful choice like a very miser; never forgetting how one link dropped undoes an indefinite number. *Principiis obsta*—Today has furnished the exceptionally passionate initiative which Bain posits as needful for the acquisition of habits. I will see to the sequel. Not in maxims, not in *Anschaungen*, but in accumulated *acts* of thought lies salvation. *Passer outre*. Hitherto, when I have felt like taking a free ini-

tiative, like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put my daring into; now, I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power. My belief, to be sure, *can't* be optimistic—but I will posit life (the real, the good) in the self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world. Life shall [be built in] doing and suffering and creating.⁶

When one comes to know James's thought, this text reads like an early blueprint of all of his later intellectual concerns. We sort out only the major contention, namely, that the human will is cognitive. The first act of the will, with no rational guarantees provided, is to believe that the will is free. By this James does not mean free to assume that what we believe is necessarily true. Rather, the will is free to believe in possibilities underwent until the crush of empirical facticity rejects the belief. No optimism here, for James stresses the hazards of taking a chance, a risk, a gamble on the future of experience. Yet, were we to hang back, we would never know the possible paths extant, many of which are blocked from our view by the dominance of rote, habit, custom and ill-advised authority.

The concluding sentence of this diary entry is crucial to James's project, for he affirms the creative and constitutive activity of the self. He is aware of the presence of self-deception, setback, and foolhardy risk. Still, he reaches for the aggressive and chance-ridden character of moving out, moving into the unknown, for the personal alternative of acceptance of the religious, ethical, and social status quo is stultifying and depressing.

After his recovery, James began to plot his belated future. Throughout the 1870s he wrote book reviews, most of them also unsigned. The year 1878, however, was to be dramatically auspicious. In that year, he wrote and published his first detailed essays and he promised to deliver a textbook in psychology to the well-respected publisher Henry Holt. James had been teaching physiology and psychology at Harvard since 1873 and was now willing to structure his thoughts in a systematic way. Perhaps most important in his journey, James married Alice Howe Gibbens in 1878, thereby assuring him of both roots and sustenance away from the demands and carping of his paternal home. The next twelve years were to be very productive for James and they culminated in the publication of his magisterial two-volume work *The Principles of Psychology*, a book still regarded as the greatest work in the history of psychology and one of the classic written works in the history of the English language.

William James was to continue publishing until his death in 1910 at the age of sixty-eight. When finished, his collected works of published and unpublished writings will approximate twenty volumes. It would be impossible and improper for an introduction of this kind to probe all of the themes and arguments in such an extensive set of writings. All the more true is this in that an understanding of James's thought requires an acquaintance with his philosophical peers and his polemical opponents. His letters and writings bristle with praise, condemnation, and rhetorical questioning of the great minds of the European-American period from 1870 until 1910. Central to his concerns was the thought of Herbert Spencer, whom he loathed, Darwin, Shadworth Hodgson, Henri Bergson, and his friendly foil, colleague, and neighbor, Josiah Royce. Familiar to James was the thought of all the experimental psychologists and most of the philosophers of the nineteenth century. There were omissions, however, for he did not have a serious acquaintance with the work of Marx, Nietzsche, or Kierkegaard. Still, he was the first major thinker to realize the signal contribution and the rich intellectual future of the work of John Dewey and, long before any one else, James knew of the genius of Charles Sanders Peirce.

The bold and innovative thought of William James was not without its critics, primarily those of the incipient analytical philosophical persuasion, especially as found in the critiques of G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, both of which were dramatically wrong-headed and shallow.⁷ James was not without responsibility for the rising tide of criticism directed to his work, for he

often published his public lectures without recasting them with regard to the more critical and dubious philosophical reader. James was a flamboyant, witty, and brilliant lecturer whose prose style was often elegant at the expense of conceptual detail. Put differently, most of James's published works, especially those which are famous as, for example, *The Will to Believe*, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, *Pragmatism*, and *A Pluralistic Universe*, are virtuoso performances in a prose that delights, tantalizes, and is often telescoped as to the assumptions and arguments at work behind the scene.

Pragmatism, Radical Empiricism, and Pluralism

The present setting of this introduction does not have the girth sufficient to unravel all of James's assumptions active in his writing. Still, we can point to three texts that serve as mooring points for an understanding of his philosophical position, one which is demonstrated over and again in both his published work and in his unpublished papers. The first of these texts is from his early period as found in the essay "The Sentiment of Rationality," first published in 1879. The remaining two texts are to be found in his *Pragmatism*, published in 1907, although they represent cameo versions of two seemingly contradictory positions long at war in his thought throughout his reflective life.

The opening text reads as follows:

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 powers which you possess."⁸

This text shows James to be a pragmatic idealist, that is, a position which admits to the existence of the world in its sheer physicality but at the same time affirms the source of meaning for that world to be dependent on the creative imagination of the human mind. Reality is not a surd, having no internal coherence. The coherence, however, does not flash out as an obvious and intractable set of laws, as Aristotle would have it. Reality is not given, final, and complete to the human mind. Rather, it is "congenial" to our understanding and our principles of organization. Reality is not permanently opaque and unintelligible, as philosophical nihilism contends. To the contrary, the human mind and reality enter into a relationship in which the "powers" of human imagination and the "energies" of human activity act as a constituting source for meaning. Such meaning is never complete, for the "inmost nature of reality" is only "congenial" to our powers and, therefore, never fully explicated.

Following James, the history of human language and civilization is equivalent to the evolving meaning of reality. As with DNA, this process is open-ended and is laced with chance as a permanent strand in the relationship between the physical world and the human mind. James sees no possibility of reality ever being grasped whole and entire. He offers two reasons for this never-ending pluralism. First, nature itself is subject to multiple permutations that violate its own history and, second, each human perspective is precisely that, a perspective, and cannot be exactly dovetailed with the perspectives of other human beings. Consequently, James holds that the world is intelligible, but not in any final way. He describes reality as a pluriverse or a multi-verse, riven with chance, mishap, and always denying any intellectual or conceptual closure.⁹ In a notebook entry of 1903, James states his aversion to philosophical closure.

What, on pragmatist terms, does 'nature itself' signify? To my mind it signifies the non-artificial; the artificial having certain definite aesthetic characteristics which I dislike, and can only apperceive in others as matters of personal taste,—to me bad taste. All neat schematisms with per-

manent and absolute distinctions, classifications with absolute pretensions, systems with pigeon-holes, etc., have this character. All 'classic,' clean, cut and dried, 'noble,' fixed, 'eternal,' *Weltanschauungen* seem to me to violate the character with which life concretely comes and the expression which it bears of being, or at least of involving, a muddle and a struggle, with an 'ever not quite' to all our formulas, and novelty and possibility forever leaking in.¹⁰

William James's stress on "novelty," "possibility," and an "ever not quite" to all of our judgments has always irritated professional philosophers, known for their drive toward clarity and even closure. James is unquestionably an antifoundationalist philosopher, by which we mean that he opposes the effort, begun by René Descartes in the seventeenth century, to place philosophical inquiry on a footing that is absolutely secure, one that rivals the alleged certitude of mathematics. To be an antifoundationalist and an anti-Cartesian is now quite acceptable in contemporary philosophy, but it was the early pragmatists Chauncey Wright, Charles Sanders Peirce, and William James who were the first to challenge the arrogance of claims for absolute philosophical certitude. Yet, despite his proclivity for chance, novelty, and a permanent pluralism in our understanding of the world, James was not naive about the obduracy of nature and about the way in which nature has its own meaning, independent of the way in which we perceive it. In his *Pragmatism*, published in 1907, James issues a warning to those who fail to match conceptions with the way in which reality "concretely comes."

*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.*¹¹

In order to explicate this text, some background information and analysis is essential. Before publishing *Pragmatism*, James had published a series of essays, in 1904–1905, subsequently collected posthumously in 1912 as *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. As early as 1897, in a preface to his *Will to Believe*, James had described his philosophical position as radical empiricism.

Were I obliged to give a short name to the attitude in question, I should call it that of *radical empiricism*. . . . I say "empiricism" because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say "radical," because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis. . . .

He who takes for his hypothesis the notion that it [pluralism] is the permanent form of the world is what I call a radical empiricist. For him the crudity of experience remains an eternal element thereof. There is no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact.¹²

Again, in 1909, in another preface, James lays out the characteristics of radical empiricism.

Radical empiricism consists first of a postulate, next of a statement of fact, and finally of a generalized conclusion.

The postulate is that the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience. [Things of an unexperienceable nature may exist *ad libitum*, but they form no part of the material for philosophic debate.]

The statement of fact is that the relations between things, conjunctive as well as disjunctive, are just as much matters of direct particular experience, neither more so nor less so, than the things themselves.

The generalized conclusion is that therefore the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience. The directly apprehended universe needs,

in short, no extraneous transempirical connective support, but possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure.¹³

Returning to the text from *Pragmatism* cited above, we can now see how James telescopes his deeper meanings, for nothing less than a grasp of his radical empiricism enables us to appreciate his warning. "Woe to him" (or her) refers to any attempt to forge or make relations that are in stark opposition to the way in which reality sets up.

Such an effort has the extremely baleful consequence of failing to "make connexions," that is, failing to hook into the flow of both consciousness and nature. James holds that objects are mock-ups, pockets, boxes of relations that are snipped and packaged for reasons of utility. Our task is to acknowledge these "substantive states," these "perches" in the stream, while yet regarding them as functional, placeholders, and pregnant with "connections" that transcend them. If we do not take these perches, these gatherings into consideration, then we may as well confuse water with stone and wood with cloth. On the other hand, if we allow ourselves only a literal reading of the flow, we become trapped as merely a definer, categorizer, and obsequious servant of the way in which the world has been passed down to us, in all of its obviousness, banality, and rigidity. Thus, the second text in *Pragmatism* states:

In our cognitive as well as in our active life we are creative. We *add* both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality. The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hand. Like the kingdom of heaven, it suffers violence willingly. Man *engenders* truths upon it.¹⁴

This text is extraordinary; especially given the warning by James, discussed above. Here we have in an unvarnished way James's doctrine of the Promethean self. The text itself is exquisite. Notice the emphasis on the "hands." Reality does not come readymade. It is true that for James, reality has its own relational network, its own obduracy. Yet, reality is malleable, pliant, awaiting our touch, our presence, our organization. The fabric known as the world results from the raw physicality of nature and the probing, constituting presence of the human imagination. Consequently, science is not final or absolute. Science functions more like a prose poem, gathering, relating, searching, and structuring, temporarily. It is the world which we come to know, more or less. It is the world with which we transact, for better or for worse. Yet, without human imagination, cognition, and construction, there would be no world, no relations, no metaphors, and, finally, no meaning.

This tension between the world as given, present, set up, in business, and our version of the world, splayed out over many disciplines, patterns, and charts, is precisely the center of James's philosophy. Human life cannot make a world out of whole cloth, *ab ovo*. Still, the world is meaningless without human articulation of its meaning, a meaning that is inseparable from how we came to mean the world. The problem, of course, is that the human version of the world is conflicted, for there is more than one of us. James was not sufficiently sophisticated about the social conditioning that pervades our personal world view. This sense of the social context for individual versions of experience was to be explored in depth by his successors, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, as well as by his European counterparts, Karl Marx, Wilhelm Dilthey, and the twentieth-century founders of the sociology of knowledge, especially Karl Mannheim. Despite his comparative unawareness of the immediate social contexting of the individual self, James was aware of the pluralism of approaches to constructing a meaningful world, as witness his statement in *Pragmatism*:

Ought not the existence of the various types of thinking which we have reviewed, each so splendid for certain purposes, yet all conflicting still, and neither one of them able to support a claim of absolute veracity, to awaken a presumption favorable to the pragmatistic view that all our theories are *instrumental*, are mental modes of *adaptation* to reality, rather than revelations or gnostic

answers to some divinely instituted world-enigma? . . . Certainly the restlessness of the actual theoretic situation, the value for some purposes of each thought-level, and the inability of either to expel the others decisively, suggest this pragmatistic view.¹⁵

James's pluralistic approach to inquiry is distinctively American in that it allows everyone to have his or her say before the inquiry is put to rest, and even a reopening of the discussion awaits the slightest hint of new information, data, or perspective. For example in his essay "The Sentiment of Rationality," published in 1879, James stresses the role of temperament as crucial to one's philosophical approach. In the absence of a full selection of this essay, I offer the reader two long representative texts. First:

. . . All those data that cannot be analytically identified with the attribute invoked as universal principle, remain as independent kinds or natures, associated empirically with the said attribute but devoid of rational kinship with it.

Hence the unsatisfactoriness of all our speculations. On the one hand, so far as they retain any multiplicity in their terms, they fail to get us out of the empirical sand-heap world; on the other, so far as they eliminate multiplicity the practical man despises their empty barrenness. The most they can say is that the elements of the world are such and such, and that each is identical with itself wherever found; but the question Where is it found? the practical man is left to answer by his own wit. Which, of all the essences, shall here and now be held the essence of this concrete thing, the fundamental philosophy never attempts to decide. We are thus led to the conclusion that the simple classification of things is, on the one hand, the best possible theoretic philosophy, but is, on the other, a most miserable and inadequate substitute for the fulness of the truth. It is a monstrous abridgment of life, which, like all abridgments is got by the absolute loss and casting out of real matter. This is why so few human beings truly care for philosophy. The particular determinations which she ignores are the real matter exciting needs, quite as potent and authoritative as hers. What does the moral enthusiast care for philosophical ethics? Why does the *Aesthetik* of every German philosopher appear to the artist as an abomination of desolation?

Second, the conclusion of the essay:

To sum up: No philosophy will permanently be deemed rational by all men which (in addition to meeting logical demands) does not to some degree pretend to determine expectancy, and in a still greater degree make a direct appeal to all those powers of our nature which we hold in highest esteem. Faith, being one of these powers, will always remain a factor not to be banished from philosophic constructions, the more so since in many ways it brings forth its own verification. In these points, then, it is hopeless to look for literal agreement amongst mankind.

The ultimate philosophy, we may therefore conclude, must not be too strait-laced in form, must not in all its parts divide heresy from orthodoxy by too sharp a line. There must be left over and above the propositions to be subscribed *ubique, semper, et ab omnibus*, another realm into which the stifled soul may escape from pedantic scruples and indulge its own faith at its own risks; and all that can here be done will be to mark out distinctly the questions which fall within faith's sphere.¹⁶

It is clear that for James, openness to experience, to novelty, to surprise is a cardinal tenet of the philosophical enterprise. Inquiry which proceeds from narrow, a priori assumptions is anathema in James's search for truth, meaning, and insight.

Psychology, Metaphysics, Epistemology, and Ethics

The selections that follow illustrate James's basic philosophical, moral, and personal approaches to the major questions that confront us as human beings. The order of these selec-

tions is not chronological but rather first introduces the reader to James's psychology, metaphysics, and pragmatic epistemology and then proceeds to the earlier moral writings. The rationale for this ordering is that the later thought of James is assumed by him in the earlier writings, which are only intelligible given the overall published agenda. Similarly, this discussion of the selections follows no chronology but rather seeks to help the reader obtain apertures into the seminal thought of William James.

Dividing the world into the "tough-minded" and the "tender-minded," as he does in *Pragmatism*, reveals James's thought as a mixture of both.

THE TENDER-MINDED

Rationalistic (going by 'principles'),
Intellectualistic,
Idealistic,
Optimistic,
Religious,
Free-willist,
Monistic,
Dogmatical.

THE TOUGH-MINDED

Empiricist (going by 'facts'),
Sensationalistic,
Materialistic,
Pessimistic,
Irreligious,
Fatalistic,
Pluralistic,
Sceptical.¹⁷

If we were to apply these tables to James, we would find that he is "tender-minded," to wit: Idealistic, Optimistic, Religious and Free-willist. We would find that he is also "tough-minded," to wit: Empiricist, Sensationalistic, and Pluralistic. To resolve this opposition, James invokes the sentiment of rationality, by which he means to stress the inordinate importance of how we "feel" about things, others, and the world as a factor in how we "think" about the same concerns.

The "Dilemma of Determinism" published in 1884, is a tour de force, one of James's most brilliant essays. The upshot of his position is that even if it turns out that all is determined, it would make no difference in any past experience, all of which were had under the guise of free will. Second, if all were to be determined from here on, there is considerable doubt as to whether we could or would live under such a rubric, leading James to conclude that, whatever the ultimate course may be, it is our decision *here* and *now* that "gives the palpitating reality to our moral life."

Another selection comes from James's classic chapter on "The Stream of Thought,"¹⁸ from *The Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890. This chapter is a reworking of an important essay written by James in 1884, "On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology."¹⁹ At that time, James isolated two major approaches to epistemological certitude, that is, to a viable theory of knowledge. Both of these approaches were considered by James in a broad and nontechnical fashion, given that he was more interested in his resolution than in their proposals. In short, never trust a great, imaginative thinker to yield an accurate version of other great thinkers. That task is for the historians of ideas. Still, James is prescient when he cites the following problems at work in the Associationist and Idealist epistemologies, respectively.

First, James praises Associationism for its emphasis on particulars and on the role of the body in the knowing activity. (Descended from Locke, the Associationists held that the mind was literally a responder to single bodily sensations and was able to associate a parallel set of ideas to the set of sensations had. James, however, denied that any such activity takes place in the human mind.) In a chapter in the *Principles* entitled "The Methods and Snares of Psychology," James decries the naivete of the Associationist position.

As each object may come and go, be forgotten and then thought of again, it is held that the thought of it has a precisely similar independence, self-identity, and mobility. The thought of the object's recurrent identity is regarded as the identity of its recurrent thought; and the perceptions of

multiplicity, of coexistence, of succession, are severally conceived to be brought about only through a multiplicity, a coexistence, a succession, of perceptions. The continuous flow of the mental stream is sacrificed, and in its place an atomism, a brickbat plan of construction, is preached, for the existence of which no good introspective grounds can be brought forward, and out of which presently grow all sorts of paradoxes and contradictions, the heritage of woe of students of the mind.

These words are meant to impeach the entire English psychology derived from Locke and Hume, and the entire German psychology derived from Herbart, as far as they both treat 'ideas' as separate subjective entities that come and go.²⁰

James's basic critique of the Associationist doctrine is that it does not provide for any continuity in our experience, holding rather to a relationship of mere contiguity or next-by-next. The second position that James analyzes does provide continuity, for all experience is unintelligible unless it is grasped as an aspect of the Absolute Mind. Referring to this viewpoint as British Idealism, James criticizes its inability to account for particulars and the comparative absence of bodily sensations in the act of knowing. James waged a lifelong debate on the plausibility of the Idealist position with two of its most brilliant exponents, F. H. Bradley and Josiah Royce. The fundamental issue is whether one has to forgo experiential continuity in order to experience particulars or whether one has to forgo particulars in order to posit a general coherence in the way particular experiences hang together.

In his 1884 essay "On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology" and again in his chapter "The Stream of Thought" in *The Principles of Psychology* of 1890, James rejects both positions in favor of a claim that we experience relations between objects as well as the objects themselves, thereby providing both the experience of particulars and the experience of continuity. He writes, "If there be such things as feelings at all, then so surely as relations between objects exist [in the nature of things], so surely, and more surely, do feelings exist to which these relations are known." And, further, "we ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*."²¹ James's contention that we have an affective grasp of relations leads him to diagnose the activity of consciousness as a flow, a stream, rather than as a container or a box. The selection below on "The Stream of Thought" provides a rich description of the activity of consciousness. A subsequent selection on "The World of Pure Experience" attempts to show that mind and body are not ultimately separate but only separate by name or by function. The flow of consciousness is whole and continuous, whereas our conceptual formulations tend to break it up into definitions, names, nouns, and other assorted categories.

It is true, of course, that to survive, human beings need placeholders, perches, moving points in the flow, which act as redoubts, way stations, and abodes. Were they not present, we would be carried in the stream as flotsam, rudderless. The task then is twofold: (1) forge those moorings that are most propitious and advantageous for our human needs and (2) avoid becoming trapped and mired such that we confuse our own temporary bunker with the entire fabric of possibility. The remaining three selections below address this issue head on. In "What Pragmatism Means," James stresses the importance of consequences as the source of evaluation of our acts and our beliefs. He urges us to liberate ourselves from a rote acceptance of dogmatic claims by opening ourselves to the call of experience, especially in its novel forms. In order for this to become a living attitude for us, we must forsake absolute certitude and beliefs that admit of no exception and generate intolerance rather than understanding for competing positions. In "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," James stresses the importance of the strenuous mood, one which is forever seeking new possibilities, new vistas, and a wider range of choices.

The last selection to be considered is "The Will to Believe," James's best-known, most controversial, and most misunderstood essay. James is *not* saying that if one believes strongly enough, the belief will come true. He is saying that belief enables us to test hypotheses out of

the range of our ordinary experience. If these hypotheses, when they unearth the data of new experience, prove to be inept, incomplete, or simply wrong, then they should be abandoned. We cannot know the worth of a belief until it is pressed forward into the crucible of new experience. James holds that the willingness to risk belief in possibilities that are often scoffed or mocked by common sense generates an energy that frequently leads to paths of insight otherwise closed off from us. This perpetual searching, this strenuous mood, pervades James's life and thought.

After the publication of *The Principles of Psychology*, James turned his attention to more directly philosophical works and he both lectured and published extensively until his death in 1910. His last book was entitled *A Pluralistic Universe*, in which he plumbed the reaches of extrasensory perception, the widest range of human consciousness, and wondered again about life after death. These were existentially appropriate themes at this time, for James was suffering from arteriosclerosis. In current terminology, he badly needed a heart bypass operation, obviously unavailable at the time. Instead, he went to Europe with his wife, Alice, and met his brother Henry while seeking some form of a cure through the mineral springs of the Continent or galvanic shock treatments. None of these nostrums worked and James returned home to die on Friday, August 26, 1910. Sixty-eight years of age, James nonetheless died prematurely. Had Kant or Dewey or Whitehead or Santayana died at that age, much of their work would have been undone. The autopsy revealed "acute enlargement of the heart."²² Despite the voluminous work that James had published, he was frustrated that he had not finished his major treatise on philosophy. On July 26, 1910, exactly one month before his death, James stated that this manuscript would not be finished. "Call it 'a beginning of an introduction to philosophy.' Say that I hope by it to round out my system, which is now too much like an arch built on only one side."²³ The manuscript was published posthumously as *Some Problems of Philosophy* and presented sufficient insight to make us greatly lament that he never finished this intended major work.

The selections in this volume reveal classical American philosophy at its best. The selections from James are especially rich in wisdom and beauty of prose style. The reader is encouraged to proceed on to a full reading of James's *Works*, now excellently edited and easily available. James is an unusual philosophical writer in that he reverses the usual response of the reader. Most philosophy, at first reading, is impenetrable and pockmarked with the jargon and technical phrasing of the period. Slowly, the reader becomes acquainted with these prose shortcuts and then sufficiently sophisticated to make his or her way through the text. On reading James, however, the first response is one of elation at the apparent simplicity and elegance of the literary style. It is only after several readings that the philosophical depth and complexity begin to emerge, much to the delight of the reader, who, first seduced, is now educated.

I leave the reader with two short texts from the writings of William James. The first is as follows: "It is, in short, the re-instatement of the vague and the inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention."²⁴ The quest is clear: avoid a life lived by formulas, by definitions, and seek instead the fringe, the novel, the unspoken, the secret and the hidden recesses of being, which speak only to those who know how to listen.

The second text was written in 1876 and is found in a brief letter to *The Nation*, entitled "The Teaching of Philosophy in Our Colleges." At that time, James wrote: "one can never deny that philosophic study means the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again, of imagining foreign states of mind."²⁵ This request of James is not easy to fulfill. Each of us has our bedrock. Each of us is frightened of new ideas, new perspectives, new values, and new beliefs. The opponent to a liberal education praises the encrusted, the habitual, and the socially acceptable. Yet human life has moved forward by taking chances. We have no guarantee that the alternatives to our present beliefs, habits, and values are better. They may be injurious. But, then, they may be enriching. How do we know what to do unless we try? Seek, then, an alternative and test it against the penalty and possibility of experience. Such is the philosophical message of William James.

Notes

1. The life of William James has received unusually close attention. In addition to his *Letters* and the works by Allen Feinstein Myers, Perry and Simon cited in the "Suggestions for Further Reading," see F. O. Matthiessen, *The James Family* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947).
2. Cf. Leon Edel, *Henry James*, 5 vols. (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1953–1972). Also see *Henry James—Letters*, 4 vols., Leon Edel, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974–1984), and Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., *William and Henry James: Selected Letters*, introduction by John J. McDermott (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1997).
3. Cf. *The Diary of Alice James*, ed. by Leon Edel (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1964). Jean Strouse, *Alice James—A Biography* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin & Company, 1980). Ruth Bernard Yeazell, ed. *The Death and Letters of Alice James* (Boston: Exact Change, 1981, 1997).
4. *The Works of William James—The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 134–135.
5. "Diary" in *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 7.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.
7. For the relevant texts in the ongoing critique of James's thought, especially his pragmatism, see *Pragmatic Philosophy*, ed. Amelie Rorty (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1966).
8. "The Sentiment of Rationality," in *The Works of William James—The Will to Believe*, p. 73.
9. *The Works of William James—A Pluralistic Universe*, passim.
10. Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1935), p. 700.
11. *The Works of William James—Pragmatism*, p. 99.
12. *The Works of William James—The Will to Believe*, pp. 5–6.
13. *The Works of William James—The Meaning of Truth*, pp. 6–7.
14. *The Works of William James—Pragmatism*, p. 123.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
16. "The Sentiment of Rationality," in *The Works of William James—The Will to Believe*, pp. 61, 89.
17. *The Works of William James—Pragmatism*, p. 13.
18. When James published his shorter version of *The Principles of Psychology* under the title of *Psychology: Briefer Course*, he renamed this chapter "The Stream of Consciousness," a title that has become tremendously famous as it has been allied with the literary work of Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and many other writers of the twentieth century.
19. "On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology," in *The Works of William James—Essays in Psychology*, pp. 142–167.
20. *The Works of William James—The Principles of Psychology*, pp. 194–195.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 238. (Also included in the selections in this volume; see below, pp. 116–117).
22. For the record of James's wife, Alice, in her diary for these last days of his life, see Gay Wilson Allen, *William James: A Biography* (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), pp. 490–493.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 469.
24. *The Works of William James—Psychology: Briefer Course*, p. 150.
25. "The Teaching of Philosophy," *The Works of William James—Essays in Philosophy*, p. 4.