

# The Economic and Family Context of Philosophical Autobiography

Acting ‘As-If’ for American *Buddenbrooks*

Christine A. James<sup>\*</sup>

## Abstract

This paper addresses the project of philosophical autobiography, using two different perspectives. On the one hand, the societal, economic, and family contexts of William James are addressed, and connected a modern academic context of business ethics research, marketing and purchasing decision making, and the continuing financial crisis. The concepts of “stream of consciousness” and “acting as-if” are connected to recent literature on William James. On the other hand, the significance of family context, and the possible connection between the William James family and the author, is addressed through shared family narratives interspersed throughout the paper.

## Preamble

This is an experimental paper, a philosophical perspective on business ethics and public policy, using personal and familial autobiography. I teach Philosophy in a combined Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. “Religious Autobiography” is a growing subfield for Religious Studies scholars, and I decided to research how many philosophers have written a “Philosophical Autobiography” about themselves. Biographies of Philosophers are well-known, including Ray Monk’s excellent biographies of Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Autobiographies written by philosophers are more unusual. In my case, a possible family connection to William James provided a theoretical framework within which public ethics and private life can be interpreted.

## 1. Introduction

Thomas Mann’s novel, *Buddenbrooks: The Decline of a Family* (1901), is a philosophical autobiography of sorts. Thomas Mann is writing with reference to the Mann family, and the family patriarch is named Thomas Buddenbrook. He is

---

<sup>\*</sup> Professor, Valdosta State University, 1500 N. Patterson St., Valdosta, GA 31698-0050 USA.

the Buddenbrook who represents the bourgeois, middle-class lifestyle that has given the family its wealth. Thomas finds himself struggling with questions of life and death as he reads Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* (1818), looking at his son Hanno, who has interests that are more artistic than practical. The novel depicts the shifting fortunes and the decay of a family, a family that moves in just a few generations from a life of financial comfort and successful business, to a far less certain, artistic lifestyle.

In 2002, the journal *Utilitas* published "A Philosophical Autobiography" by R. M. Hare, distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oxford and the University of Florida at Gainesville. Hare shows a charming Socratic self-knowledge in the piece, ironically stating that "there was nothing in my family background to turn me into a philosopher" (Hare 2002: 272) just before explaining the emotional impact of the death of his mother in 1935, and the intervention of his kind uncles who took him to live at his maternal grandmother's mansion outside Basingstoke, Audleys Wood, and provided him with a quality education. As Julian Baggini (2002) notes in his research on philosophical autobiography, every philosopher's autobiography will inevitably be an "extended speech act of self-revelation" including layers of evidence of how their philosophical views began.

As philosophers write about their personal and theoretical development, the question of what kind of life is most recommended must be addressed. In Julian Shand's recent article in *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, "A Valuable and Meaningful Individual Life," he compares an individual life to a work of art, noting the importance of not being "bound by accidental circumstances and expectations." (Shand 2011: 75) This paper addresses some of these circumstances and expectations directly, reviewing the economic context of my family (distantly related to William James), and the circumstances of the business world that often require 'acting as-if.' The difficulty of living the best, most meaningful life and finding a vocation is explored through the difference between economic and artistic lives.

## **2. Prelude: Jameses in Albany**

My father, Gordon James, worked for Montgomery Ward for years, starting out as an order-filler in 1955, in the large Montgomery Ward building just outside his hometown, Albany, New York. Eventually he was promoted as a

senior executive to the Chicago headquarters of the company, each weekday he would take a 5:30 am train to the city in the morning and return on a 6 pm train at night. He raised four children on a modest salary, a salary that was cut in the 1980s during the first of many severe economic downturns. Montgomery Ward supported my father while he helped nurse my mother through breast cancer in the 1990s, then through its metastasis, and her death in 1999. He remained loyal and worked for the company until just before it went out of business in 2000, struggling under competition from big box stores like Walmart and internet sales. I was in college and graduate school at the time, reading William James, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Thomas Mann. The possibility that my family was related to William James was sometimes mentioned, but not seriously — although if we had been related to the William James family, it seemed we were on a *Buddenbrooks*-style trajectory. Thomas Mann's tale of a decline of a family that had once been prosperous in business, then over the generations shifted into the arts, and finally collapsed morally, physically, and emotionally under the stress of the changing societal context around them. I don't want to mislead anyone, there never was any money inherited, no explicit mention of us being related to those Jameses in any formally accepted sources. All we really knew was that the famous James family had also lived in Albany, New York for generations, and that the ancestor who "came over" to America was named Evan James, and his tombstone in Albany and his death certificate both mentioned proudly that he was a native of Cenarth, Wales.

### **3. On Philosophical Autobiography**

Relatively few philosophers have engaged in the process of philosophical autobiography. Perhaps the process seems contrary to the traditional Western philosophical project of being an intellectual, one who is disembodied and decontextualized, an anonymous thinking subject. Those philosophers who have engaged in philosophical reflection on their own life, background, or family history usually do so for a particular reason. Some philosophers will give personal stories to use as a specific thought experiment or a case study. This is the form of R. M. Hare's philosophical autobiography in the journal *Utilitas* (Hare 2002). Others have engaged in the process of philosophical autobiography because it illustrates the biases and inequities in the academy, as in *Singing in the Fire: Stories of Women in Philosophy* (Alcoff et al. 2003). Historical

philosophers in the canon who engaged in some autobiographical reflections received excellent attention from Shlomit Schuster in *The Philosopher's Autobiography: A Qualitative Study* (2003). Julian Baggini discusses philosophical autobiography in the work of Ray Monk, noting that any autobiography by a philosopher will unavoidably be philosophical, a form of “extended speech act of self-revelation” with explicit or implicit arguments in favor of a particular understanding of a causal chain of events (Baggini 2002). The self-revelation in this paper is of the latter type — an attempt to clearly explain the family and economic context that shapes one’s philosophical temperament.

#### **4. James Family History (Pre-History)**

A famous intellectual family of the American nineteenth century, the James family story often begins with William James coming to the United States from Kurish, Bailieborough, County Cavan, Ireland in 1789. The man who would be known as the first William James of Albany was born on a 25-acre tenant farm in Bailieborough, in 1771. The James family produced oats, potatoes, and flax for the making of Irish linen. William James made the most of the slim educational possibilities available to him in Ireland at that time, and “prided himself on his elegant script, and was mildly interested in reading literature. William had an educational push for intellectual betterment.” (Bailieborough.com) He was a diligent student, proud of his excellent formal script lettering, and he would become a leader of the business community of Albany, New York:

For twenty-three years William James was a storekeeper. Then he turned the management of his “commercial concerns” over to his son, Robert, and a relative named Thomas James. Robert, however, died in 1821, and the trading business was liquidated. The James fortune was by now well established by this shrewd Irishman, who may have had a Welsh strain in his blood, and William James was looked upon by his fellow citizens of Albany as one deeply entrenched in the business life of that thriving river port.” (Schriftgiesser 1940: 107)

By 1823, William James was elected chairman of the Committee of Citizens of Albany, and he presented a keynote address at the opening of the eastern section of the Erie Canal when the first boat sailed through. When he addressed the crowd he said, “The canal is a work that sheds luster on the United States, bearing the stamp of the enterprising spirit and resolution which declared our Independence. With the perpetual example of despotism of wretchedness in the Old World before our eyes, we may look forward with a well-founded hope that neither tyrannical aristocracies nor intriguing demagogues can ever succeed in corrupting our citizens or blighting our liberties,” (Bailieborough.com) It remained to be seen how, when, and if the elder William James’s hope of escaping the corruption of tyrants and demagogues would be fulfilled. Most histories of the Jameses place the end of the intellectual era of the family at the death of his grandson, Henry James the novelist, in 1916.

The Thomas James relative mentioned in the family history is potentially the brother of my great-great grandfather Evan James. Their father was another William James, perhaps a Welsh cousin or second cousin to the William James of Ireland, on the census living in Cenarth, in west Wales in 1804, where the regions of Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion meet at the river Teifi and its tributary the Cych. The valley (the Glyn Cuch) is well-known in Literature of Wales as the place where, in the *Mabinogion*, ancient King Pwyll Pendefig Dyfed has his fateful meeting with Arawn, Lord of the Underworld. In traditional Welsh culture, boundary streams such as the Cych were thought of as portals to the underworld. Thomas was the second son of yet another “William James” who was the owner of the local public house and traveler’s inn. Mother Ann was the local baker. The eldest son, yet another “William James” would inherit the inn and remain in Wales; Thomas operated the flour mill across the main road (now the A484), and youngest son Evan would become the local schoolmaster.<sup>1</sup> Thomas left for America sometime around 1820, and Evan would follow him to America around 1846, just about the same time as the Treachery of the Blue Books.<sup>2</sup> This area of west Wales still has many Jameses,

---

<sup>1</sup> Apparently there is a history of trouble with one William James and a particular weir in the area. From the National Library of Wales Crime and Punishment records, [http://www.llgc.org.uk/php\\_ffeiliau/sf\\_results.php?co=All&from=1795&off\\_cat=11&off\\_co=All&to=1830&off=100](http://www.llgc.org.uk/php_ffeiliau/sf_results.php?co=All&from=1795&off_cat=11&off_co=All&to=1830&off=100) “Accused: William James; Parish: Cenarth; County: Carmarthen; Status: Mason; Offence: Destroying a weir or dam on the Teifi, the prosecutor's property. No indictment. Cf. no.26 in 4/831/1. Location and date Parish: Cenarth; County: Carmarthen; Date: 1808 Prosecutor John Hammet, esq. File number4/830/4 Document number 41.”

<sup>2</sup> This refers to the *Reports of the commissioners of enquiry into the state of education in Wales*

including Washington and Elma James who own a Gulf petrol station near the Cenarth bridge and mill, and their granddaughter Elin Angharad Forster, who creates websites for the BBC in Welsh and English.

Historians describe the first William James in Albany as a consummate leader and businessman who gave back to his community on a regular basis. He led a life of principle, he expected everyone to have a purpose and to work toward specific goals. Although this made his relationships with his sons a bit difficult at times, it made him a respected member of Albany society. Schriftgiesser wrote,

One can see Old Billy James going about the narrow Albany streets in his high hat and formal business attire, bowing reservedly to the lesser citizenry: attending to his affairs during a briskly regulated day: conferring with Mr. Van Rensselaer of whom he undoubtedly was a little jealous, or Governor De Witt Clinton, or his Irish friend Thomas Addis Emmet, Robert Emmet's son and the great orator of the day: or visiting New York City on business, a man of obvious means and dignified bearing, to whom the doors of banks or business houses were never closed. Assuredly a man of parts — widely respected, shrewd, generous to his family and the best charities, the true type of “merchant, banker and philanthropist” for which the American press, then as now, had reverence. He despised idleness and the other Puritan sins, but he did not believe virtue was its own reward. (Schriftgiesser 1940: 110)

The extended James family made good on the promise of philanthropy. The Thomas James who worked in the family business in the 1820s when the original business was liquidated had been specializing in flour milling, echoing his former life with the mill in Cenarth. His mill business in Albany gave him a secure lifestyle and enabled him to help in the Irish famine relief effort:

---

published in 1847. The enquiry was carried out by three English commissioners, R. R. W. Lingen, Jellynger C. Symons and H. R. Vaughan Johnson. The commissioners visited every part of Wales during 1846, collecting evidence and statistics. However, they spoke no Welsh and relied on information from witnesses, many of them Anglican clergymen at a time when Wales was a stronghold of Nonconformism. The commissioners often simply reported verbatim the prejudiced opinions of landowners and local Anglican clergy. The more bilious editorial attacks on Welsh culture mostly emanated from Commissioner Lingen. The Books remain an invaluable, although slanted, source of information on mid-19th century Welsh society.

A four person sub-committee headed by Thomas James, a prosperous flour merchant, was set up to coordinate the collection, storage and shipping of goods from Albany and its outlying areas . . . . By September of 1847, a total of \$25,354.82 had been collected for Ireland from Albany and its outlying areas. (Albany Committee, 1847)

The Albany Institute of History and Art Library maintains records of his involvement in the Albany Committee for the Relief of Ireland, a group that quickly raised more than \$40,000, an impressive amount in the 1840's.

## 5. Streams of Consciousness, and Revenue

It is striking that these early Jameses had the courage to go to a new country and build up new businesses, facing personal struggles along the way. They were a part of the America depicted in Thomas Cole's *The Oxbow* of 1836, a combination of wild frontier and rampant growth; the notion that the self-awareness of the individual constantly reconstructs itself just as the physical world is shaped and reshaped by the action of a stream. This stream of consciousness is not passive, it is a stream that reshapes itself and changes as does the oxbow. The notion of James' stream of consciousness is the topic of one of my favorite, perhaps even telling and meaningful, typos in James scholarship from a 2008 article by Jaan Valsiner:

In his effort to make sense of the flow of human subjective creativity, James introduced the notion of stream to characterize its nature: Consciousness . . . does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; **it lows**. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, of subjective life. (James 1890, p. 239) Yet — as is known from the time of Heraclitus — it is not possible to step into the same river twice. And the river is not a homogeneous flow similar to that of water, but filled with affective

and cognitive phenomena of inherent ambivalence (Rudolph 2006). Furthermore, the stream of subjective flow entails the creation of hierarchical order — higher level Gestalts (von Ehrenfels 1890, 1932 — see von Ehrenfels 1988a, b) or semiotic regulators (Valsiner 2001, 2005). These are features that the river/stream metaphor of James does not include — no river can be seen to construct its own dams to limit its flow, nor invent barges to float on it. (Valsiner 2008: 2 *as published with typographical error, highlighted, should be “flows”*)

If consciousness “lows” it certainly makes sense in a variety of religious experiences. (It calls to mind sacred cows.) Having a sense of humor is, I believe, absolutely essential to the project of shaping one’s consciousness and one’s attitudes. As James notes in *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), “Truth is made, just as health, wealth, and strength are made, in the course of experience.”<sup>3</sup> This is an image of the self as shaper of experience, engaged in creating their world as part of an ongoing battle. Trygve Throntveit notes that William James described the mind as a “fighter for ends,” and thinking, a “moral act.” Later, in “The Will to Believe” (1896), James argued that when evidence is inconclusive, belief might create conditions in which hypotheses could be verified and potential goods realized — or lost. (Throntveit 2011: 255)

The beliefs of members of the merchant middle class in 19<sup>th</sup> century America were clearly set against a background of numerous ethical problems and political issues. James is not discussed very often as a “business ethicist,” and as recently as 2009, scholars like Scott Stroud shared with the academic community that more should be done on what James can tell us about substantive topics in business ethics. (Stroud 2009: 378) James did speak out on a variety of political issues, making “. . . impassioned pronouncements on lynching, industrial conflict, imperialist expansion” but most scholars have given them short shrift, noting that James expresses “a particularly cosmopolitan but otherwise unremarkable American liberalism . . . .” (Throntveit 2011: 256)<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, James concluded that truth was not just reflected in the consequences of conduct but shaped by them: “Truth is *made*,” he wrote, “just as health, wealth, and strength are made, in the course of experience.” (Throntveit 2011: 255 quoting William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1907), 46, 50, 218.)

<sup>4</sup> As explained by Throntveit, “e.g. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in*



The reasons for this charge of “unremarkable” no doubt relate to a combination of some of the major concepts in James’s work: he was a radical empiricist, he held that the universe is pluralistic, that the reality we can access is constantly changing and that human consciousness is constantly changing. In terms of ethical principles, James felt that these must emerge “organically” from individuals’ collective experience in deciding moral questions.<sup>5</sup> (Throntveit 2011: 257) This is described by James as an “organic” form of social change, with revolutionary thought and action potentially bearing prosperous fruit.<sup>6</sup> Experience is the teacher of all, and communication and change over time are unavoidable and necessary — like the stream in Thomas Cole’s oxbow the landscape is always shifting even if we do not realize it, and we are also always changing, growing as creators of the moral law. Even though this might sound too relativistic or too indeterminate, James does include a normative and prescriptive element in his work, through his meliorism. He sees the project of his philosophical work as trying to reconstruct and change existing realities for the better, and he notes that it is the human mind that can engage in this reconstructive process: “The vital points of James’s work (are) melioristic, or aimed at improving actual lived human experience.” (Stroud 2009: 379, 394) This notion of James’s meliorism is another aspect of his philosophy that proved to have mass appeal. Blogger Diane Cameron, of dianecameron.info, cheerfully notes that without William James and his early notions of self-improvement and therapeutic practices on consciousness, there would never have been Oprah!

---

*America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001). James’s ethics is typically ignored by scholars: the most recent intellectual biography, Robert D. Richardson’s *William James in the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), devotes a few scattered pages to the subject. Ralph Barton Perry’s *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935) did attend closely to James’s ethics, but overemphasized James’s individualism, ignored his tragic sensibility, and inadvertently reinforced views of James resembling Menand’s. Among James’s biographers, Ralph Barton Perry attended most closely to his ethics in *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935).”

<sup>5</sup> A self-proclaimed “radical empiricist,” James held that the universe is pluralistic, and the only reality accessible to human minds is constantly changing — not least through the ceaseless flux of human consciousness, a fact as natural and consequential as any other. This blurring of subject-object distinctions scandalized contemporaries. (Throntveit 2011: 257)

<sup>6</sup> “Revolutionary thought or action may bear prosperous fruit.” Still, such fruit is harvested “only through the aid of the experience of other men,” and its value determined the same way. James offered this organic account of social change as early as 1880, when he explained the relationship between “Great Men and Their Environment” in Darwinian terms, with human intelligence the major selective pressure. The innovative socio-political perspectives of “great men,” he argued, are spontaneous variations of social thought, which the community’s aggregate judgments either allow to propagate or reject as maladapted to its needs.” (Throntveit 2011: 272)

Scott Stroud expands on James in a more scholarly sense, describing “orientational meliorism” as “the concerted effort to change one’s mental attitude or orientation toward activity, self, or world such that her experience is improved.” (Stroud 2009: 379)

## 6. Business Ethics: Meliorism vs. *Kanban*

There is an inherent tension between the concerted effort of meliorism and habits of thinking (which might be also known as “best practices”). James himself realized that there are stumbling blocks on the way to a better and unblocked understanding of the unified, pluralistic, un-block universe he described.<sup>7</sup> One such serious problem is that there are orientations “toward activity that are driven by mere habit, or by ideals that have become habituated.” (Stroud 2009: 379) Habits of consumers and purchasers and merchandisers are one of the causes of the current economic situation we find ourselves in at the present time. Consider for a moment the habit of seeking profits and cutting the costs of production, especially to maximize profits for shareholders of corporations. This particular habit of thinking created situations where cheap goods were stocked and sold by big box retailers, and as a result, production lines moved to other countries, and Americans who used to have secure manufacturing jobs were put out of work. The profit motive, and the motive to create increasingly efficient streams of supply and production, might have sounded perfectly legitimate at a certain point in our history. But consider the case of Walmart adopting the practices of “*kanban*” lean resource management.

Each night at midnight, Walmart computers generate automatic update reports about what needs to be restocked, what supplies need to be repurchased and remerchandised, what items need to be recreated on foreign production lines. The instant feedback guarantees that consumers will have a steady supply of inexpensive items to purchase, and in-store marketing practices lure consumers

---

<sup>7</sup> An even more positive stance is taken by James in his latest work *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909). In this work, he arrives at the conclusion that pieces of evidence garnered from different fields, from psychology, from “psychic research,” and from religious experience, purely theoretically speaking, lend remarkably high probability to the general worldview expressing itself in the “religious hypothesis,” i.e. the doctrine concerning higher forms of consciousness, a spiritual sphere, in which we, without knowing it, move ourselves — like our dogs and cats move themselves within our human sphere, and to which we relate just like they relate to us. As can be seen from the title (“pluralistic universe”), James lays out his philosophy most proximally as the opposite of monism, which aims at viewing the world as unity, one enormous block (“a block universe”). (Kalia 1912: 144)

into specific spending patterns and habits. What the consumers may not realize is that their spending habits are actually having a negative effect on domestic production, and creating a “service economy” in which they no longer make or produce or invent new items. The societal good of these habits is clearly debatable. In James’s moral system, he insists on qualitative distinctions among demands<sup>8</sup> and a connection and consistency between our ideals and our actions. It must strike us as sadly amusing that a jingoistic American consumer, with “proud to be an American” ideals, makes economic decisions that disadvantage the very country in which they take so much pride.

My own introduction to *kanban* practices came at the request of my oldest brother, Gordon. Gordon worked in manufacturing, purchasing, and line merchandising in the auto parts industry, literally the little nuts and bolts that go into making cars. The company where he worked, starting in his 20s, was aptly named “Kar Products.” After working at Kar from 1976 until 2003, he was laid off at the age of 46 when the company was dissolved. He is now 54. Finding new work has been a difficult process of stringing together a succession of 6-month temporary positions, as American manufacturing has suffered greatly in the last decade. When we hear the media discussing whether or not the government will extend unemployment benefits, my brother is one of those who have been affected by those decisions on three separate occasions in the last seven years. He asked me to buy him books on *kanban* for his last birthday, he wanted to keep up to date with it in hopes of improving his chances at getting another job.

Stories such as this cannot merely be another story of the decline of a *Buddenbrooks* declining family; and if the recent actions of Occupy Wall Street are any indication, the majority of us feel like we are less secure than past generations in the context of corporate political power. There seems to be something wrong in how we as a society are shaping, understanding, and acting on our ideals and values. James’s ethics were not a fixed program, but an *ideal* of private and public interests converging — an ideal derived from experience,

---

<sup>8</sup> But it was precisely because James abjured closed moral systems, insisted on qualitative distinctions among demands, considered particular ideas and acts the subject of moral judgments, and entertained but did not assume the existence of a supernatural authority, that he succeeded in articulating a pragmatist ethics — one reflecting the genetic conception of truth and radical-empiricist view of experience he thought modern science, common sense, and the variety of human ideals dictated. This method for integrating belief and action in a dynamic environment was an ethics in the most fundamental sense: a practical guide to conduct proceeding from an apprehension of the good. (Throntveit 2011: 259)

constantly mindful of the terms and consequences of its own realization.<sup>9</sup> In James's view, it was an empirical fact that all individuals have unique ideals, requiring cooperation or acquiescence from other individuals for realization. Consequently all individuals impose obligations upon others. The *practical* validity of the ideals one holds could only be established as their consequences were judged by the community. This is dubbed the "ethical republic" by James, an ongoing discussion<sup>10</sup> and evaluation of values and ideals, tempered by respect for personal freedom:

In short, while *an* ethical republic was a dependable fact of experience, *the* ethical republic of each day depended upon its members' interventions and interactions in it. The purpose of ethics was to help people reflect upon, test, and revise their freely embraced ideals to accord with the republican reality of moral life, while also helping them alter that reality to accommodate as many ideals as possible. For these reasons, some of the next generation's foremost champions of progressive social politics embraced James's vision, making his ethical republic their model for a nation

---

<sup>9</sup> Ethics, for James, is the process of deciding which of these free yet imperative moral ideas — or better ideals, given their prospective nature — should be channeled into action, and how. For a pragmatist, a key to this process is clarifying the meaning and probable consequences of ideals before committing to their realization. That requires clarifying the meaning of "good" itself, or answering what James called moral philosophy's "metaphysical question." Applying what he later termed the "pragmatic method" to that question in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," James determined that in any scenario, involving any number of moral beings, the consequence of conceiving something as good is to lay an obligation upon someone to realize it, even if that someone is only the conceiver of that good. Moreover, James argued that all obligations correspond to concrete, personal demands that certain circumstances obtain over others; contrary to Kantian formulas, there can be no obligation to abstract principles divorced from specific consequences. From a pragmatist perspective, therefore, "we see not only that without a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation, but that there is some obligation wherever there is a claim." This dictum answered James's metaphysical question, for if goods had no existence — or meaning — beyond the demands they made upon living minds, then demand and obligation to the good were "coextensive." In other words, James says in the *Will to Believe*, "the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand" — demand not just for pleasure, but "anything under the sun." The origins and meaning of moral ideas, therefore, were inextricable, enmeshed in the individual minds comprising the ethical republic. Accordingly, equality of opportunity was a motto of the republic: if all moral ideas are subjective and imperative, all deserve translation into whatever action best meets the demand they create. (Throntveit 2011: 266)

<sup>10</sup> James believed the sole principle of ethics is discussion to determine relations of "authority" and "submission" among specific claims, while the sole purpose of moral philosophy is to make such discussion as widely satisfactory and respectful of personal freedom as possible. (Throntveit 2011: 260)

constantly perfecting unity by encouraging each member to act, in W. E. B. Du Bois's words, as "a coworker in the kingdom of culture."<sup>11</sup> (Throntveit 2011: 259)

Du Bois's phrase "coworker in the kingdom of culture" is quite prescient, since the status of the American workforce would become one of the major issues our society would face; both in the context of the industrial revolution of the 1900s, to the economic decline of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The struggle for civil discourse in this context is disheartening. James himself realized that this would be a problem. Even though he would consistently show regard for individual autonomy, he would frequently insist "on the community's right to overrule minority sentiment when deliberation fails and action cannot be postponed." (Throntveit 2011: 260) James knew that orderly change in society was needed, and would in times of serious crisis, have to be imposed.

## **7. Vocational Integrity in Economic Disharmony**

In the case of the individual worker, James gives explicit direction on how to cultivate the best possible relationship between employees and their vocation. "James shows us how ideals can be important insofar as they unify the worker with her work activity, thereby instantiating a sort of *experiential integrity* or oneness between two vital (and overlooked) parts of work experience . . . to instill meaning and unity between an agent and her work activity as well as among a variety of activities over time." (Stroud 2009, 379, 396) James knew that the attitudes and ideals of the American workforce would have a direct connection to the future of the country. Even though he had been the grandson of a merchant whose fortune was said to rival John Jacob Astor's, he knew that individuals need to feel their work has a purpose and that they are enacting their own ideals and purposes even as they work.

The vital aspect that James emphasizes — the integration of the worker into the work activity . . . a wholeness and systematicity

---

<sup>11</sup> As explained by Throntveit, W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), page 4. A recent overview of James's influence on American social thought is James T. Kloppenberg, "James's Pragmatism and American Culture, 1907–2007," in *100 Years of Pragmatism: William James's Revolutionary Philosophy*, ed. John J. Stuhr (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010): 7-40.

among one's virtues or principles . . . the role that certain orientations in the individual play in facilitating a unity in her action and experience . . . . What sort of concrete ideal or subjective orientation to activity will enhance one's absorption in the activity of the present? What sort of orientation fosters the integration of agent and act in work activity? James frequently invoked two related classes of ideals — religious ideals and strenuous “moral fight” ideals. Often these are intertwined . . . fostering a meliorative engagement with the present that is constitutive of the process of moral cultivation. (Stroud 2009: 390-391)

Integration and integrity are the key terms to bring James's notion of work activity into focus. The energy and attention of the worker is directly contributed to current activity, without the wish to be somewhere else, or do something else — in other words, it truly is doing what you love. Stroud gives a counterexample in his interpretation of James on work as well: “What is not an instance of integrity is any agent acting with an ideal or orientation that fractures and distracts energy and attention from the present activity. Working with the idea that life begins at quitting time does exactly this. The . . . integration between worker and work activity thus becomes a vital ethical concern.” (Stroud 2009, 392)

Many of us find ourselves in unhappy work situations, or doing jobs we dislike because it is necessary. One can argue that the banking industry, sub-prime mortgages, and student loans are all a way to lock a working populace into jobs and make them feel desperately, deeply dependent on their jobs. What James is saying is that the world would be better, production would be better, workers attitudes and health would be better, if the workers were able to do what they love and integrate their beliefs, their ideals with their work.

This notion in James makes me think of my other older brother, Greg. He is the sibling I think bears the most resemblance to the famous Jameses, especially William. Greg played the drums ever since he was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and he loves music. He had a massive record collection, and thanks to him I know bands and lyrics from the 60s to the present. He now works as a musical instrument supply representative for schools. He is one of the people who encourage grade school students to rent their first musical instruments by doing demonstration shows at the beginning of every school year, and he meets with school band directors

ordering new instruments and repairing old instruments on a weekly basis covering a wide territory in Illinois driving by van every weekday. His wife Jen is a band director he met on his rounds. Greg could have ended up in an office position doing something not related to music. But he has a position where his ideals and his values are fully integrated into what he does for a profession. He truly has a vocation, he has integrity in both the colloquial ethical meaning and the “this job goes with my values” meaning. The only source of stress — the worry that as school budgets are cut, programs in arts and music are often cut as well. While my brother Gordon struggled with a business framework for his vocation in difficult economic times, my brother Greg was able to embrace a life closely connected to the arts. Perhaps we haven’t really been *Buddenbrooks* after all.

In considering the best kind of life and the possibility of happiness, James argued that our intellectual approach to ethical problems must involve a method, a revisable procedure for making moral judgments. This method “promises to reconcile freedom and obligation in ongoing action, even though the flux of experience precludes certainty about the rightness or consequences of moral decisions. Indeed, though the plasticity of reality presents new and frustrating “enigmas” each moment, it also reveals the universe as potentially ‘self-reparative’ through us . . . .” (Throntveit 2011: 261) To be able to communicate effectively on moral and ethical issues, one must first understand the differences in values and ideals that exist among people. This is what James called “the psychological question,” “understanding the origins of the moral ideas populating people’s minds, and what that etiology reveals about the source of moral authority . . . .” (Throntveit 2011: 261) I am a professor in a combined Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, a context where understanding the religious and ethical assumptions of my students is important. The administrators I know refer to this as “meeting the students where they live,” understanding what motivates their hearts and minds. The James view on these divergent beliefs and ideas is a healthy one: “Certain things are captivating and valuable to certain people, which is fine (and inescapable) for the pragmatist project according to James.” (Stroud 2009: 380) So, we must commit to “tolerate, respect, and indulge” other people “harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways,” and to pursue our own ideals “without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field.” The message here is inclusivity, the notion that there is room for a wide range of opinions and practices in a mature society.

So if I have a student who is engaged in religious practices that are unfamiliar or unappealing to me, I respect and indulge those practices, provided they do not harm anyone else (Snake handling? Drinking strychnine? Making chalk graffiti drawings on campus sidewalks the Monday after Easter that say “It’s Alive!”) Even when clashes of ideals occur, James gives us guidance on how to structure a positive victory, by doing justice to the vanquished party’s ideals:

‘Since victory and defeat there must be,’ he concluded, ‘the victory to be philosophically prayed for is that of the more inclusive side — of the side which even in the hour of triumph will to some degree do justice to the ideals in which the vanquished party’s interests lay.’ Here, ideals clash like armies seeking victory with honor, sparing what foes they can and absorbing tractable survivors as full citizens of their empire. (Throntveit 2011: 269)

Yet the keyword above is “harmlessly”: tolerance rightly understood is a means of maximizing freedom, not a euphemism for ignoring consequences. This is tolerance with careful discernment. (Throntveit 2011: 273)

## **8. Discernment of Harms in Civil Contexts: Finns and *Sisu***

This element of discernment of “harm” is one that may get lost in understanding James’s pluralism, but it is important. James notes that “our “ancestral blindness” encourages us to mindlessly forget the multitude of ways of experiencing the world and to not ask the question of which way (or ideal) is *better*.” (Stroud 2009: 384) But, we must also be aware that ancestral blindness can cause us to forget which ideal may be *worse*. James notes that people with incommensurate objects of attention are inspired by “interests that possess certain characteristics that render them as ideals . . . uplift, and novelty.” (Stroud 2009: 380 and James 1992: 851, 861) It would seem, then, that we must encourage the best possible forms of “uplift and novelty” and discern qualitatively between practices that are harmful in the moment (the clear harm of forcing someone else to drink strychnine just because you do at your church) and those that are harmful over time (imposing values, legislation, making legal decisions that will have a detrimental effect on society over time.) This process of discerning qualitatively better pursuits of uplift and novelty can happen in



unexpected ways. We can be woken from them as someone might be woken from a bad habit: “. . . the push for change comes when one notices a problem, and James thinks this is no different in the case of interests or ideals; we often blindly follow them until something wakes us to their shortcomings.” (Stroud 2009: 384) Sometimes the process occurs when we are alone, and inspiration strikes after reflection. “The most characteristically moral judgments are in unprecedented cases and lonely emergencies, where no popular rhetorical maxims can avail, and the hidden oracle alone can speak.”<sup>12</sup> (James 1897: 190) One such hidden oracle might emerge in discussion via the internet. Consider public policy decisions in 2010 and 2011 in Indiana and Georgia, two states that removed cursive handwriting from their educational standards at every grade level. Since William James from Ireland was so proud of his script, I hope he would be heartened to know that there is a Facebook page devoted to trying to save the teaching of cursive in schools: <http://www.facebook.com/SaveCursive>.

What does this mean, then, for how a citizen of a democracy should act? Democracy, for James, signified a cultural commitment to communal inquiry, dependent on each individual’s faith that “common people can work out their salvation well enough together if left free to try . . . ongoing, deliberative discourse.” (Throntveit 2011: 270-1) This idea of common people working out their differences and engaging in discourse is very appealing. But as we know, the rules for civil discourse can often be difficult to codify, and they can be misused and misconstrued in many ways by the powerful and the elite. To remedy this, James asserted that democracy’s survival hinges on “civic courage”: “disciplined good temper” toward those adhering to democratic processes, and “fierce and merciless resentment” toward those subverting them when the outcome confounds their wishes. (Throntveit 2011: 274) Fierce and merciless resentment includes overall awareness of who has subverted the process of discourse and refusing to put up with their subversions, kind of like the finches Darwin described on the Galapagos islands who would always remember the species of birds that tried to steal their seeds, the “grudgers” remembering the “cheaters” and fighting them off.<sup>13</sup> But another interpretation,

---

<sup>12</sup> For more information on such moral judgments, see James’s “Moral Philosopher,” *Will to Believe*, pages 186-7 and 190; idem, *Principles 2*: 672.

<sup>13</sup> Tune in next week to “Days of our Islands” and read *Moral Sense and Moral Imperative: An Analysis of the Foundations of Morality and their Implications for Moral Theory* by Michaela Leigh Wooley, Masters Thesis, University of British Columbia, 2003: [https://circle.ubc.ca/bitstream/handle/2429/14627/ubc\\_2003-0599.pdf?sequence=1](https://circle.ubc.ca/bitstream/handle/2429/14627/ubc_2003-0599.pdf?sequence=1)

that is a bit more of a call to action, came from Finnish philosopher and Vienna Circle participant Eino Kaila in his 1912 article, “William James: The Philosopher of America”: The man of action treads forward, conquering new realms, because he dares something, whereas the passive spectator is a parasite, for even those things he has have been vanquished for his enjoyment by others. . . . All life, therefore, consists essentially in daring, ‘risking’. (Kalia 1912: 139) The Finns have a name for this daring attitude, it is *sisu*, a kind of life force, self-determination, spiritedness that gives you self-confidence to stand up for yourself and take an active hand in your own destiny. My sister Cheryl’s father in law was a Finn who had great *sisu*, his name was Walter Lampinen. He was a veteran and a survivor of the Depression. If we combine the notion of resentment for those who subvert the process of civil discourse with the daring risk-taking of *sisu*, we have a model for action, and an exemplar of participating in democracy in a way that is pluralistic, informed, inclusive yet discerning, daring, and unafraid. Perhaps in this skill lies our best hope, our most promising reason for optimism. Of course we need to remember that James acknowledged the possibility of indeterminacy and chance at play in the universe, and that he argued that we must meet this indeterminacy with the constant thought that the future can be other and better than the past has been. For American *Buddenbrooks* who are facing difficult circumstances in today’s world, William James’s optimism is highly recommended:

Make as great an uproar about chance as you please, I know that chance means pluralism and nothing more. If some of the members of the pluralism are bad, the philosophy of pluralism, whatever broad views it may deny me, permits me, at least, to turn to the other members with a clean breast of affection and an unsophisticated moral sense. And if I still wish to think of the world as a totality, it lets me feel that a world with a chance in it of being altogether good, even if the chance never come to pass, is better than a world with no such chance at all. That “chance” whose very notion I am exhorted and conjured to banish from my view of the future as the suicide of reason concerning it, that “chance” is — what? Just this, — the chance that in moral respects the future may be other and better than the past has been. (James 1884: 607)

## References

- Albany Committee for the Relief of Ireland Records, February 1847 — July 1848, Committee for the Relief of Ireland, CD 528. Albany Institute of History & Art Library, New York.  
<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/129902096/AlbanyIrish-Relief-CD-528>  
(Accessed November 2012).
- Alcoff, Linda Martin, Ed. (2003) *Singing in the Fire*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bailieborough.com, “Local History: William James, Patriarch of a Great Irish-American Family.”  
[http://www.bailieborough.com/history/details.php?History\\_ID=8](http://www.bailieborough.com/history/details.php?History_ID=8) (Accessed July 2011).
- Baggini, Julian (2002), “Philosophical Autobiography,” *Inquiry*, Sept. 2002, 45:3, pp.295-312.
- Cameron, Diane (2011), “There Would Be No Oprah Without William James,” published online immediately before the May 2011 celebration of the James Family of Albany at the State University of New York at Albany,  
[http://www.dianecameron.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/There\\_Would\\_Be\\_No\\_Oprah\\_Without\\_William\\_James.pdf](http://www.dianecameron.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/There_Would_Be_No_Oprah_Without_William_James.pdf) (Accessed November 2012).
- Hare, R. M. (2002), “A Philosophical Autobiography,” *Utilitas*, 14:3, pp.269-306.
- James, William (1884), “The Dilemma of Determinism,” in John J. McDermott, (Ed.), *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1977, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.587-609.
- James, William (1890), *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Henry Holt.
- James, William (1897), *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co.
- James, William (1907), *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, New York: Longmans, Green, and Co.
- James, William (1992), “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” in *William James: Writings 1978–1899*, New York: Library of America.
- James, William (1992), “What Makes a Life Significant,” in *William James: Writings 1978–1899*, New York: Library of America.
- Kalia, Eino (1912), “William James: The Philosopher of America,” originally

- published in *Uusi Suometar*, 8th and 12th September, 1912, translated by Heikki A. Kovalainen in *The Proceedings of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 47:2, 2011, pp.136-145.
- Mann, Thomas (1901), *Buddenbrooks: The Decline of a Family*, New York: Vintage, 1994.
- Rudolph, Lee (2006), "Spaces of Ambivalence: Qualitative Mathematics in the Modeling of Complex Fluid Phenomena," *Estudios de Psicología*, 27:1, pp.67-83.
- Schriftgiesser, Karl (1940), *Families*. New York: Howell, Soskin & Co.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur (1818), *The World as Will and Idea*. New York: Everyman's Library, 1995.
- Schuster, Shlomit (2003), *The Philosopher's Autobiography: A Qualitative Study*. New York: Praeger.
- Shand, John (2011), "A Valuable and Meaningful Individual Life," *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, 1:2, pp.74-83.
- Stroud, Scott R. (2009), "William James on Meliorism, Moral Ideals, and Business Ethics," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 45:3, pp.378-401.
- Throntveit, Trygve (2011), "William James's Ethical Republic," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 72:2, pp.255-277.
- Valsiner, Jaan (2001), "Process Structure of Semiotic Mediation in Human Development," *Human Development*, 44, pp.84-97.
- Valsiner, Jaan (2005), "Affektive Entwicklung im kulturellen Kontext," in J. B. Asendorpf (Ed.) *Enzyklopädie Der Psychologie. Soziale, Emotionale und Persönlichkeitsentwicklung*, 3rd ed., Göttingen: Hogrefe, pp.677-728.
- Valsiner, Jaan (2008), "Consciousness as a Process: From the Loneliness of William James to the Buzzing and Booming Voices of Contemporary Science," *Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science*, 42:1, pp.1-5.
- Valsiner, Jaan, & Rosa, Alberto, Eds. (2007), *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Von Ehrenfels, Christian (1988a), Über "Gestaltqualitäten," in R. Fabian (Ed.) *Psychologie, Ethik, Erkenntnistheorie*, München: Philosophia, pp.128-167.
- Von Ehrenfels, Christian (1988b), "On Gestalt Qualities," in B. Smith (Ed.) *Foundations of Gestalt Theory* (pp. 121-123). München: Philosophia. [Original German version: R. Fabian (Ed.) *Psychologie, Ethik, Erkenntnistheorie*, München: Philosophia, pp.128-167.]