William James

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TRANSLATED BY ROBERT H. WEIDMAN, '31

I remember a picture in the air and sunlight style of painting of the nineteenth century. In the foreground was to be seen the back of a horse, the head of which the imagination had to add beyond the frame of the picture; in the background shone colored splatters which one could identify as ladies and gentlemen under a tent. But all that was incidental. The main thing was the bright splatters themselves, the joy in colorfully atmospheric details; objectivity was gradually vanishing, accepted and endured only with misgivings, a concession to the naive Common Sense of practical people who move in an agreeable, fixed world; and nevertheless the spots of color fitted in the whole picture. Such is the philosophy of William James.

He designates philosophy as an attitude of will rendered in thought; and this attempt to philosophize involves an unusually obstinate effort to think clearly. His method of thinking is broad and loose like the method of an impressionistic painter. He never fails to blot out apparently clear outlines, seismically to reject apparently sure fundamentals; he offends scientists by psychic forces that disturb the course of physiology; he frightens "scientific psychology" with visions of individual ghosts and of occult appearances; he replaces ecclesiastical and dogmatic religion with wild eruptions of private emotions; he irritates the educationalists with his racy, slang expressions; the "horror of horrors to him, however, is the orderly, essential, step by step construction of an idea. According to him idea is thin, but actuality is thick and hazy; the temple of philosophy is supposed to be a shabby place for tender souls; on the other hand life is understood only by hard-boiled businessmen, practical people whose philosophy is "cash payment." His letters, almost exquisitely amiable in contrast to the famous hard-boiledness, testify again and again that philosophy is not a consoling fortress and shelter, but an almost painful obsession, an unusual effort, at best a means, to get rid of all philosophy (as his enthusiastic disciple, the Italian Papini, expresses it). As in an American city, so in James' philosophy skyscrapers are built to be torn down. He treats almost with a kind of bitterness the logical principle of unambiguous coherence as if it were the personal offender; "life is a series of interruptions." He rested his hopes on nothing, and allowed himself to be obliged to nothing. It is told that a student once haltingly interrupted him with the demand, "But, Doctor, Doctor!—to be serious for a moment.—" And from his classes came questions about what the examinations would really cover. But William James did not teach for examinations. He wanted to teach nothing at all, but to intellectualize his total personal reactions to reality. His revolution against every set form never spared even academic form. In his chair of philosophy he felt as a soldier would feel if called on to deliver a funeral prayer, to speak in the spirit of Santayana.

James was the first American thinker to be in wide familiarity and favor in his country. But if Santayana is to be trusted, who has observed his activity on the spot first as a student and then as a colleague, James was no exception to what usually befalls a prophet in his own land. According to Santayana, James was long regarded with distrust as a dangerous, queer person, until it was learned that he was famous in Europe. He said that he hardly seemed important enough for a great man. They thought a professor worthy of the name should at least have the appearance of knowing everything. The exacting theologians and the panegyric idealists, for there are some in America, shook their heads. What kind of a sound philosophy, they said, can be expected from an irresponsible doctor who has not even finished college, from a raw empiricist, a dissector of frogs? On the other hand the solid businessmen (who control the universities in America) were not quite assured about a teacher of youth who had no special system handy, that if need be could be turned to at once; and at first they could not stomach a private gentleman who dabbled with hypnotism and visited mediums, who didn't talk like a book and didn't write like a book, unless it was one of his own. Even his students, although they were unfailingly attracted by his personality, felt some doubt as to the profundity of anyone who was so entirely natural. He would like to open the window to look out for a moment. He probably was glad when the bell would ring and he could be himself until the next day. But the spirit could come over him in the midst of the routine of the classroom, and leaning his head on his hand, he would let fall golden words, picturesquely fresh from the heart, full of knowledge of good and evil. Occasionally there would burst forth humorous characterizations, the honest confession of a doubt or maybe personal preferences, probably some excellent bit of scholarship; radicals, which often plunged deep into the subsoil of all philosophies; and occasionally the most unvarnished and virile thoughts of profound wisdom and thoughtful piety that anyone ever had.

William James' life indeed was a series of interruptions, eruptions and disruptions. Nevertheless he embodies an inner force in spite of the irregular rhythm; there is a comprehensive meaning in his life, which happens to be an incarnation of national and contemporary forces and tendencies. He who all his life long guarded himself against everything classic, since his death has been raised to a national thinker of "classical" rank by his friend and adversary Royce.

II

James' grandfather was a Protestant Irishman. He landed in America in the year of the French revolution, as it were a foreign born American. He appears to have left Ireland—because his family thought to force him into the ministry, eager to visit the "battlefields of freedom." When he arrived he possessed a Latin grammar. Before long he had climbed to an important position in Albany, New York. Upon his death he left an estate that could assure his widow and eleven children an independent existence. He was an organizer of the Erie Canal, was in the salt industry, in banking, and was on the board of commerce of Albany; he speculated successfully in western lands. A real capitalist, in his will he tried to keep his children from enjoying the estate until they had added their share to it. This stipulation was evaded, however, and James' father, Henry James, lived for most of his life on the income. This remarkable, irrational sage reminds one of the German Hamann or of the Englishman Blake. He lived in Emerson's circle of influence; but he mistrusted everything literary, clear, and certain. He wished to communicate with living—not with talking—men through life alone. God is all that is sure and necessary. But man—what is he? Theologies and formulizations are treacherous, they seduce men to optimism and self-satisfaction. He wrote in a letter to Emerson, "...my intelligence is the necessary digestive apparatus for my life." For a time he followed Swedenborg, the Swedish visionary. There are thick, supra-
tional facts! But he roughly turned aside attempts to ally him actively and publicly with the Swedenborgian sect. To the editor of the Swedenborgian journal he wrote: "Why don't you cut the whole concern at once, as a rank offence to every human hope and aspiration? The intercourse I had some years since with the leaders of the sect, on a visit to Boston, made me fully aware of their deplorable want of manhood; but judging from your paper, the whole sect seems spiritually benumbed. Your mature men have an air of childishness, but your young men have the aspect of old women."

William James' main tendencies had been pre-formed in his father. He shared with him an anarchical, earthy, positive theism and a scorn of all worldly institutions and moulds that conceal the human dependence on an individual creator. The textbook played as small a part as possible in his education. . . . we wholesomely breathed inconsistency and ate and drank contradictions," wrote Henry James, the writer, brother of the philosopher. "Thus we had ever the amusement. . . . of hearing morality, or moralism, as it is more indiscriminately worded, made hay of in the very interest of character and conduct. I would rather have a son of mine corrupted with all the sins of the decalog than have him perfect!"

William James was sixteen years old when for the first time he had the impression that now he had finally started to school. That was in Boulogne. All his youth he skipped about over America and Europe with all possible and impossible tutors, in schools or without any teachers at all. The father wanted to keep the minds of his children from becoming set, and from the overwhelming influence of a fixed environment. There began to be developed the future philosopher of the living individual moment and of the looseness of things, of dillatentist self-making and of unhampered, broad, cosmopolitan sympathies. He learned French in France and Geneva, and German in Germany; all his life he had the habit of scattering bits of German and French throughout his letters and conversation. Thus he appears to be especially fit to listen to the manifold murmurings of the Academicians and to give assent to them. On the other hand he complained of the "lack of all discipline," especially when a student in Germany. He lacked, as he complained, the patient habit of forming an opinion and letting it ripen, and the methodical, sure mastery of older thinkers. His pronouncements on older philosophers, with whom he could not come in scintillating contact, are almost always exceedingly summary. The most famous chapter of his Psychology is a sermon: form habits!

First he thought himself called on to prepare to study medicine. "Nervous" digestive and eye disorders trouble him. He senses opposition between the attitude of life and what is palpable, visible and dissectible; between alert, conscious and purposive life and the pathological and gratuitous; and he recognizes that the boundary between them is fluctuating and gradual. Obsessed, eccentric, queer, he was always a sympathetic friend. After visiting an insane asylum once he said to one of his students that President Eliot would probably protest if one told him that he was only slightly different from those patients, but that it was so.

The study of medicine was interrupted by a biological expedition to the Amazon. William James went along as assistant to the great naturalist Louis Agassiz. The naturalist's enthusiasm was astonishing to him. He began to realize that he felt no call for this kind of life, but that it was his task to comprehend the many chaotic interests of his mind and to establish their values. Every man should follow the direction that is suitable to him and in which he can be of consequence. Active life and the struggle with nature's riddles seems to some as easy as breathing. The speculative life lay open to him. A philosophy that wishes to be just to life must be pluralistic.
Lay claim to the individual's beliefs—his first philosophical work was called The Will to Believe—that there is a life that withdraws from practical decisions is impossible, and is possessed with a mortal malady. He was called to Harvard as instructor when he was thirty-one. He taught physiology, founded the "Society for Psychological Research" for the investigation of "occult phenomena," and established the first experimental psychology laboratory in the United States. Today there are hundreds of them that determine with their tests and statistics the speed of reaction and ability of millions in the universities and even in industry and big business.

Libraries are filled with the reports of physiology, founded the "Society for Psychology." His last works, A Pluralistic Universe, Radical Empiricism, and Some Problems of Philosophy, are philosophically more important than his Pragmatism, which as mere method is overshadowed by a larger problem. The tendency of this larger problem was to defend a majority of human values and to maintain a contact with occidental culture. The old-world respect for outward forms of existence. Theocentric and logically starting-point, the justification of which can university. It finds its philosophical unity and formula in James. He carried Americanism into philosophy in order to carry philosophy into Americanism.

James has repeatedly compared his philosophy with the Reformation. Actually a greater antithesis can hardly be imagined. James' philosophy of religion is "humanistic." Individual experiences form its starting-point, the justification of which lies in its ability to fit man for the struggle of existence. "The true philosopher is a rebel when he has just returned from a European trip."

William James' greatest human strength was his open-mindedness toward other modes of living. He discovered Royce and Santanyana, and brought the young Privatdozent Münsterberg from Germany. Thus he made possible that philosophical Golden Age at Harvard, which laid a firm basis for the continuation of the work all over the United States. He greeted the works of Royce, whose objective idealism "auflösen" pragmatism, and those of "the pessimistic, moribund Platonist" Santanyana, with a grim satisfaction. He wrote to Royce that the rest of his life would try to overthrow his system.

After James' death Royce, in the appreciation William James and the Philosophy of Life, created an admirable monument not only to James, but also to their philosophical friendship. Here too is a humane sympathy, but it does not exclude putting things in their proper places. The question Royce raises concerns James' position in American civilization. In the following an attempt is made to reproduce the main points with a few additions.

The pre-war epoch in American history, in which James lived, was liberal; it welcomed everyone almost without restraint. An impetuous release of individual forces. A seemingly unrestricted movement toward the west. A time of the pioneer, home builder, the gold-seeker. A romantic tumult, the world a gamble and an unknown adventure. At the same time that the nation was born in the Civil War imperialism awoke. While on the one hand cultural traditions of new England and of the southern states were broken, on the other hand one sought to find oneself in the family of nations, and one undertook to produce and maintain a contact with occidental culture.

The most competent representative of these things is James. He was not conscious of any totalities for which he could stand. What he was passionately occupied with was individuals, novelties, concrete experiences. All experience itself becomes synonymous with the adventure of reason, to create it, to gain possession of it. He is entirely eclectic throughout; not fastidious but democratic; he preferred crude, simple experiences of pioneers of life to the fine system of the classical thinkers. 

James collected with a democratic open-mindedness the most varied of religious experiences of healers, cultists, mystics, revivalists, chance acquaintances, and leaders of the Reformation, and tried to show that the same vitalizing value is found in new disguises the same as in the old ones. As Royce said: The old-world respect for outward forms of the church finds no place in his pages; just as foreign to him is that satisfied enmity toward the church of the typical European free-thinker who has broken with traditions. What struck Royce was that the new doctrine in some respects peevishly leaves religion in the rather trivial position of a plaything of whimsical forces—a prey to endless psychic caprices. But James' robust belief was that just these whims, the unconventional and individual in religious experience becomes a means by which the truth of a supernatural world can be made more evident. And this robust belief of James, whatever one may think of its merit, is typically American, as the effect has proved. It is the pioneer spirit carried over into metaphysics. There is a distant home, our long-lost spiritual bliss. Experience alone can lead us to the places where these are. Only he can get there who ventures the experience and decides to live there.

And what are the moral fundamentals that can lead life through the pathless wilderness of the new democracy? Again Royce says: The ethical maxims that are
especially fit to meet the popular demands for leadership in such a land and in such times, are maxims that combine attractive indefiniteness with an equally profitable appropriateness. Their practical usefulness must be at hand. They must not be too rigorous. They must kindle a broad enthusiasm for action, without becoming burdensome to us through restrictions and tiresome self-control. They must not lay pretentious claims to self-conscious reflection. In spite of their indefiniteness they must not seem "abstract" or hard to understand. Moral missteps must be natural only to others, never to ourselves. We must be self-confident. Moreover out ethical law must have an athletic sound to it. Its highest aim is to make us "good sports." Only on such an ethical law can we reflect day and night, in case the game ever leaves us time for it. In spite of all that, these popular maxims of course cannot be considered as mere expressions of blind impulses. They must be able to stand up before highly intelligent people, but intelligent people who, fearful of the danger of thinking too much, will run away. In order to be popular, these maxims must make the heart tremble, not exactly like the trumpets of the last judgment, but more like an automobile horn.

James' pragmatism formulated these things and offered them for discussion. Truth is not given, but it is produced. Actuality is not finished, it is being brought about. Ideas reveal their value in experiences that can be cashed in on by the senses. Ideas justify themselves by their actions—the gospel of reward and works. Courage and strength, health and virility are its prime virtues.

The catching success of pragmatism proved that James had hit the mark. The nation was grateful for having found a distinctly audible voice that helped to explain life to it and that was heard in the family of nations. It showed, as Royce says, that America had started on the road to self-deliberation, but it soon stopped at a very provisional halting-place.

James would be no philosopher if he were only an American event and expression of the period. Critics of pragmatism arose even in America. To them and to the European voices which began to call out sometimes cuttingly and scornfully, he always replied that his philosophy was not concerned if they could understand by "fitness," nothing but plain usefulness and satisfaction of immediate wants. The world is not given as finished (gegeben), but given as a task (aufgegeben) and must be interpreted (James repeatedly uses this Kantian term). And this interpretation remains a risky guess, for which the interpreter is responsible. The world will look on him as he looks on it. The visible world is only a segment of the invisible world, upon which to build and which it is the privilege and also the responsibility of man to allow to become fruitful in life.

The kernel of James' pragmatism is an ethical idealism whereby he aligns himself with the persistent tradition of American philosophy.

«BLACK JACK DAVEY»

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citement of the makers of Oklahoma— "man's country."

The cast follows:

May Keene Harriett Stewart Mirabelle Dawes Myrtle Ann Wilson Bess Keene Carol Constant

Jim Dawes Jim Robinson Rose Warrior Gladys Johnston J. A. Keene Harold Pettit Davey Dawes Howard Fielden Cale Boyd John Weever Ned Warrior Fred Wheeler Honey Wade Ben Marks

Professor Ray Holcombe, director of the Playhouse, was assisted in the directing of the play by the author himself. The stage setting was a remarkable piece, a pioneer cabin and the yard of the pioneer home. Part of the action in the second act takes place with all of the characters in the house, not visible to the audience.

All of the action takes place on the same set. During the second act, which is divided into two scenes, there are remarkable trick effects. During gunfire, there is the ripping of shingles, the crashing of glass, all done in realistic manner. The play moves with lightning speed from the end of the first act until the storm clears near the end of the third act.

Although the play presented some difficulties for an amateur cast, it had an able production. The play revolves about Mirabelle Dawes, an invalid who is confined to her wheel chair, but who has the fighting spirit of the old Dawes family. In the background is the Dalton gang, endeavoring to dispossess Ned Warrior, an Indian, and the Keenes and the Dawes, who came from Arkansas. Miss Wilson gave a powerful interpretation of the role of Mrs. Dawes, ending in the climax, where Mrs. Dawes shows the fighting courage of the pioneer woman.

After all, as Davey says: "It's a man's country, Maw—it's Pap's an' my country—and I love it."

That's Oklahoma—"man's country."

And that's the Oklahoma Mr. Dickinson portrays in the swiftly moving, dramatic episode of a group of pioneer families.

Two years ago the school of dramatic art instituted the prize winning Oklahoma play contest which Walter Frichard Eaton characterized in the New York Herald Tribune as indicating that "the new theater is on its way." John Woodworth, '29 arts-sc., of Shawnee, won the prize the first year, with his three act A Certain Young Widow.

Mr. Dickinson's play is the first presented by the Playhouse dealing with regional drama. The play was wholly Oklahoman, the author, the players, the theater and the subject, being Oklahoman.

THE ALUMNI ACT

(continued from page 324) in its present form, spoke for the adoption.

"We are at a crisis in the history of the university," he declared. "We should face with sober judgment and with every courtesy extended to those in authority with whom we deal."

"It has been the goal of alumni of this university for years to take the school out of so-called 'practical politics.' We always felt that the progress of our school depends on the absence of political interference with it."

"We have a great university here. It is endangered by the threat to the stability of the faculty. In Oklahoma City yesterday I had occasion to visit the offices of an attorney. His daughter has attended a private school in the east for the past two years. The attorney has endeavored to interest his daughter in coming to the University of Oklahoma. He had persuaded her to come down here and then came the announcement that a regiment had been removed. Now, his daughter will not come here. There is danger of a general attitude like that, if the people of Oklahoma feel that good faculty people are endangered and that inferior faculty members will be substituted for them."

"I am not interested in personalities, rather the principle at stake in this matter. I was a member of the legislature that enacted this law. We did so to take the university out of 'practical politics.' We intended for the board of regents to be subject to removal in the manner of other state officers not subject to impeachment. We believed in going further than that. Not only did we believe that the board of regents should be protected from interference by any governor but also, from interference by any legislature. And it was because of that that we have worked these years for a constitutional amendment, removing the temptation from the legislature to tamper with the university. In it we state a policy and affirm a principle. In passing this resolution we need not criticize his excellency the governor nor laud Mr. Buttram. We are not interested in individuals or their fate. We are interested in the principle of keeping the university out of politics, however."

Mr. Talbert explained the provisions of the law. He said: "The act referred to