

Review of *Damn Great Empires!: William James and the Politics of Pragmatism*, by Alexander Livingston. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 264 pp. \$30.95.

For those who are more familiar with William James's philosophical writings than the commentary that has grown up around them, it might be surprising to learn that James is seen as having little to offer political theory. The practical orientation of Jamesian pragmatism, along with the references to anarchists (and protofascists), imperialism, real-world suffering that cannot be philosophized away, and working-class life that are peppered throughout James's texts may not add up to a systematic theory of politics, but they certainly point toward intriguing possibilities or, at the very least, interesting connections. However, as Cornel West states in a representative comment, "In regard to politics, James has nothing profound or even provocative to say."<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Alexander Livingston's fascinating reexamination of James's work in *Damn Great Empires!: William James and the Politics of Pragmatism* asserts that "William James was an important and innovative theorist of politics."<sup>2</sup> Livingston posits that James's anti-imperialist arguments in the letters, editorials, and speeches collected in the *Nachlass* are not only an important part of James's philosophical corpus but also provide a critical lens through which we can fruitfully read the rest of James's work. Though Livingston is not the first to propose a political reexamination of James's thought, his careful and systematic book-length work provides one of the strongest and most sustained arguments for a historical reinterpretation of James as well as the beginnings of a

worked-out political orientation that can usefully diagnose, evaluate, and contribute to solving contemporary political problems.

Livingston's first chapter is an attempt to explain James's exclusion from contemporary political theory. Ralph Barton Perry's influential biography and scholarship on James portrays James's anti-imperialism as "a brief distraction from his more serious philosophical pursuits."<sup>3</sup> Livingston argues that one of Perry's chief motivations for portraying James's political pursuits as a temporary dalliance is an attempt to distance James and pragmatism from European fascism.<sup>4</sup> This worry will likely surprise contemporary readers, but as Livingston details in a brief but fascinating intellectual history, American flirtations with fascism at the beginning of the twentieth century were not uncommon.<sup>5</sup> James had an intellectual and mutually influential friendship with Giovanni Papini, and fascists, like Mussolini, cited James as an important influence on fascism's anti-intellectualism.<sup>6</sup> While Perry admits that pragmatism and fascism share a "gospel of action," James "valued energy and militancy . . . only in the service of liberal values."<sup>7</sup> This allowed Perry to bring James into the canon of Western liberalism, not necessarily as a liberal theorist, but as an "exemplar" of American liberalism.<sup>8</sup> Livingston sees this reading as not only more reflective of Perry's own political commitments than of James's but also as a pernicious distortion that gave support to political projects and institutions that likely would have horrified James.<sup>9</sup>

In the second chapter, instead of attending to the well-worn details of James's biography or psychology, Livingston proposes to "consider James as *psychologizing* politics itself."<sup>10</sup> Livingston claims that one of the key features of the historical period James lived in was an overwhelming sense of contingency. The feeling that the world lacks a true order, certainty, or foundation leads to "two seemingly contradictory postures of agency": "resignation" or "an inflated sense of sovereignty."<sup>11</sup> We can best see resignation in James's discussion of "bigness": the way in which the political, economic, and cultural forces of the gilded age were consolidating into overwhelmingly large institutions and structures.<sup>12</sup> The bigness of the age meant that individuals no longer felt there was a way for

their voices to be heard. In the face of America's growing imperial ambitions, the bigness of political problems could lead to even those with anti-imperialist sentiments acquiescing to the political order.<sup>13</sup> But a fatalist resignation is part of what feeds the very sense of bigness in the first place, so, as James puts it, "acquiescence becomes active partnership."<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, one can "recover one's individuality through [an] intimate attachment to reality" by finding or aspiring to "success" within that system.<sup>15</sup> In the latter half of the chapter, Livingston reads these ideas from James's letters back into his philosophical works. James, according to Livingston, finds similar cravings for authority in rationalist and monistic accounts of the world.<sup>16</sup> While this turn to James's more systematic work gives Livingston's account more theoretical weight, it is not always clear how these ideas relate back to Livingston's central thesis that James was an important political theorist. Livingston, unfortunately, also does not answer questions like: Is there an advantage to psychologizing politics? Does it lead us to insights that focusing on political and economic structures cannot provide? While a psychological theory of politics is interesting in its own right, James's own anti-imperialist aims and pragmatism's emphasis on the practical make these important questions for such an account.

The third chapter further psychologizes politics through a captivating analysis of "republican melancholia" in the gilded age.<sup>17</sup> Republican melancholia was a further reaction to the "disorienting experience of modern contingency" combined with the closing of the American frontier.<sup>18</sup> Livingston argues that the frontier had played a (morally) cleansing role in the American imagination as a space in which "men" could not only go to make themselves anew, but through which the country itself could continually regenerate its moral identity.<sup>19</sup> Livingston portrays the outward turn of American colonial expansion as a further attempt to master the modern sense of contingency, now that the frontier could no longer play such a role. James's strategy is not to deny this urge towards a "strenuous life" driven by republican melancholia—after all, it was an urge he was all too familiar with himself.<sup>20</sup> Instead, he argues for a spiritually strenuous life which is "available to anyone willing to

become strenuous . . . in the service of a moral ideal they wish to make a reality.”<sup>21</sup> What makes such an ideal worth striving for, for James, cannot be its absolute truth, as such an understanding would undermine his anti-monism and anti-bigness. Instead, it is the novelty of an ideal, within the lived experience of an individual, that makes it worth pursuing. But as Livingston rightly asks, does this give moral principles enough strength that someone could consider one worth dying for?<sup>22</sup>

Livingston attempts to answer this question affirmatively in his fourth chapter, mostly by focusing on a speech given by James commemorating a civil war memorial of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth Regiment. James sees a “lonely courage” in Shaw’s decision to lead a regiment made up of African American men.<sup>23</sup> The strenuousness of Shaw’s decisions does not necessarily come from the warfare itself but from Shaw’s willingness to “challenge Americans to trust their own judgement in the face of moral injustice.”<sup>24</sup> This spiritually strenuous life is not the result of the infamous “leap of faith” that James describes in “The Will to Believe” but is instead a “stuttering” conviction, one marked more by indecisiveness and doubt than faith and action.<sup>25</sup> Livingston argues that James’s stuttering account of Shaw’s life provides a way to see how “agency resides in more subtle and imperceptible connections with others than the language of sovereign decision presumes.”<sup>26</sup> While I am somewhat skeptical of the idea that we should see Shaw’s decision-making, as portrayed by Livingston, as the answer to the question at the end of the previous paragraph (after all, according to Livingston, Shaw’s decisions were sometimes a matter of delaying until the circumstances had changed so that a decision was no longer required),<sup>27</sup> I think this chapter provides a useful correcting force to those who read James’s work as an attribution of God-like powers to human individuals. Livingston’s reading of “The Will to Believe” here is subtle and sophisticated, and his placement of it in the context of James’s comments on the Civil War could provide lecturers who are teaching it to intro students with some useful tools for framing James’s lecture. While Livingston’s chapter itself is probably too

dense for an audience's first introduction to philosophy, it is not hard to imagine a skilled lecturer using it as background to connect James's work with concrete historical events and decision-making.

Livingston's fifth and final chapter is an overwhelming barrage of Greek mythology, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, a discussion of W.E.B. Du Bois's double consciousness, and an all too brief evaluation of Richard Rorty's patriotic neopragmatism. It is sometimes difficult to grasp the thread holding these ideas together, and even after reading the chapter several times, I continually found myself referring back to the first few pages of the chapter to remind myself of its organizing claims. The heart of the chapter is a reading of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, which Livingston uses to bring issues into James's philosophy that James himself was mostly naive about.<sup>28</sup> In other words, unlike many other works comparing James and Du Bois, Livingston's point is not to trace James's influence on Du Bois but instead to view Du Bois's work as a useful corrective to James's blindness on certain issues.<sup>29</sup> Despite Livingston's stated intentions, what follows is a mostly straightforward summary of Du Bois's work. Livingston claims that Du Bois provides a "historical and sociological depth missing from discussions of meliorism by both pragmatists and their critics," but it is far from clear whether we should see the resulting depth as a critique of James's political theory, an expansion of it, or both.<sup>30</sup> This leads to my main complaint about the final two chapters: While both chapters are full of interesting arguments and historical details, it is not easy to see how they connect to anti-imperialism as an organizing feature of James's political theory. While there certainly are implicit connections between the earlier and later chapters, Livingston leaves most of the work of drawing them out to the reader.

Livingston concludes his book with a brief discussion of the ways in which James's work can connect to contemporary political problems. Mostly focusing on the notion of "empire lite" as argued for by Michael Ignatieff and others, he argues that James provides an alternative version of international relations.<sup>31</sup> James's anti-imperialist writings help highlight the "injustice and violence of

American power that many are blind to” and imagines a “world of decentered, pluralistic, and autonomous communities of peoples” instead.<sup>32</sup> It is perhaps inappropriate to complain about the brevity of these connections in a work on the history of philosophy, but I found myself asking exactly what James’s work is adding to the conversation. After all, the violence and injustice of American imperialism is likely to be recognized in most works of political theory, and so is the imagining of a more just order in its stead. It’s not that Livingston’s James is incapable of answering these concerns, it’s that some discussion of them is required. If we are to take James seriously as a political theorist, some comparison with functioning political theory is necessary. Without this evaluative framework, the identification of injustices and proposal of alternatives risks becoming platitudinous.

While I have a few criticisms of *Damn Great Empires!*, many of my complaints come from a desire for more. Livingston’s analysis of James as a political thinker is both original and compelling in ways that make this reader want further development and expansion. I suspect that readers of James will find much to value in *Damn Great Empires!*, and Livingston’s careful exposition of James’s historical context, and his understanding of it, are a useful corrective to the many overly simplistic understandings of James’s work. The book is a pleasure to read and its writing style is accessible not only to academics, but to upper-level undergraduates and graduate students as well. Livingston’s claims are evocative and convincing enough that one is unlikely to find references to James’s lack of a political theory, like Cornel West’s earlier comment, in the future.

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**NOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> West, *American Evasion*, 60.

<sup>2</sup> Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Livingston, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Livingston, 33.

<sup>5</sup> Livingston, 34-5.

<sup>6</sup> Livingston, 35-40.

<sup>7</sup> Livingston, 42.

<sup>8</sup> Livingston, 49.

<sup>9</sup> Livingston, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Livingston, 54.

<sup>11</sup> Livingston, 55.

<sup>12</sup> See James, "To Sarah Wyman Whitman," *Correspondence*, 2: 546.

<sup>13</sup> Livingston, 57-62.

<sup>14</sup> James, "To Josephine Shaw Lowell," *Correspondence*, 10: 339.

<sup>15</sup> Livingston, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Livingston, 64-75.

<sup>17</sup> Livingston, 79.

<sup>18</sup> Livingston, 80.

<sup>19</sup> Livingston, 80-3.

<sup>20</sup> Livingston, 86-7.

<sup>21</sup> Livingston, 98.

<sup>22</sup> Livingston, 98.

<sup>23</sup> Livingston, 104.

<sup>24</sup> Livingston, 105.

<sup>25</sup> Livingston, 106.

<sup>26</sup> Livingston, 125.

- <sup>27</sup> Livingston, 116-7.
- <sup>28</sup> Livingston, 142-50.
- <sup>29</sup> Livingston, 130-1.
- <sup>30</sup> Livingston, 150.
- <sup>31</sup> Livingston, 162-3.
- <sup>32</sup> Livingston, 163.