The Jamesian Mind

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Young William James, almost a philosopher

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William James became a philosopher in halting steps as he worked through religious puzzle-
ment, scientific study, and artistic training. His personal and intellectual troubles and indecision
added further roadblocks. By the end of his youth, he realized that he had been a philosopher all
along, that his reflections through those difficulties formed the seeds of his philosophical voca-
tion. The well-known philosopher in formation developed in three ways that would solidify
major planks of his philosophical commitments. First, his path through his troubles would set
his personal and intellectual direction toward fidelity to natural facts. Second, he realized that
his problems served as opportunities both for himself and for constructing theories based in
endorsement of free will. And third, the first drafts of his mature philosophy in his private wres-
tling with empiricism and idealism would confirm his impulses to mediate contrasting theories
and ways of living. In laying the groundwork for his mature work, young William James was
already both a philosopher of experience and a thinker who constructed theories from his own
experiences.

1. The elusive vocation of philosophy, 1850s–1876

William James grew up immersed in philosophical thinking. As a child, philosophy meant
the ideas of the unorthodox elder Henry James (1811–1882). In the spirit of the later social
sciences, with their careful diagnoses and prescriptions for society’s ills, the father thoroughly
believed in the power of philosophy to transform humanity. He maintained a religious vision
inspired by Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who combined mystical faith with fidelity to
empirical facts. Swedenborg expressed this unusual combination in his correspondence theory,
with each natural fact expressing a religious truth. The elder James used this idea to propose that
science, understood in this spiritual way, would provide steps toward enhancement of our oth-
erwise “infirm understanding” (H. James Sr. 1879: 51). That would bring reform to individuals,
for reduction of craving for self-fulfillment, and to society, with organization “not by human
legislation, not by police, not by contention, but by God’s legislation which is SCIENCE” (H.
James Sr. 1850: 126). The father applied these high ideals to the raising of his five children
with an emphasis on youthful spontaneity, which he expected would provide “an admirable
Divine mould or anchorage” fostering the “spiritual life” (H. James Sr. 1885: 178). The eldest,
William, and his four siblings felt at liberty to explore New York City, where the family lived
Young William James, almost a philosopher

except during three trips in the 1850s and 1860s to Europe, driven by the father’s hope that they would learn “strange lingoes.” The children lived a “pewless state,” as second son, also named Henry, reported about their exposure to a range of religions (H. James Jr. 1913: 232–35). Youngest child, Alice, called their upbringing an intellectual “tabulae rasae,” enabling each to “receive whatever stamp our individual experience was to give them” (A. James 1964: 192; Perry 1935, I: 170–71).

William James did not adopt his father’s philosophy, but it had three major influences on the development of his own. First, his upbringing prompted his first major vocational decision, for study of science, even as the brand of science he would take up at Harvard’s Lawrence Scientific and Medical Schools had more rigorous methods and more association with materialistic thinking compared to his father’s idealistic science. Even William’s brief decision in 1860 to become a painter, before starting at Harvard the next year, reinforced the scientific message for keen fidelity to natural facts that he received both at home and in school – albeit each for different reasons. In effect, he retained a painter’s eye for introspective details about the operations of the human mind. Second, even though William did not take up particulars of his father’s faith, he did maintain respect for the intimate interaction of material and nonmaterial aspects of life. That outlook initially manifested in his mediation of the religious and scientific sides of his education and would crystallize into nondualist interpretations about the relation of mainstream and sectarian approaches to healing, of mind and body in his psychology, of subjectivity and objectivity in his philosophy, and of psychological and spiritual sides of religious experiences. Third, and underlying all of William James’s work, was the confidence that his father inspired about his felt sanction to “have a say about the deepest reasons of the universe,” which encouraged his appetite for philosophical inquiry and his interest in philosophy as a search for life’s purposes (C5: 342).

William James approached philosophy as reflection on large and deep questions, including about philosophical motivations, how minds know and make choices, the ethics of belief, the consequences of theorizing, the character of experience, and the sources of spiritual commitment. Throughout his career, he maintained that these questions were not confined to abstractions but would serve as practical guides to life. This combination of the heady and the everyday, another reflection of his nondualism, would be a keynote of his philosophy, and of psychological and spiritual sides of religious experiences. Third, and underlying all of William James’s work, was the confidence that his father inspired about his felt sanction to “have a say about the deepest reasons of the universe,” which encouraged his appetite for philosophical inquiry and his interest in philosophy as a search for life’s purposes (C5: 342).

Given the elusive and diverse character of human experiences, many of his characterizations were, of necessity, paradoxical, for example with his description of experience as a “mosaic” for which “there is no bedding” to back up and hold together the pieces of our lives. This was philosophy in a new key, akin to a groundswell of theorizing without the “absolutes of other philosophies,” emerging in the North Atlantic world of the late nineteenth century (ERE: 42; Kloppenberg 1986). James would add the first and clearest expositions of pragmatism, a revision of empiricism by prioritizing pure experience as lived before conceptual organization, and a call for scientific investigation of non-mainstream experiences. Yet before he could imagine any of these developments, as a young adult, those traditional absolutes, and even the path of asking such deep questions without their guidance, almost kept him from taking on the vocation of philosophy when he was choosing his own direction in life.

Until his late thirties, James identified as a scientist. His literary brother Henry fastidiously recorded a memory of his older brother’s “inquiring” mind as a child, with “addict[ion] to ‘experiments,’” including “the transfusion of mysterious liquids from glass to glass under
exposure to lambent flame, the cultivation of stained fingers, [and] . . . the administration to all he could persuade of electric shocks” (H. James Jr. 1914: 122–23; Perry 1935, I: 205–6). With his father pleased for his “devot[i]on to scientific pursuits,” William enrolled in 1861 as a chemistry student at the Lawrence School, and in the next few years he added study of anatomy and physiology before enrolling in Harvard Medical School (Perry 1935, I: 184). He paused his classroom studies with a year on a natural history expedition to Brazil starting in 1865. Although he appreciated the practical and orderly skills needed for field work, he resolved, “I thoroughly hate collecting.” The range of his interests, cultivated since childhood, stoked his craving to get “back to books” (C4: 131). For the next decade, these twin attractions to tangible research in natural facts and to theoretical reflection would frame his education and early career. His only degree, in 1869, was in medicine, which seemed practical, but his studies in physiology toward the degree would serve his deeper theoretical interest in psychology. In 1863, he wrote to his cousin, Katherine Prince, whose husband was a doctor at an asylum for the mentally ill, with hopes “to see him and his patients.” He explained that “of all the departments of Medicine, that to wh[ich] Dr. Prince devotes himself is . . . the most interesting” (C4: 81). His own bouts of uncertainty and depression over the next few years amplified his interest in psychology. He taught physiology, with his first job starting in 1873, and through these same years he read philosophy avidly and joined friends in the Metaphysical Club discussion group. Science was his day job, with philosophy study the equivalent of his night school or avocation.

When beginning his job in the spring of 1873, he declared “I decide today to stick to biology for a profession. . . . Philosophy I will nevertheless regard as my vocation and never let slip a chance to do a stroke at it.” But he worried that “philosophical activity as a business is not normal for most men, and not for me,” because deep reflection led him “every day . . . to criticize afresh . . . the grounds” of all he believed. He equated the philosopher’s constant questioning to an “abyss of horrors,” which would “grasp my imagination and imperil my reason” (James Papers, [Diary 1], February 10 and April 10, [18]73: 87–88). Philosophical speculations were one source of the confusion and depression that plagued his early adulthood. These intellectual challenges combined with tensions with his father, awkwardness with women, and indecision from the broad range of his interests to bring him to a series of crises starting in 1868. He scoured different ways of thinking and different ways of living in search of clear direction, and “thoughts of the pistol the dagger and the bowl began to usurp an unduely [sic] large part of my attention” (C4: 194). Compared to these troubles, as represented by “the constant sense of instability” from philosophical reflection, science provided “some stable reality to lean upon” ([Diary 1], April 10, [18]73: 87). The range of choices and of studies confused him about his personal and vocational direction, but they would add up to a self-constructed liberal education, with his experiences adding planks to his vocational steps first in psychology, then in philosophy, and often in combination. Throughout his young adulthood, James felt compelled to study philosophy like a moth attracted to flame. He was unable to turn away but was steadily burned by its deep reflections, because with philosophy he would “never [be] . . . done with doubt” ([Diary 1], April 10, [18]73: 88).

In the fall 1861 chemistry class of Charles Eliot, James’s teacher had noticed a “remarkable spirituality” (James 1920, 1: 32). This interest was not doctrinal but an application of intellectual curiosity about his childhood “pewless state” for inquiry into a range of different theories and beliefs. His diary reading lists included scientific texts, but also works of Emanuel Swedenborg and his own father and his interests in literature, philosophy, spiritual texts from the religions of Europe and Asia, and religious skeptics (James Papers, [Notebook 3] 1862–63; and [Diary 1], 1870). His immersion into so many different points of view, into different ways that humans think and experience the world, combined with his psychological studies, provided a
vantage point for evaluating the sources of these human differences and for developing a theory about their mental starting points in the “sentiment[s]” of human “rationalit[ies].” And James defended “the subjective method” (1878) as a plausible use of human rationality when “facts . . . are not fixed quantities,” particularly with complex settings, personal convictions, and elusive futures (Eph: 32–64, 332).

Already in the 1860s, he had detected the role of personal relations in our mental grasps toward knowledge. In 1862, from his friend and fellow Lawrence Science student Charles Sanders Peirce (whose name he first spelled “Pierce”), James learned to identify “a triad: me & it require the complement thou,” suggesting the importance of the relation of the subjective and objective. James also privately asked about the role of “consciousness” in enabling perception to “distinguish between two objects,” an insight he would elaborate into his mature psychological observation that each person learns to sort out particular concepts from the initial “blooming, buzzing confusion” of initial encounters with new experiences (James Papers, [Notebook 2] 1862, 21 and [1]; PP: 462). James also gave gendered expression to his admiration for the particularities of experience in saying that “women do not generalize much, [but] they rather seize on particulars.” He could not know later debates about essentialist or contextualist ways of understanding women’s culture; instead, he was enlisting a cultural stereotype of his own time and actually endorsing women’s “traits,” to support his admiration for what he would call the “feminine-mystical mind” in contrast with the “scientific-academic mind,” even as he maintained that they each fell short because they “shy away from each other’s facts ([Notebook 2] 1862, 22; EPs: 248–49).

In his Principles of Psychology (1890), with echoes of his father’s educational goals, James would emphasize the importance of “attention, implying a degree of reactive spontaneity,” with the mind making active selective choices. Already in the 1860s, he had responded to the challenge of so many choices with an urge to build up the early habit of cultivating the attention” (PP: 380; James Papers, [Notebook 1], 13). Later in life, he delivered practical applications of his science in pointing out the benefits emerging from the neurological embedding generated by habitual practice: “Let no youth have anxiety about the upshot of his education,” he declared. “If he keep faithfully busy each . . . working-day, he may safely leave the final result to itself” (PP: 131). This was a moral message adding scientific support to his vow in 1868 to do his daily pegging, even when discouraged, and let “the results . . . float up of their own accord” (C4: 250). This example shows both the personal commitment of his philosophizing and the philosophical quality of the introspective method in his psychology.

James kept faithfully busy with his “day job,” earning respect from his students for approaching scientific issues in terms of their broad implications. And he gained promotions, culminating in his appointment as assistant professor of philosophy at Harvard in 1880. Along the way, he taught physiology and anatomy, he introduced the first course in the United States in psychology, and he was the first to include laboratory study of psychology in 1875–1876. Because psychology was not yet an independent profession, his philosophy appointment was the path to academic work in the new field, even as he approached its study through integration of science and philosophy. In 1878, he received a contract to write a text in psychology, which would become The Principles of Psychology, and he married Alice Gibbens after two years of often-awkward courtship. She provided him at once with steady emotional and logistical support in the tradition of women’s separate spheres, and she was an inspiration to her husband, especially in his religious thought. One of his love notes from their tenth year of marriage also forecasts his search for the intensity of “personal religion” in The Varieties of Religious Experience. He said that Alice has “eyes like a prayer. . . . just the expression I have been seeking all my life, but just escaped finding” (Letter to Alice Gibbens James, May 13, 1888, James Papers; VRE: 33).
2. Taking on philosophy in a new key, 1872–1879

By 1878, James had found ways to address his early uncertainties about personal and vocational instabilities. But through these years, he never really solved his youthful troubles; instead, he learned to manage them. This was one of the lessons from sectarian medicine, including hydropathy (water cure), homeopathy, and mind cure, which he practiced regularly, even though “when I was a medical student, . . . we had to sneer at [these practices] by word of command.” He insisted, “I know” that their “remedies are not inert, as orthodox medicine insists they necessarily [sic] must be,” even as he also insisted on continued research about their actions and effectiveness (ECR: 61; C10: 208). The sectarian approach emphasized each person’s ability to prevent or cope with illnesses rather than the mainstream emphasis on attacking or curing the malady. In fact, one of his first uses of the word “crisis” was an expression of the sectarian idea of the “healing disease,” with symptoms being uncomfortable but often serving as part of the body’s means for coping with diseases and even surmounting them (C1: 159; Rausse 1851: 49). Ironically, mainstream medical interventions, with their removal of natural adaptations from a person’s natural healing powers, showed less fidelity to evolutionary theory than did sectarian practices.

In similar ways, James approached his own crises as learning experiences, also akin to his father’s endorsement of the ancient theological view of the “fortunate fall,” with insights and benefits emerging in times of trouble, as symbolized by the biblical “fall of man.” In 1870, William observed that “through abridgement & deprivation we learn of resources within us, of whose existence we should else have remained ignorant” (C4: 409). James’s way to cope with his problems was to reframe them. In place of trying to solve his uncertainties, he looked to the freedom they implied. His reading of French philosopher Charles Renouvier, first in 1868 and more deliberately two years later, provided theoretical expression for his impulses. The day after another “crisis in my life,” he referred to Renouvier in a diary entry on April 30, 1870, expressing his hopes. He declared bravely, “My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will” (C4: 342; [Diary 1], April 30, [1870]: [83]). This would not solve his troubles but would flip his attitude toward them. Instead of feeling weighed down by the very serious personal and intellectual issues he faced, he aimed for a vantage point for dealing with them—at least. He promised to begin “after the first of January” ([Diary 1], April 30, [1870]: [83]). In the next few months and years, he found more ways to strengthen his vow. By 1877, he had learned to accept life and to think “without any guarantee,” because his hoped-for embrace of freedom encouraged his most “vigorous condition” (C4: 570–71). In saying that at these times he felt “this is the real me,” he anticipated his later psychological theory of the most “intimate part of the self,” deeper than material and social identities (PP: 283).

James’s study of Renouvier provided him with a way to avoid a major philosophical burden stemming from his scientific work, in its implied limitation of life to its material factors. He challenged the automata theory of scientific enthusiast Thomas Henry Huxley, who proposed that physical factors determine thoughts and actions (EPs: 38–61). With his endorsement of the nonmaterial freedom of the will, the French philosopher provided a counterbalance—a way to be “no longer . . . bullied by Huxley & Co” ([Miscellaneous Notes] “21 October 1872,” James Papers, 4B). James regarded Renouvier’s “psychology of volition . . . the truest . . . treatment . . . yet given to the subject” (EPs: 10). Embrace of life without guarantee also encouraged his study of philosophy by transforming its burdens of doubt about conflicting theories into both personal enrichment and objects for further study. The worried ambivalence of his earlier years became a decisive ambivalence with learning about—and learning from—human differences. In 1880, he answered the question, “What is reflection?,” with a portrait of his new thinking:
reflection involves “conflict between many ideas of possibility.” Now he noticed that such troubles serve as opportunities. “Like the tempered steel,” the fruit of difficult reflection could become “more precious and invincible for its icy bath in the waters of uncertainty” (EPs: 118).

A shifted approach to his troubles did not mean denying their reality. In fact, he never did completely live by the goal he had set in 1870. He would continue to get discouraged and face setbacks, but that goal served as a lodestone both for his own personal motivations and for much of his theoretical work with his psychology of attention concerning selective choices, his will to believe in life-affirming options, the framing of his psychology of religion around the human impulse (and his own) for “the chance of salvation,” and his radical empiricism with understanding of experience as sets of mosaic pieces freed from the “cement” of absolute answers (VRE: 414; ERE: 42).

While working in science and implementing his resolution about free will, James also pursued his “night job,” with extensive philosophical discussion in his off-hours. When still a student in the late 1860s, he joined a group of young intellectuals with an itch to “discuss the very tallest and broadest questions” generated by the scientific, religious, and philosophical theories of the time (C4: 245). Chauncey Wright, who computed mathematical statistics at the *Nautical Almanac*, and James’s fellow science student Peirce were the recognized leaders, and they had the greatest impact on James as he assimilated the strands of his education and weighed their implications for his philosophical thinking. Peirce named their group the Metaphysical Club, and from their discussions, the philosophy of pragmatism would emerge from an impatience with both the “incompleteness” of materialism and the “systematic totality” of idealism, as Peirce observed (1982, 1: 111). The third way he advocated would remain rooted in the natural facts of science and empiricism while emphasizing practical purposefulness without reliance on absolutes but with Darwinian adaptive purposes as a model. For James, the club was a setting for exploring the implications of thinking and living without certainty.5

While working in mathematics for his own day job, Wright described metaphysical discussion as his “favorite amusement” (Wright 1878: 28). As a child, he jokingly deified “Spontaneity” and continued to defy routine as an adult. He would do all the year’s computing work three months before deadline, leaving the rest of the year free for his philosophical avocation (Wright 1878: 343; Madden 1963: 5). Wright advocated an empiricist philosophy based on his admiration for science and on the continual need to test theories by the facts of scientific evidence. He thought James’s enthusiasm for free will unjustified because it invited unverified beliefs. James responded with an unpublished essay, which he named “Against Nihilism” because he maintained that, with his traditional empiricism, Wright “denies this to be a Universe, and makes it out a ‘Nulliverse.’” Wright focused on the empirical “multitude of representations” around us. Any assertion of ways “the representations come together, and seem to combine and influence each other,” in relation or with purposes, is a willful addition beyond verifiable fact. James suggested that relations and will provide the basis for meaning and purpose in the world, a teleology “not *a priori* and determinant” but future oriented. James proposed that meaning is “*a posteriori* to the happening,” justified by appeal to experience within the very empirical facts that empiricists such as Wright emphasize (MEN: 150, 52–53). Michael Polanyi called this James’s “looser view of teleology” with “intelligible directional tendencies . . . operative in the world without our having to suppose that they determine all things” (Polanyi and Prosch 1975: 162–63). This describes purposefulness in the making, immediately useful like the adaptive traits Darwin proposed as the active agents of evolutionary change. And this implied a purposeful focus to subjective experience criticized by Wright for being in sharp contrast with objective experience. By contrast, James proposed that “a representation” in consciousness, such as his subjective assertion of will, has a kind of “objective being” alongside empirical facts. In short, he suggested that
“subjectivity [has] an objectivity.” This would form the basis for his integration of the subliminal realm into his study of religious experience: the (objective) parts of subconscious psychology serve as the setting for (subjective) religious experiences (MEN: 154; VRE: 170, 190).

A few years later, James wrote a critique of Herbert Spencer, whose enthusiasm for scientific empiricism also prompted dismissal about the role of the will. In his “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence” (1878), James presented the impulsiveness of the will, along with other features of the human mind not always adhering to scientific standards, including philosophy, religion, and the arts, as actually central to Darwinian science. Just as natural selection operates through the spontaneous variations of physical traits, mental interests, with their diverse “idiosyncrasies,” also serve as “spontaneous variations,” likewise providing “data for Darwin’s theory” (EPH: 19). This essay would become a founding text of pragmatism. James’s rejoinder to Wright would contribute to James’s approach to pragmatism with his argument for the will as an objective factor in human consciousness.

Like his fellows in the Metaphysical Club, Peirce was an avid supporter of scientific inquiry with interest in the philosophical implications of modern science. He also studied at the Lawrence Scientific School, graduating summa cum laude in 1863; his father, Benjamin Peirce, was a prominent mathematician on the Harvard faculty. Charles showed an early aptitude for mathematics and logic that would shape all his career of scientific research and pathbreaking philosophical innovation, even as he was unable to maintain steady work because of his irascible temperament and his divorce, which violated Victorian-era norms. James knew Peirce first as a fellow science student with philosophical interests, and they were soon discussing both fields informally. More than two decades later, when introducing pragmatic philosophy in 1898, he credited Peirce with its initial insights, introduced to his club friends with what James called the “admirable introductory chapter to his book on logic,” the draft of Peirce’s essays, which would become his “Illustrations of the Logic of Science” (C1: 177; in the series of six essays, the first two would become starting points for pragmatist thinking: “The Fixation of Belief” 1877; and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878), Peirce 1982, 3: 242–76).

While the chief lesson that Wright derived from science was about the importance of empiricism, Peirce used his mathematical training to evaluate the importance of probabilities for scientific thinking. Charles Darwin’s The Origin of Species (1859) provided a key example, both intellectually and in method. Chance variation is the key agent in Darwin’s theory of species development by means of natural selection. Those variations which contribute to each creature’s adaptation have the highest probability for enduring into the next generation. Those adaptive variations (the “fittest” traits) shape the character of the species. The uncertainties of chance, therefore, are at the heart of evolution, even as those random variations coalesce into distinct evolutionary directions in probabilistic ways. Peirce extrapolated from his portrait of species change into his theory of the interplay of chance and system (“tychism” and “synechism,” in his thinking) to propose a universal tendency toward continuity and regularity, nature’s habits in formation. Darwinism also displayed probabilism through the enormous scales of time needed for species emergence. The origin of species was therefore beyond proof but highly probable because the theory so many natural facts so well. Peirce anticipated a shift in science from expectations of determinism “before 1860” to probabilistic thinking, which he forecast would “raise . . . science . . . to a distinctly higher plane” (Peirce, “Concept of Probability” January 23–30, 1909, Peirce Papers: 13–15). This approach to Darwinism and to science in general influenced James, who similarly noticed that the “law” of natural selection was “Caprice – caprice in inheriting [and] caprice in transmitting”; each contribution to adaptation “helps to accumulate a probability” (ECR: 234, 37). And James would continue considering probabilities in his “Will to Believe,” which begins with assessment of Blaise Pascal’s
wager about the plausibility of religious belief in terms of “the stakes in a game of chance.” James offers “a defence of our right to . . . believe[el]” without proof in matters such as religion and personal relations when facing questions “living, forced and momentous” (WB: 13, 14, 16).

While Peirce and James agreed on the role of probabilities in science, and also in religion, they focused on different sides of the vector of inquiry. In 1862, a year after starting his scientific studies, James wrote notes on ideas learned from his new friend in their consideration of “mental phenomena,” including “poetry, all direct intuitions of nature, scientific instincts, relations of man to man, morality, &c.” Peirce argued that “none succeed in leaving Faith entirely out” ([Notebook 2], 20). This served as James’s orientation to Peirce’s idea about the fallibility of human inquiry; no one could produce certainty, which left a place for faith to fill in that shortcoming. This condition, to Peirce, formed the basis for the “irritation of doubt” motivating inquiry toward “The Fixation of Belief.” In this article, he portrayed ways that people establish their beliefs (Peirce 1982, 3: 247). He surveys the popular method of stubborn tenacity and the political demand for obedience as common ways to “fix” beliefs but notes that they do little to quell doubt. He then credits the method of philosophical reason with more sophistication, but it produces problems similar to those of the popular methods. As with tenacity, it provides no grounds for substantial persuasion across tenaciously held reasons, and this invites claims to philosophical authority, echoing the assertions of political power. By contrast, Peirce proposes that science provides the method for affixing beliefs to “one true conclusion” (Peirce 1982, 3: 257). The basis for scientific superiority is that its path to belief formation is “quite independent of . . . how men think” or behave (Peirce 1982, 2: 479).

Peirce reconciled his confidence in science with his fallibilism in his concept of the long run of inquiry. At any one time, even science can only “approach to certainty” because “knowledge is never perfect” (Family Record c. 1909, Peirce Papers). But the pressures toward revision in communities of scientific research, with their “constant tendency . . . to correct,” provide a path toward approaching certainty, what he called “practical certainty” (Peirce 1931–1958, 2: 729; Eisele 1964: 56). Truth with certainty remains out of reach to any investigator, but he idealized the achievement of successors if remaining loyal on the long-run path of inquiry. Peirce’s prime interest was in the transit from doubt to belief formation, best achieved through scientific inquiry. Even with these claims for science, however, Peirce did not align with positivism. Like James, he observed that this outlook made the results of scientific inquiry into an absolute; Peirce valued the methods of science, with any day’s result subject to tomorrow’s correction.

James agreed with Peirce about fallibilism but disagreed on his next steps. From that point, Peirce aimed for fixing beliefs that culminate with the method of science. From that same starting point, James looked squarely at the uncertainty suggested by the premise. He regarded claims to certainty with suspicion and came to agree with Renonvier that “there is no certitude; all there is men who are certain” (ECR: 325). Where Peirce followed a logical path in search of sound methods, James took a psychological path toward the ways that different people make different claims. He called each individual path, where each person feels most intellectually “at home,” the “Sentiment of Rationality” (1879). He did not posit “the feeling of sufficiency” in these sentiments in contrast with rationality; sentiments, however, reside at their root, serving as assumptions shaping the first steps of inquiry, their direction, and capacity to endure. Personally, the theory expressed his use of psychology to resolve “the conflicting claims to authority of the different systems” he faced in his education, even as it was also an innovative philosophy, admired by Ernst Mach for detecting how “consciousness [serves as] an economic substitute for mechanism.” James’s essay also joined Peirce’s essays as founding texts of pragmatism. And this philosophy would also serve as a step toward his religious thought. This theory provided a
psychological explanation about how commitments feel so right in each particular mind, that is, an explanation about the psychological dimension of belief formation. Peirce did not approve of James’s psychological turn; he perceived that the younger man tainted his logical insights with mere subjectivity. Peirce admired James personally and for his writing, but he wrote a critical review of *The Principles*, and he coined the term “pragmaticism, . . . a name ugly enough to safe from kidnappers,” to maintain the role of logic in the pragmatic method for clarification of ideas in contrast with James’s emphasis on broad meaning and practical consequences in lived experience (Peirce 1931–1958, 5: 414, 1891).

James did not so much misinterpret Peirce, or fail to rise to his standards, as intentionally extend Peirce’s recognition of uncertainties to more realms of human experience and belief. For example, where Peirce grudgingly admired the power of novelists to persuade but remained exasperated by their lack of rigor and frank appeal to subjectivity, James welcomed the power of subjective insights, including in literature and art, not just to persuade but also to open new imaginative possibilities not fully available in daily life or even to rigorous inquiry. In effect, Peirce displayed his own sentiments of rationality in acknowledging that he was imbued with the spirit of physical science, with the “attitude . . . of a dweller in a laboratory.” He even maintained belief in God with a .93 probability.7 Peirce’s terms and tone are in striking contrast with James’s view of divinity as “a sense of reality . . . more deep and more general than [the] . . . existent realities [of] . . . current psychology” (VRE: 55).

When James was still teaching courses in physiology, he wrote an essay about his vision for “The Teaching of Philosophy in Our Colleges” (1876). Sounding rather like the enthusiasts for science he was distancing himself from, he criticized “the sleepiest doctor-of-divinity-like repose” because “all doctrines find themselves . . . compelled to settle their accounts and make new treaties with . . . science.” In a phrase portraying his own career path as the best way to prepare for teaching philosophy, he stressed the importance of “a thorough physiological training” for understanding bodily actions with mental insights. James also welcomed the social authority it could bestow, not to assert the priority of scientific thinking but to counter the pretentious “popular philosophic literature” of those who do not understand science but find references to it of “portentous moment.” Most important, already thinking about competing sentiments of rationality, philosophical inquiry should involve “the habit of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid, . . . of imagining foreign states of mind.” With that “liberal spirit,” he actually took “the extreme Positivist position” of insistence on empirical verification for dismissal of non-scientific beliefs so seriously that he applied it to science as well, in maintaining the importance “of always seeing an alternative,” even to scientific propositions. James treated positivism as an opportunity to reinforce the inquiring spirit of philosophy but without slighting the importance of science. His focus was on inquiry and on natural facts, no matter their source (EPh: 4–6).

### 3. Reckoning with empiricism and idealism, 1873–1885

Five years after starting to teach physiology, and two years after endorsing philosophy for teaching “a wider openness of mind,” James began to assemble ideas for his psychology text (EPh: 4). He drew upon both his scientific training and the philosophical leanings he had developed from his family education, discussions with friends, and personal reflections. While the work of physiological psychology became his professional focus, he used his philosophical interests to interrogate the empirical grounding of the facts he was studying and their implications for the purposes he sought. James taught and reviewed scientific approaches to mind including the works of Herbert Spencer, William Clifford, and Thomas Huxley, who explained consciousness
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in terms of bodily functions and who showed high confidence in scientific truths. During these same early years when James hoped for a philosophy appointment in order to teach psychology, he privately applied philosophical questions to the assumptions and practices of his work. He gravitated toward a central concern about the tension between empiricism and idealism because he perceived merits in both the study of physical facts and the insights and feelings of high ideals. He added kindred names to each side, including positivism, materialism, “scientificism,” and scientific naturalism in contrast with transcendentalism, apriorism, intuitionism, moralism, religious belief, and rationalism (MEN: 296). While the names within these sets were not synonyms, he was highlighting the respective material and immaterial sources of each, with their roots in scientific and religious commitments. He noticed significance in each, even as he was also repelled in part by each. Turning away from science “leads to idealism,” but that outlook lacked substantial empirical support. By contrast, science, including in his own education, “instills materialism,” which seemed a “pessimistic creed” and even “frivolous” in its neglect of broader purpose. Most important, each “remains a mere taste” evaluated “from the subjective side.” In sum, “the first [is] like the theist . . . [with] his faith,” while “the second [is] like the Compists” [sic: Comtists supported Auguste Comte’s positivism]. He mocked the way their view “corresponds to that of the theists,” effectively declaring, “Physics, be thou my absolute!” James was starting to turn toward “the third” choice that would animate pragmatism, based on his mingling of philosophy and science. In his private notes, he explored what each had to offer, and what of each he might choose.

Some of James’s private reflections emerged from his reading of David Masson’s Recent British Philosophy (1865), whose evaluation of “Empiricism against the opposite theory of Transcendentalism” reinforced his view of the significance of this contrast, and also appealed, as James’s student Ralph Barton Perry said, to his “philosophical centrism.” Although empiricists criticized idealists (a word James used for Masson’s transcendentalists) for unverifiable speculations, the empirical collection of facts that anchored scientific inquiry did not bring any more intellectual certainty, despite its growing social authority. What he gleaned from Masson was that neither orientation could produce a complete account of the world; but, as the British writer speculated, “what if the two extremes could be united?”

James scrutinized the merits of each side. Empiricists consider an experience “simply as a fact or state,” he observed, while transcendentalists consider it “as the outcome of, or conditioned by, certain forms of being, which lie behind it or are ‘a priori’ to it.” Using abbreviations (“Tr” for transcendentalists, “Emp” for empiricists), he then dealt with the challenge to empiricists of data collection without ever achieving proof, through a dialogue to portray the “neck & neck race backwards between the 2 schools”:

\[
\begin{align*}
Tr: & \quad [\text{knows}] \text{ from what?} \\
Emp: & \quad f[\text{ro}]m \text{ previous product} \\
Tr: & \quad \text{of what [?]}
\end{align*}
\]

Eventually, the empiricist ceases to be able to assign an earlier form, and from this, “the Tr . . . is supposed triumphant”; but this is because of the habit of ending the “regress with a substantive rather than a verb” (MEN: 134–35). This insight anticipated James’s later radical empiricism, which included abandonment of “‘consciousness’ as an entity,” even as he insisted “most emphatically that it does stand for a function” (ERE: 4).
James also observed that for the transcendentalist, “a reason for everything is sought.” By contrast, empiricists leave the gathering of facts “unaccounted for,” without any particular purpose, and that struck him as “a defect of seriousness.” Still, empiricism has led to a great accumulation of facts, which science has explained with “laws by which elements and their properties are associated.” However, he balked at the empirical tendency to assume that “the only order which has any objective existence is the elementary order, . . . empirical actuality.” Those building blocks alone could not explain “a living organism” whose “whole dynamic history” includes “the interaction of the anatomic elements” in a “unified total” greater than the sum of its elementary parts. Despite his respect for empiricism, he wondered “is the ‘thing’ then not meant by nature at all,” or is any meaning just “a gratuitous figment added by us”? James was showing shades of his religious education from his father about meaning in the natural world, but also of what he would call the “more” in his religious psychology without any particular religious doctrine but with assessment of the psychology in all religions. He also asked, when the empirical parts of a living thing “separate and it dies, is nothing of it left in any sphere of being”? Is it “lost, gone utterly? without a warrant, an influence”? He noticed that “for the positivist, . . . that a thing sh[oul]d merely be or happen is the all in all of it.” In fact, these empiricists seem to say, “what more . . . can one ask [for] than concrete reality?” By contrast, the transcendentalist does ask for more, for “some guarantee, . . . some assurance that it is ‘intended’ by the Universe.”

This idealistic leaning “postulates thus a sort of duplication of all existences,” namely, “1 their positive actuality [and] 2 the hold their idea has upon the rest of nature.” He summarized “this ‘duplication’” briefly:

Emp:  It exists –
Tr:  it is meant to exist10

While idealist and transcendental ideas had some appeal to James, he could not adopt them without criticism. “Meant by nature” left him puzzled and impatient: “Meant! – by what or by whom?” He readily enlisted an empiricist insistence: “cash your concept by its particulars!” He remained committed to natural facts, with no need for “the state of consciousness. . . [to] refer or be outside of itself.” In his own physiological research, he would, along with empiricists, maintain focus on natural facts; searches beyond nature were just “nonsense” (MEN: 137, 141). But within that natural domain, he insisted on an unblinking openness to facts of all kinds. Before identifying as a pragmatist, and in the spirit of scientific inquiry, James called himself a “phenomenist,” ready to “take the phenomenon in its entirety and permanently sacrifice no one aspect to another” because of prior philosophical orientations, empirical or idealistic (EPH: 51). With this phenomenist perspective, he would bring inquiry to a range of human experiences, including non-mainstream phenomena.

James noticed that fixed absolutes, motivated by empirical or idealistic philosophies, blocked inquiry into natural phenomena. He wondered if trans-empirical ideals could be achieved with attention to natural facts, but without being tied to the single explanations of either traditional ideals or empirical facts. As he put it, “Must Idealism Be Monistic?” (MEN: 197). The will, immaterial but a natural fact of psychology, suggested just this type of “idealism” with empirical impact. He asked, “does the quality of an idea,” as willfully felt, influence “the physical process?” Empiricists “answer . . . in the negative” because of a belief that non-empirical agents “cannot have efficient causality in the physical world.” Their views veered toward proposals for “a mechanical equivalent of thought.” But James pointed out that such conclusions were still “far beyond our power” of inquiry. Meanwhile, he observed, “we think . . . to a purpose” – the kinds of purposes, as he explained in his Spencer essay, that suggest the adaptive function of
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reputedly idealistic traits, including will, choice, and attention. And he asked about the psychological role for still more nonmaterial factors, for example, “when we care deeply for a subject,” with “our very care” generating physiological changes, and when mental anticipation prompts a “peculiar tingling consciousness in the skin” (MEN: 247–49, 251–53). Even with all his scientific training, he remained open to the tangible impacts of immaterial parts of life.

On James’s path toward finding the relation of empiricism and idealism, he was committed to scientific research for its careful methods and fact gathering but did not adopt the reduction of all experiences to the material dimensions of facts. On the idealistic side, James’s endorsement of free will allowed him to “deliberately assume (that is [I] am willing to act on the belief) that this metaphysical world exists,” and “that its spiritual ends may run across the ends of nature” – part of or at least circulating in natural phenomena (C4: 545). His engagement and marriage in 1878 to Alice Gibbens reinforced this side of his thinking because of the depth of her religious commitments. He told her, “I know you have what I fain would add to . . . [my] feeling toward the world.” While her faith was steady, his was a path, a work in progress, with an “attitude toward Religion . . . one of deference rather than of adoption” (C4: 547). And on that path, he called for scientific discovery of experiences not readily classified in material terms for “recognition of . . . facts that long stood knocking at the door of our senses, but . . . ignored” ([Notebook], 1873; Bjork 1988: 103). With this experiential approach to empiricism, James investigated realms of life generally associated with idealistic thinking, including religious experiences, sectarian medical practices, and psychical phenomena.

When James’s scientific studies took him away from his father’s thought, he expressed the hope “one day [to] get a glimpse of things through the ontological window.” He used this informal phrase to characterize the idealistic philosophy of the elder James as “ontological” for its grand scope, with an obverse of materialism, in reducing natural facts to spiritual ideals (C4: 195). Among enthusiasts for science, young James noticed a parallel “trait in positivism for minds prone to the ontological emotion,” because of “the sense of vastness” in its sweeping synthesis of all knowledge and understanding in terms of empirical facts. Each side, his father and positivists, idealists and empiricists, assumes a dualism – “this is mind & that matter” – with debates emerging over which is more influential. As the young James had hoped when he began teaching, the stable stance of physiological psychology now enabled him to step back from the debate between empiricism and idealism to think about “the form of thought” as a whole, when after all, “while you think, you think of an Object,” thus enlisting both subjectivity and objectivity. To James, material and nonmaterial experiences are simultaneous phenomena interpreted in different ways and for different purposes. This perspective also encouraged his respect for each position and provided a vantage point to treat the debates as opportunities to learn from each side, while suggesting “we can hardly escape f[ro]m positing some common ground” (MEN: 142–48).

The common ground that would serve as the terrain for James’s lifetime of philosophical inquiries was the full phenomena of human experience, with respect for the insights of science and religion, for the evidence gathered by empiricists and idealists, for the sentiments of diverse rationalities. When introducing the theory of pragmatism, with its first public expression in 1898, he added the perspectives of the philosopher and the poet to the other dual contrasts he mediated. The clarifying works of philosophers, with their diligent construction of “formulas, . . . technical conceptions, . . . [and] verbal points” to make sense of experience, provide “spots, or blazes” through the “trackless forest of human experience.” But poets have “no need of blazes,” because they provide intuitions about the “center in truth’s forest.” Both, with their distinct methods, assumptions, and contributions, “have the same function, . . . [to] give you . . . direction.” Thanks to these fruits of human ingenuity, “we can now use the forest; . . . it
is no longer a place merely to get lost in.” Yet for all of their “help” of the “most genuine sort,” compared to the whole “integral forest” of experience, their contributions are “few . . . thin and spotty.” He persistently felt that all efforts of human intellect through the forest of experience, from the big-picture thinking represented by poetry to the more fine-grained insights of philosophers, were subject to reminders of “ever not quite.” The sentiments of this favorite phrase penetrated all his work, from his youthful studies to his psychology, philosophy, religious studies, and public intellectual contributions. All human efforts, including his own, faced an ever not quite compared with the robustness of life. Even toward the end of his life, he still approached his speculations with humility, and even with his influential achievements, he still felt himself almost a philosopher.

In addition to her prominent artistic career, Sarah Wyman Whitman also read many of James’s books in manuscript. In her portrait of James, she provides an artist’s distillation of his central insights (Whitman 1903). James sits, serious, with inquiring mind, clutching a book. It is not one of his own publications, but a manuscript with a title that was one of his favorite phrases, capturing his enthusiasm for human achievements but also his realization that none could claim absolute completeness. She recorded William James’s words, “ever not quite,” with traditional and capital spelling to amplify his earnest humility: EVER NOT QVITE.

Notes
1 For more on James’s youthful crises, see Croce (2018: 187–26), fns. 303–12, with review of prior interpretations, especially fns. 4, 5, 32, 33, 55, 57, 76, 93, 95, 97, and 100. For a recent contrasting interpretation, with emphasis on a single crisis, which has been central to almost all interpretations, see Leary (2015).
2 James never claimed to have established a very elaborate laboratory. G. Stanley Hall disputed his priority on that basis; see Ross (1972: 238–39).
3 Charlene Haddock Seigfried (1996) both recognizes misogyny in his acceptance of separate spheres and argues that his theories opened doors for challenge to hierarchy.
4 For more on the fortunate fall, see Croce (1995: 59–60, 252), fn. 46.
5 For more on the Metaphysical Club, see Croce (1995: 151–56), fn. 2–3, 6, 13.
6 Mach (1986: 151) found “points of agreement” with “the idea of concepts as labor-saving instruments [of] Prof. W. James,” especially in “‘The Sentiment of Rationality,’ . . . composed with vigor and impartiality.”
8 [Miscellaneous Notes] (October 21, 1872), James Papers, 6B, 4A, 4B, and 6B; James would use the same phrase about intellectual deference to the absolutism of physics in a review of George Henry Lewes, another enthusiastic support of science (ECR: 306).
9 See Masson (1865: 245, 148, 226); Perry (1935, 2: 574).
11 In the 1890s, “The Ontological Society” formed, based in Philadelphia and Atlanta, dedicated to the study and propagation of the philosophy of the late Henry James Sr.; Houghton Library, AC85. J2334.884l(B).

Further reading


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