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Pragmatism without Progress: Affect and Temporality in William James's Philosophy of Hope

Bonnie Sheehey

University of Oregon

bsheehey@uoregon.edu

Abstract

Philosophers and intellectual historians generally recognize pragmatism as a philosophy of progress. For many commentators, pragmatism is tied to a notion of progress through its embrace of meliorism – a forward-looking philosophy that places hope in the future as a site of possibility and improvement. I complicate the progressive image of hope generally attributed to pragmatism by outlining an alternative account of meliorism in the work of William James. By focusing on the affectivity and temporality of James's meliorism, I argue that James offers a non-progressivist version of hope that is affectively tempered by melancholy and oriented temporally toward the present.

Keywords

pragmatism – William James – hope – affect – temporality – progress

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“Progress,’ as I once heard William James remark, ‘is a terrible thing.’”¹

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1 Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, *The City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925), 108.

Introduction

Pragmatism has long been recognized as a philosophy of progress. Historians of pragmatism and pragmatist philosophers alike take progress as a necessary and unquestioned feature of pragmatism.² Historian John Patrick Diggins notes, “Pragmatism, which looks to the future to undo the past, remains the last philosophy in modern times to see progress growing out of the expansion of scientific intelligence alone.”³ Recent pragmatists like Richard Rorty and Philip Kitcher identify pragmatism with a belief in social and moral progress.⁴ Colin Koopman likewise associates pragmatism with the attitude of “improvement, progress, and betterment” in his rereading of the tradition from 2009.⁵ John Dewey serves as the oft-cited classical pragmatist figure inspiring the understanding of pragmatism as a progressive philosophy.⁶ For many of these thinkers, pragmatism is tied to a notion of progress through its embrace of

2 See David W. Marcell, *Progress and Pragmatism: James, Dewey, Beard, and the American Idea of Progress* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974); James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Christopher Lasch, *True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991); John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999); James Livingston, James, *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy: Rethinking the Politics of American History* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Robert B. Westbrook, *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Colin Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Richard J. Bernstein, *Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010); Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

3 Diggins, *Promise of Pragmatism*, 42.

4 Rorty, *Social Hope*, 27–28; Kitcher, *Ethical Project*, 210.

5 Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition*, 17.

6 The concept of progress and its connection to hope is central in the work of John Dewey. See John Dewey, “Progress” in *The Middle Works: 1899–1924*, Volume 10 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983). For a critique of Dewey’s notion of progress, see Max Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974). For an account of Dewey sympathetic to the tragic reading of hope on offer here, see Eddie S. Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) and Melvin L. Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

meliorism – a forward-looking philosophy motivated by a faith in the future as a site of improvement, possibility, and hope.⁷

Following a recent trend in the literature that complicates pragmatism's embrace of progress by showcasing its more tragic elements,⁸ this paper challenges pragmatism's progressivism by problematizing the unquestioned alliance between hope and progress. I complicate the progressive image of hope generally attributed to pragmatism by outlining an alternative account of meliorism in the work of William James. I argue that James's meliorism is significant insofar as it offers a non-progressivist version of hope that is affectively tempered by melancholy and oriented temporally toward the present.

My interpretation of James's non-progressive meliorism addresses a series of connected dangers associated with progressivism, where progressivism represents a philosophical allegiance to a progressive conception of time and history that also entails an attitude of optimism.⁹ That is, progressivism can be understood along two connected registers – a *temporal* register and an *affective* register. In terms of time, the concept of progress is linked to an idea of the future as an open horizon with limitless possibilities for improvement and development.¹⁰ Accompanying this progressive conception of time is an optimistic attitude that funds a confidence in the prospect of future progress.¹¹ The temporal and affective registers of progress are mutually reinforcing insofar as the progressive account of the future justifies an optimistic attitude toward that future, and insofar as the optimism or faith in progress justifies a progressive understanding of time.

In light of these dual features of progressivism, a range of scholars have recently pointed out the political dangers that arrive with a belief in progress.¹²

7 Marcell, *Progress and Pragmatism*, 190; Diggins, *Promise of Pragmatism*, 19; Livingston, *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy*, 12; Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition*, 17.

8 See especially Glaude, *Shade of Blue*; Rogers, *Undiscovered Dewey*; Alexander Livingston, *Damn Great Empires! William James and the Politics of Pragmatism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016); William J. Gavin, *William James in Focus: Willing to Believe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

9 I use progressivism to designate less a political movement in u.s. history than a broader, philosophical position that is marked by a belief in progress or attendant concepts like "development" or "improvement."

10 For a history of this temporal account of progress, see Koselleck, "'Progress' and 'Decline': An Appendix to the History of Two Concepts," in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

11 For a discussion of the link between optimism and progress, see Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!* and Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

12 In addition to the scholars discussed here, see Gurminder Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007);

As Alexander Livingston argues in *Damn Great Empires! William James and the Politics of Pragmatism*, the concept of progress poses a challenge for the contemporary struggle against imperialism just insofar as this concept invokes the rhetoric and agenda of American exceptionalism. Offering a rereading of James's anti-imperialism through his *Nachlass* writings, Livingston explores the political resources within James's work to combat the imperialist legacy of American expansionism and its nationalist narrative of perpetual progress. Like Livingston, Joseph Winters outlines the political dangers of progressivism while focusing on the grim underside of the notion of racial progress. For Winters, the concept of racial progress functions as a triumphant category that problematically reinforces and justifies the status quo while denying the tragic and painful features of racial suffering.¹³

While Livingston and Winters insightfully clarify some of progressivism's political dangers, I consider some of the *ethical* challenges facing progressivism in terms of its affective embrace of optimism as a moral mood and its problematic normative relation to time and history. The ethical dangers of progressivism can thus be understood in its affective and temporal features outlined above. These are: (1) an optimistic blindness to the tragic features of moral life – features that include suffering, regret, evil, failure, loss, and death; and (2) a willful forgetting of the past and its tragic elements in exchange for the potential of future progress. James's non-progressive meliorism helpfully elucidates and responds to these challenges by offering a conception of hope disentangled from the affect and time of progress. To clarify this alternative version of hope without progress and the promises it bears in light of the ethical dangers of progressivism, my argument proceeds in two connected steps.¹⁴

I first show how James inflects his meliorism affectively with a melancholic mood. Unlike progressivism's optimistic disavowal of tragedy, James's melancholic meliorism aims to countenance and cope with the tragic features of moral life. This insight stands in contrast to a dominant theme in commentary

James Tully, "On Law, Democracy and Imperialism" in *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, vol. 2, *Imperialism and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

13 Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 14–5.

14 These steps are connected for two reasons. First, they respond to the dual features of progressivism's affectivity and temporality discussed above. My contention is that it is necessary to disentangle hope from progress along the registers of affect and temporality since these features especially contribute to conceptions of progress. Second, they are connected just insofar as hope is understood as a *temporal affect* – as a mood, hope is already caught up with temporality inasmuch as it signals anticipation, aspiration, expectation, and desire.

on James, and pragmatism more broadly, that holds hope and melancholy as opposing affects.¹⁵

In section two, I use James's non-progressive meliorism to specify the ethical dangers that arrive with a progressive conception of time and history. Against the tendency in secondary scholarship to interpret James's meliorism through the lens of a progressive temporality,¹⁶ I argue that James's meliorism ought to be understood through the temporality of crisis, lest hope become confused with a concept of progress.

To conclude, I clarify some consequences that follow from this melancholic and non-progressivist vision of hope. James's non-idealized form of hope importantly provides us with an immanent, rather than a transcendental, conception of coping with limits and losses.

Melancholic Meliorism & the Tragedy of Moral Life

"Melancholy! gives truer values."¹⁷ Such a sentiment appears peculiar coming from a thinker of hopefulness like James, but it speaks to the particular affective inflection of his meliorism. While commentators on "Melancholy William"¹⁸ often narrate James's depressive years as a period that he eventually *overcomes* through the "determination" of his will, in this section I argue for a different relation between the melancholy that marks the time of James's "spiritual crisis," and the hopefulness that assumes the form of his so-called "recovery." As I

15 See Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1935); James William Anderson, "The Worst Kind of Melancholy" (*Harvard Library Bulletin* 30 (4): 369–386, 1982); Stanley Cavell, "What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?" in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Naoko Saito, "Transcending the Tragic with Dewey and Emerson: Beyond the Morse Boisvert Debate," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 39 (2) (2003): 275–292. An exception to the tendency to oppose hope and melancholy is Winters' *Hope Draped in Black*, though Winters locates resources outside of the pragmatist tradition to conceptualize what he calls "melancholic hope." See Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*.

16 See Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*; Livingston, *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy*; Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism & American Literary Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition*; Sarin Marchetti, *Ethics and Philosophical Critique in William James* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

17 See William James, *Manuscript Lectures*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 63; Anderson, "Worst Kind of Melancholy," 386.

18 Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 404.

will argue, it is not so much that James distances himself from the melancholy of his early period by turning to hope, but rather that his melancholy inflects and modulates his hopefulness in a way that allows him to *cope* with it. The inflection of hopefulness by the melancholic keeps James's meliorism affectively distinct from progressive optimism. This meliorism remains affectively divergent from the optimism of progressivism in its melancholic affirmation of the tragic realities of evil and loss without succumbing to a pessimistic position. That is, unlike pessimism, meliorism finds hope in the "moral chiaroscuro"¹⁹ of the world – a world marked by mixtures of loss and recovery, good and evil, despair and joy, limitation and possibility. The melancholic mood that inflects James's concept of hope offers what he calls a "genuine sense for the tragic."²⁰ By the tragic, James means a feature of life that is marked by contingent loss.²¹ This melancholic embrace of the tragic, I argue, operates as a necessary condition for James's meliorism.

Melancholy and hope are often treated as conflicting affects. The interpretation of melancholy and hopefulness as opposing affects generally undergirds the secondary literature on meliorism, as well as the biographical commentary on James's depressive period.²² Gerald E. Myers writes of James, "His life was not all melancholy, and his determination to see things optimistically was largely responsible for his better spirits."²³ Ralph Barton Perry refers to the "old doubts" of James's spiritual crisis as "dispelled" by his insight in Renouvier's concept of free will.²⁴ George Cotkin describes James as being "lifted out of his depression" by finding "tangible objects of desire."²⁵ Such examples of commentary tacitly assume that James's recovery took the form of ridding himself of his negative state through finding or encountering positive directions for his work and thought. No longer debilitated by doubt, James here appears to reach recovery by divesting himself of his melancholic disposition. While such

19 William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1956), 168.

20 William James, *Essays, Comments, and Reviews* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 18.

21 James's understanding of the tragic is existential rather than literary. It does not refer to the literary genre of tragedy so much as it describes something about life that has to do with loss in a variety of forms (death, regret, evil, disappearance) and the suffering that ensues from loss.

22 Op. cite n.15.

23 Myers, *William James*, 405.

24 Perry, *Thought and Character*, 323.

25 George Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 62.

narratives attempt to capture the reasons behind James's improved condition in the early 1870s, they often do so by opposing his depressive state with his achieved "healthy-minded"²⁶ state without adequately accounting for the endurance of the tragic and the productive function of the melancholic in his writings. As I argue here, James's meliorism not only complexifies the relation between melancholy and hopefulness; it also makes use of this relation to account for its specific non-redemptive limits.

Prior to (and following) the publication of *The Principles of Psychology*, James suffered from physical and psychical ailments that were diagnosed in the medical vocabulary of his time under the blanket category of "neurasthenia." Identified by neurologist George Miller Beard in 1869, neurasthenia was a disease of the nervous system that affected many 19th century Americans of James's social standing.²⁷ Neurasthenia drained a person's nervous energy, afflicting subjects with symptoms of anxiety, depression, neuralgia, fatigue, headaches, insomnia, and indecision. In an 1895 letter to George H. Howison, James describes himself as "a victim of neurasthenia and of the sense of hollowness and unreality that goes with it."²⁸ According to George Cotkin, neurasthenic doubt contributed to the "Hamletism" that haunted James's cultural milieu.²⁹ The image of Hamlet as a melancholic figure looms large in both James's biography and social context.³⁰ Indeed, James Livingston goes so far as to suggest that "the 'Hamletism' of late-nineteenth-century intellectuals can be taken almost literally in the case of William James – that Hamlet's situation is reproduced in James's breakdown of 1868–72."³¹ James's breakdown between the late 1860s and early 1870s is well-documented by secondary scholars.³² This period is one in which James was afflicted by severe suicidal depression and chronic melancholia. James famously relates one particular episode of melancholic crisis

26 Myers, *William James*, 413.

27 George Miller Beard, *American Nervousness, Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1881), 9.

28 William James, *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 8: 1895–1899 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 23.

29 Cotkin argues that by the late 19th century, Hamlet served as a "trope expressive of the dangers of the divided self, the individual so consumed by uncertainty that he or she was incapable of sustained or directed activity." See Cotkin, *William James*, 40.

30 Sigmund Freud was among the first to note Hamlet's significance as a melancholic figure. See Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" and Freud, "On Repression in Hamlet."

31 Livingston, *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy*, 119.

32 See Perry, *Thought and Character*; Myers, *William James*; Cotkin, *William James*; Livingston, *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy*; Louis Menand, "William James and the Case of the Epileptic Patient" in *American Studies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

in his 1901–1902 Gifford Lectures, later published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In his account of the “sick soul,” James masks his own breakdown in the form of a French melancholic.³³ He describes feeling a “horrible fear of my own existence” commingled with a recollection of an epileptic patient he encountered in an asylum. The epileptic used to sit all day “with his knees drawn up against his chin ... moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human.”³⁴ The image elicited in James an intense horror that he could suffer the same fate as the epileptic patient at any moment. He describes the transformation wrought by the recognition of his only momentary separation from this corpse-like patient: “After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation; and although the immediate feelings passed away, the experience has made me sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others ever since.”³⁵ Hence, James recounts his own harrowing encounter with what he calls “the worst kind of melancholy” that takes shape in the form of panic fear.³⁶

For James, the significance of melancholy has to do with its accompanying recognition of “evil facts” as constituting “a genuine portion of reality.”³⁷ This honest avowal of the tragic reality of evil is also what distinguishes the melancholy of the sick soul from the optimism of healthy-mindedness. As James notes, the healthy-minded method of “averting one’s attention from evil ... breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes.”³⁸ This is because the melancholic suffers the “grisly blood-freezing heart-palsying sensation” of evil intimately and intensely.³⁹ That is, the melancholic sick-soul does not simply conceptualize or intellectually perceive evil, but affectively registers it, undergoing its painful bodily effects in the process. According to James, the melancholic attention to the realities of sorrow, pain, and death contributes a more complete and inclusive religious system than its healthy-minded

33 James admits this to Frank Abauzit, the French translator of *Varieties* in 1904: “The document...is my own case – acute neurasthenic attack with phobia. I naturally disguised the *provenance!* So you may translate freely.” See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 508.

34 James, *Varieties*, 160.

35 *Ibid.* 160–161.

36 *Ibid.*, 159.

37 *Ibid.*, 163.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*, 162.

counterpart.⁴⁰ Hence, in his chapter on “The Divided Self,” James describes the redemptive sensibility of twice-born souls like John Bunyan and Leo Tolstoy as “two stories deep:” “They had drunk too deeply of the cup of bitterness ever to forget its taste, and their redemption is into a universe two stories deep. Each of them realized a good which broke the effective edge of his sadness; yet *the sadness was preserved as a minor ingredient* in the heart of the faith by which it was overcome.”⁴¹ The twice-born soul’s redemption is “two stories deep” because it bears the melancholic traces of the sick-soul’s affective encounter with evil. This evil cannot simply be forgotten by the twice-born soul lest she succumb to a position of cheerful healthy-mindedness. Rather, evil is here embraced as existing *alongside* good, generating a picture of the universe as a “moral chiaroscuro.”⁴² Furthermore, the affective realization of evil in the form of melancholy is “preserved as a minor ingredient” in the heart of hope.⁴³

James’s melancholic attention to the reality of evil gains a moral significance in his 1891 essay, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” Melancholy enters this text in the form of an avowal of the tragic losses that arrive with the messiness of moral life. According to Sarin Marchetti, this essay remains the “most misunderstood” of James’s writings, in part because of the standard view of James’s ethics as a version of utilitarian moral theory.⁴⁴ I follow Marchetti in reading James as offering a critical reflection on the limits of moral philosophy itself rather than advancing a moral philosophy of his own.⁴⁵ This interpretation underscores the melancholic tone assumed by James throughout the essay. James’s tone can be attributed to both showing the futility of moral theory as a foundationalist project and revealing the “tragic constitution” at the heart of our moral life.⁴⁶

In his criticism of dogmatic moral philosophy, James at once discloses the aim of the moral philosopher to establish a unity among actually existing ideals, and the very impossibility of achieving that aim in the midst of the messy dilemmas of concrete moral life. The problem with the dogmatic moral temper is that it “changes a growing, elastic, and continuous life into a superstitious

40 James writes, “The completest religions would therefore seem to be those in which the pessimistic elements are best developed.” James, *Varieties*, 165.

41 *Ibid.*, 187. (Italics added).

42 James, “Dilemma of Determinism,” 168.

43 James, *Varieties*, 187.

44 Marchetti, *Ethics and Philosophical Critique*, 52.

45 *Ibid.*

46 William James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1956), 150.

system of relics and dead bones.”⁴⁷ Rather than contributing a moral theory to be counted among those already established like deontology or consequentialism, James shows the limits of moral philosophy in light of the utter complexity and travail of moral life.

James witnesses moral life as bearing a tragic constitution. Moral life depends for its existence on the conditions of human consciousness and the obligations, demands, claims, and ideals made by “living minds.”⁴⁸ Moral life is tragic because of the only partial fulfillment of our ideals in the squeeze of the actual. James laments, “The actually possible in this world is vastly narrower than all that is demanded; and there is always a *pinch* between the ideal and the actual which can only be got through by leaving part of the ideal behind.”⁴⁹ In the tragic reality of our moral life, the demands made on the part of our many ideals exceed the limit of what is actually possible in such a way that the ideal cannot wholly survive. James’s designation of the moral world as a “howling mob of desires” reveals the agonistic composition of our moral life whereby the clash of ideals competing for fulfillment requires “butchering” part of the ideal.⁵⁰

James describes the authoritative role assumed by “individual moralists” who order the butchering of moral ideals on the basis of some moral principle or rule. He argues that it is not the task of the moral philosopher to establish a system of moral metrics to adjudicate between the ideals to be destroyed and those to be kept. Rather, the struggle exists at the level of moral life itself, and the unavoidable loss at stake in the partial destruction of an ideal is decided through “actual experiment.”⁵¹ By turning actual cases of moral deliberation into a theoretical problem, moral philosophers forget the “tragically practical” nature of the moral life.⁵² In the thickets of moral life, we must weigh and measure the plural obligations emanating from our divergent ideals. For James, the dilemma that constitutes the confrontation of competing ideals exists as a “unique situation” whereby “the exact combination of ideals realized and ideals disappointed which each decision creates is always a universe without a precedent, and for which no adequate previous rule exists.”⁵³

47 Ibid., 158.

48 Ibid., 150.

49 Ibid., 153. (Italics in original).

50 Ibid., 155.

51 Ibid., 157.

52 Ibid., 153.

53 Ibid., 158.

Decision in the absence of certainty bears a tragic form. In the agonism of our moral life, we cannot determine in advance which ideals should be wounded and which saved. Neither can we ascertain which wounded ideals will return to haunt us with “interminable crops of consequential damages, compunctions, and regrets.”⁵⁴ Since every ideal cannot be totally saved in the pinch of the actual, we are forced to mutilate a part of the ideal in a lamentable situation that renders our ideals fragmentary rather than whole. James’s emphasis on the sorrowful reality of our moral life in this essay remains striking in the context of his meliorism, as it indicates the irrecoverable partial losses suffered by our ideals in the decisive squeeze of the actual. He exhorts, “See everywhere the struggle and the squeeze; and everlastingly the problem of how to make them less.”⁵⁵ Here melancholy becomes a productive moral mood for the philosopher insofar as it orients her attention to the realities of loss, damage, and regret – to the “*pinch* between the ideal and the actual” – that arrive with the messy complexity of moral life.⁵⁶

The melancholically inflected hope described by James in *Varieties* comes to the fore in his final *Pragmatism* lecture, delivered at Columbia University in January 1907. He opens the lecture with a distinction between two possible ways of interpreting a poem by Walt Whitman entitled “To You.” According to James, Whitman’s poem may be understood monistically, embodied practically in the attitudes of “quietism” and “indifferentism,” wherein the feeling of inward safety endures all happenstance dangers and defacements.⁵⁷ Alternately, the poem may be taken pluralistically, which entails an affirmation of the genuine, plural possibilities of yourself and others.⁵⁸ For James, the dilemma presented in these two interpretations turns on the idea of “the world’s possibilities” and the relative emotional security imparted by this category.⁵⁹

As James specifies it, meliorism stands between the moral attitudes of pessimism and optimism, which both rely on the security and certainty of such categories as impossibility and necessity in considering the status of the world’s salvation. Those who are pessimists consider the world’s salvation “impossible,” while optimists believe it “inevitable.”⁶⁰ Affectively, these two attitudes emit diverging responses in the form of despair and cheerfulness, yet they

54 Ibid., 159.

55 Ibid., 207.

56 Ibid., 153. (*Italics in original*).

57 William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 133.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., 135.

60 Ibid., 137.

practically converge insofar as they allow for the immobility of their subjects. What can we do after all, in a world that is either fated to be destroyed or destined to be saved? The problem with these moral attitudes, as James argues, is that they monistically reduce the world to the presence of either good or evil. Reducing the world to good, the optimist neglects evil or the “ineluctable noes and losses” that form a part of life.⁶¹ Conversely, the pessimistic reduction of the world to evil blinds one to the redemptive features that populate life in a diffuse fashion. Remaining blind to the simultaneous existence of good and evil, the pessimist and the optimist construe redemption in a totalizing all-or-nothing form. This absolutistic scheme affords security and relief to pessimists and optimists against “the bewildering accidents of so much finite experience.”⁶²

Meliorism differs from optimism and pessimism in three essential ways. First, unlike pessimism and optimism, meliorism treats salvation as a question of *possibility* rather than one of necessity. For the meliorist, redemption exists “as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become.”⁶³ Meliorism affirms the uncertainty and risk at the heart of the only possible salvation of the world. Second, meliorism encourages *action* unlike pessimism and optimism, which effectively leave subjects immobile in their necessary and totalizing treatment of salvation. The meliorist is called to act on the possibility of the world’s redemption so that it may become more probable. Furthermore, she places her faith in the deeds undertaken by her fellow companions who likewise risk their trust on only possible redemption. Hence, James writes that meliorism “is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done.”⁶⁴ Third, meliorism conceptualizes salvation in a *pluralistic* or *piecemeal* fashion rather than in the monistic all-form of total redemption or total damnation. One consequence of this is that the meliorist neither saccharinely embraces the total presence of good at evil’s expense nor despairingly wallows in the total presence of evil at good’s expense. Rather, the meliorist, like the twice-born soul, countenances the co-presence of good and evil such that redemption becomes “two stories deep.”⁶⁵ This piecemeal redemption involves a complex relation between what is lost and what is salvageable insofar as the meliorist melancholically affirms loss as “unatoned for” while hopefully embracing the possibility that some

61 Ibid., 141.

62 Ibid., 140.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 139.

65 James, *Varieties*, 187.

things may be saved.⁶⁶ As James writes, “When the cup is poured off, the dregs are left behind forever, but the possibility of what is poured off is sweet enough to accept.”⁶⁷ The meliorist is thus “willing that there should be real losses and real losers, and no total preservation of all that is.”⁶⁸

“Melancholy gives truer values” not only because melancholy is a necessary condition for James’s form of meliorism, but also because melancholy inflects the mood of hopefulness at the heart of meliorism. Hopefulness is held through melancholy, or rather *because of* melancholy. In this respect, James follows the insight imparted by his former student W.E.B. Du Bois in “The Sorrow Songs” chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois writes, “Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope – a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond.”⁶⁹

Regarding melancholy and hopefulness as opposing moods marks a grave misunderstanding of James’s meliorism because it neglects the productive work that melancholy performs for his hopefulness. Melancholy prevents meliorism from becoming optimism, be it in religious, political, or some other form. It gives truer values because it does not neglect or negate the reality of loss, but begins from that reality. Melancholy is not a state to be overcome according to James’s view, but is a mood responsive to loss in the same way in which hopefulness is a mood responsive to the possibility of recovery. For James, melancholy performs the work of revealing the traces of irredeemable loss. It contributes to the saving function of his meliorism by showing both what is not recoverable and that everything cannot be redeemed. In order to ascertain what may be saved, it is necessary to understand precisely what has been lost. James affirms both the occasions of actual loss and the possibilities that accompany a world of chance. Like the sorrow of Du Bois’s songs, melancholy breathes a hope for James.

Melancholic Meliorism & the Time of Crisis

Having shown how the melancholic modulates Jamesian meliorism, it is important to consider the temporality of this meliorism insofar as the maintenance

66 James, *Pragmatism*, 142.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994), 162.

of the melancholic elicits doubts about leading interpretations of his meliorism.⁷⁰ I show in this section that James's melancholic meliorism entails that we detach ourselves from progressive conceptions of time and history. The detachment of hope from a temporality of progress remains vital in light of the contemporary need for a form of meliorism that does not sacrifice either the past or the present for the sake of the future. I here follow James Baldwin's call for a form of hope responsive to "the moment" and unwilling to risk temporal deferment where hope is exclusively directed toward the future: "There is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment, the time is always now."⁷¹ James's melancholic meliorism helps us understand hope's temporality differently from its usual progressive depiction and the historical amnesia that it condones. He offers a form of hope responsive to the limits and possibilities of the moment.

James's melancholic meliorism bears a temporality distinct from the temporal account of consciousness given in *The Principles of Psychology*, where consciousness is conceived in terms of a flow or stream.⁷² His descriptions of meliorism in places like "The Dilemma of Determinism" and "Pragmatism and Religion" provide two possible ways of interpreting the temporality at work in his meliorism. The first interpretation involves an orientation toward the *future*, wherein progress is conceived as a contingent function of temporal transition. In this reading, meliorism remains tied to the temporality of progressivism. The second interpretation consists in a temporal orientation not directed toward the future, but to the *present*. Meliorism on this interpretation concerns the potentiality of the now-time of turning-places. In this temporal depiction, meliorism must be understood as responsive to those moments of crisis that interrupt the steady flow of time's continuous movement in a way that reconfigures the limits and possibilities of the present.

In order to clarify the specific temporality of James's melancholic meliorism, I first turn to the progressivist interpretation and show its deficiencies. I then provide an account of meliorism as responsive to crisis through a reinterpretation of James's own so-called 'spiritual crisis' in light of his discussion of "turning-places" from the last lecture of *Pragmatism*. Unlike those who read James's spiritual crisis from the prospective position of his future recovery,⁷³

70 Op. cite n.16.

71 James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 214.

72 See especially the "Stream of Consciousness" and "The Perception of Time" chapters in William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1950).

73 See Perry, *Thought and Character*; Myers, *William James*; Cotkin, *William James*; Anderson, "Worst Kind of Melancholy."

I propose interpreting his crisis from the temporal perspective of his present struggle in order to disclose how James conceptualizes hope temporally through an encounter with melancholy. It is this alternative temporality of meliorism, I argue, that allows James to disentangle hope from the time of progress.

Hopefulness is generally understood as a prospective attitude directed toward the future. In "The Dilemma of Determinism," James argues that the future is precisely what is at stake in the concept of chance at the heart of indeterminism. He writes, "That 'chance' is – what? Just this, – the chance that *in moral respects* the *future* may be other and better than the *past* has been. This is the only chance we have any motive for supposing to exist."⁷⁴ Etymologically linked to the Latin comparative adjective for 'better,' meliorism in a progressive form consists in a belief in the possibility that the future may be morally better than the past has been. Being prospectively oriented, meliorism admits of the possibility for progress by setting up a normative comparative relation between the future and the past.

If tied to a progressive understanding of the future, the hopeful mood of meliorism allows us to see the future as an open horizon wherein progress is conceived not deterministically as the necessary end or goal of history, but as something *contingently* realizable from the prospective position of the future. Meliorism becomes indistinguishable from a contingent form of progressivism insofar as it accepts the concept of progress as a possibility rather than a necessity. In this melioristic form of progressivism, progress refers to an experimental possibility that may be contingently achieved. Melioristic progressivism does not entail a rejection of the teleological function of progress so much as it transforms this function from a necessary end of universal history to a contingent goal achievable in time. Progress is thus not a function of universal history, but a function of contingent transition.⁷⁵

While the normative comparative form that James sets up between the past and the future allows us to give up a notion of progress as the necessary end of universal history, it nonetheless allows us to retain a concept of progress as a temporary ideal possible to achieve insofar as the future remains open to chance. The hopeful mood at work in contingent progressivism turns toward the future from the standpoint of transitive proximity. For James, the future is not what lies in the distance, temporally cut off from the present, but rather is what remains near to us insofar as time bears a continuous stream-like flow

74 James, "Dilemma of Determinism," 178–179.

75 For a discussion of progress and temporal transition, see Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition*, 166–170.

that passes from the past, through the present, and toward the future.⁷⁶ Understanding the future as not only a temporal continuation of the past, but as a moral improvement from the past, James provides us with a conception of time as both prospective and progressive. Meliorism as contingent progressivism thus suggests the possibility of temporally redeeming the past from the perspective of the future by improving it.

While contingent progressivism allows us to redeem the past through the future by offering a temporal account of the continuity between these temporal positions, it nonetheless requires a stabilization of the past such that the temporal change can be understood as an improvement. In order for progress to function as a possibility of the future, the past must be rendered stable so that we can see what we are progressing *from*. The temporality of progress assumes a linear trajectory, where the past marks that stable point from which we might continuously progress as we advance toward an open future.

Though temporal continuity prevents us from instituting a radical break with the past, the momentum of progress conceived under temporal transition potentially condones a form of forgetting such that we can forge a moral distance from the past. James himself offers a justification for a kind of forgetting in the last lecture of *Pragmatism*, “The way of escape from evil on this system is *not* by getting it ‘aufgehoben,’ or preserved in the whole as an element essential but ‘overcome.’ *It is by dropping it out altogether, throwing it overboard and getting beyond it, helping to make a universe that shall forget its very place and name.*”⁷⁷ James argues that the way we get ‘beyond’ evil is by contributing to the formation of a universe that will forget evil’s “very place and name.” In this picture, the possibility of the world’s improvement comes at the price of forgetting the world’s evils.

Contingent progressivism consists in a potential compensation of hopefulness for memory. While it allows us to not wholly turn our backs upon the past and its evils, it nonetheless makes it increasingly tempting to do so because of the momentum of progress that arrives with an open future. Though this form of meliorism regards progress as a function of temporal transition rather than of universal history, it potentially suffers from the same critique brought against progress as tied to universal history.⁷⁸ Walter Benjamin’s critical reflections on the temporal form of progress as it relates to history remain instructive in this regard. Following Benjamin’s depiction of Paul Klee’s “Angelus Novus”

76 James, *Principles of Psychology*, 606–607.

77 James, *Pragmatism*, 142.

78 For a recent critical discussion of progress in Frankfurt school critical theory, see Allen, *End of Progress*.

in his 1940 essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," if the momentum of progress makes us turn our backs upon the past, then the wreckage of history no longer remains visible to us. Unlike Benjamin's angel of history, the progressivist cannot countenance the wreckage, the debris, and the dead that lay at the feet of the angel who faces the past.⁷⁹ The potential of future progress thus comes at the expense of forgetting the losses of the past. Even if the temporal form of continuity prevents us from ever leaving the past behind, progress nonetheless serves as a possible justification for neglecting the ruins and evils of the past. There is a danger here of being transfixed by the image of what we may become such that we can no longer recognize where we have been. The brightness emanating from an open future might blind us to the dark figures arising from a haunting past. Contingent progressivism thus potentially opposes hopefulness and memory – we may hope, if only we do not remember, or we may remember, if only we do not hope. Here hope is severed from its affective ties to melancholy by taking loss as something to be forgotten and thereby overcome, rather than as something to be affirmed and coped with.

The progressive temporality just explained is insufficient as an interpretation of James's meliorism in light of the melancholic inflection of hope demonstrated in the first section of the paper. By denying the limits and intractable force of the past, progressivism severs hope affectively from melancholy. We thus need an alternative temporality for understanding James's meliorism, one that attends to the affective ties between hope and melancholy established earlier. The time of crisis provides just such a temporality insofar as it remains attentive to the limits of the moment and to the risk of loss.

The year 1870 famously marks the momentous period of James's so-called 'spiritual crisis.' In a frequently-quoted diary entry from 30 April 1870, James confesses, "I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second *Essais* and see no reason why his definition of free will – 'the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts' – need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present – until next year – that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will."⁸⁰ In their biographical commentaries on James, both Gerald Myers and Ralph Barton Perry describe this critical juncture in James's life as spurring the start of a "recovery"⁸¹ and a "permanent improvement."⁸² Though Myers dissents from Perry's designation of James's recovery as a philosophical

79 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 257–8.

80 See Myers, *William James*, 46; Perry, *Thought and Character*, 323.

81 Myers, *William James*, 47.

82 Perry, *Thought and Character*, 321.

one, he nonetheless admits the therapeutic role of Renouvier's concept of free will in helping James "overcome" his spiritual crisis.⁸³ While the debate over the moral and psychological efficacy of philosophical concepts remains intriguing in the context of James's life, this debate potentially obfuscates the tacit assumption on the part of Perry and Myers in articulating James's critical recovery as a kind of enduring antidote. The descriptions of James's crisis and eventual recuperation provided by Perry and Myers fail to attend to the complex temporality of James's entry. They both take the "yesterday" of James's confession to mark a break between the crisis of his past self and the belief in freedom James assumes for his present self. They thus understand James's recovery in terms of progress – this new self of James appears to be better than his previous one.

While such an understanding of James's recovery may be excavated from the diary entry of April 1870, the strange interruption of the future-tense conditional "until next year" in the middle of James's professed decision reveals the suspected temporary or abbreviated nature of his 'spiritual' experiment. This is not to say that James expects his experiment in belief to be cut short, but rather that time prevents him from sustaining the belief as a guaranteed cure from crisis. The point here is to not read James as instituting a break between his former melancholic self that suffered from the neurasthenic tendencies of indecision and his present hopeful self, delivered by belief and its index of action, but rather to see how James holds these moments of crisis and recovery in tension with one another. Recovery does not provide an antidote to the lasting effects of crisis, nor can it forestall the possibility of future crisis. By interpreting James's recovery from the aspect of progress, Perry and Myers neglect the peculiar temporal uncertainty expressed by James in his diary entry. Rather than focus on the temporality of James's recovery, we might turn our attention to the temporality of his crisis.

Following Wendy Brown, a crisis refers to a "threshold moment" whose urgency demands a call for action to "stave off catastrophe."⁸⁴ Brown cites the medical designation of crisis as indicating the crucial turning point in a disease.⁸⁵ Etymologically, 'crisis' is derived from the Greek noun *krisis*, which means "decision" or "judgment."⁸⁶ Crisis thus remains intimately linked with

83 Myers, *William James*, 47.

84 Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6–7.

85 Ibid.

86 See Reinhart Koselleck and Michaela W. Richter. "Crisis," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67:2 (2006): 357–400.

decision insofar as what is precisely to be decided in any crisis is the determination of a turning point.

James attends to the urgency of critical decisions at the close of "The Dilemma of Determinism." He describes the temporality of decision in a world trembling with chance and possibility as directed not toward the future, but toward the "*here and now*." James explains:

The great point is that the possibilities are really *here*. Whether it be we who solve them, or he working through us, at those soul-trying moments when fate's scales seem to quiver, and good snatches the victory from evil or shrinks nerveless from the fight, is of small account, so long as we admit that the issue is decided nowhere else than *here and now*.⁸⁷

By describing the reality of decision as taking place "here and now," James intimates the temporal index of uncertainty at stake in a world of chance. If critical junctures open the world to indeterminacy, they do so through the temporal force of the now.

Crisis rends the smooth flow of temporal continuity.⁸⁸ It interrupts the durational transition from the past to the future by opening the moment to the either-or form of deciding between two possibilities, "*either* of which, at a given instant, may become actual."⁸⁹ In his 1882 essay, "On Some Hegelisms," James explains the conflict that results when "mutually exclusive possibilities" "strive to possess themselves of the *same parts* of time, space, and ego."⁹⁰ The conflict of mutually exclusive possibilities gives rise to "an excess of possibility over actuality."⁹¹ Crisis here consists in the strife that ensues in a world where possibility exceeds actuality such that exclusive possibilities compete for the same parts of time. Thus, what is being decided in the force of now-time is between two possible futures vying for the same present. From the temporal perspective of his own spiritual crisis, James suffered from the uncertain reality of a crucial turning point whereby the alternative futures of hopeful recovery and depressive suicide competed as possibilities for his present, divided self.

87 James, "Dilemma of Determinism," 140.

88 In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James notes the interruptive temporality of crises that often precipitate religious conversions and counter-conversions. Such crises come on "suddenly" and explosively, occasioning a complete transformation of "the habitual centre [sic]" of one's "personal energy." See James, *Varieties*, 196.

89 James, "Dilemma of Determinism," 139.

90 James, "On Some Hegelisms" in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1956), 294.

91 *Ibid.*

Following the medical designation of crisis as a crucial turning point in a disease, James discusses his meliorism in terms of temporary “turning-places” in his final lecture from *Pragmatism*. He refers to the complementary conditions that help ground the concrete possibility of the world’s salvation as those “turning-places and growing-places” created by our responsive acts to chance. James asks, “Does our act then *create* the world’s salvation so far as it makes room for itself, so far as it leaps into the gap?”⁹² He affirms that we alter the world and ourselves by creating the kinds of selves we would like to become.⁹³ James clarifies two features that contribute to this world in the making, a world where “new being” can “come in local spots and patches.”⁹⁴ These two features consist in a gap opened by chance and an action that responds to this gap. Chance first creates a “gap,” an indeterminate, inchoate opening that finds its spatial and temporal referent in the opaque quality of the “here and now.” The gap opened by chance remains indeterminate until acted upon. Thus, according to James, chance calls for the response of our acts and actions, which then serve as the concrete growing-places of the world. Our acts decide the turning points of chance. When we think through James’s decisive affirmation of Renouvier’s concept of free-will in the context of his spiritual crisis, we can see how, even prior to any determination of progress, this action served the function of responding to the trembling quality of chance at the heart of his crisis.

The time of turning-places marks that critical point where the response of action is necessary, but its efficacy uncertain.⁹⁵ Hopefulness accompanies the uncertain response of action in times of crisis, but it cannot promise recovery, nor stave off future crisis. Hence James’s hesitant interruption from his diary entry regarding the temporary nature of his experimental act of belief.⁹⁶ How one responds to moments of crisis consists in a temporal gravity. It is not only our ideals, desires, and selves that are being decided in a critical juncture, but time and its unfolding. Crisis and its response through action mark turning-places in time; they make time’s durational continuity *turn*, not in a bid to reset

92 James, *Pragmatism* 138.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 This feature of crisis maps onto James’s description of forced options in “The Will to Believe.” Forced options are those that force a decision insofar as they make it impossible not to choose between one option or the other. See James, “The Will to Believe” in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1956), 3.

96 Hence, James notes in *Varieties* that forward movement often proceeds “by jerks and starts.” See James, *Varieties*, 206.

the time as in Friedrich Nietzsche's formulation of the "untimely,"⁹⁷ but to reorient its passages, flows, and spurts, and to offer up new temporal beginnings. Conceptualizing the temporality of crisis, James provides us with an account of chance as not only indexical of the future, but also as indexical of the present. In the time of crisis, it is precisely the *present* that remains indeterminate insofar as the alternative possibilities and their differing futures compete for the same now-time. Thus, what is at stake in this temporal interpretation of hope is a conception of time as a disruptive force that reconfigures the limits and possibilities of the present.

This differs from the progressive time discussed above insofar as it does not take the future as the primary temporal index of meliorism, nor does it condone a willful forgetting of the past to safeguard the possibility of progress. Unlike progressive time, the time of crisis relies upon temporal dissonance rather than temporal continuity. It entails an understanding of temporality from the standpoint of instability, conflict, and disruption that diverges from the impulse of stabilization at work in progressive time. Recall that progressive time stabilizes the past in order to render the future an improvement. The time of crisis reveals the present's volatility and is escorted by a form of hope responsive to this volatility and the risk of loss that comes with it. Unlike the type of hope that ties itself to the promise of progress, this hope is tethered to a melancholic acceptance "of loss as unatoned for."⁹⁸ This bears a consequence for how we understand temporal change and the kind of hopefulness that accompanies our conception of temporal change. Shall we understand temporal change from the perspective of stability in a way that allows us to overcome the tragic element of the past by securing our hope to the progress of the future? Or, shall we understand temporal change from the perspective of volatility in a way that allows us to cope with tragic limits precisely by remaining uncertain with regard to hope's possibilities in the challenge of the moment? As I have argued, James's meliorism responds affirmatively to this second option once it is understood affectively through the melancholic and temporally through the now-time of crisis.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for a non-progressivist version of James's concept of hope. By first showing how this tension plays out affectively, I have

97 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unfashionable Observations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 193–196.

98 James, *Pragmatism*, 142.

demonstrated that James's hope remains affectively tied to the melancholic. Following this melancholic conception of hope, I have shown how the temporal interpretation of meliorism in terms of crisis is the best James has to offer insofar as it does not sever melancholy from hope as the temporality of progressivism does. Conceptualizing hope from the perspective of crisis rather than progress entails that we turn our attention toward the present as a site of possibility and precarity. In describing a melancholic form of meliorism, I have aimed at troubling the unquestioned alliance between hope and progress generally ascribed to James's pragmatism, and to the philosophical tradition of pragmatism more broadly.

In decoupling hope and progress, I follow the lead of political theorist George Shulman who shows how hope can be both present and problematic if it is idealized. In his insightful essay from 2002, "Hope and American Politics," Shulman cautions against the idealization of hope he finds in Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and Social Hope*.⁹⁹ Shulman criticizes Rorty for taking hope to be an "unconditional good" rather than exploring "the ambiguity of hope."¹⁰⁰ He offers compelling reasons to worry over the idealization of hope, especially once hope is linked to a concept of historical progress. If we tether our hope to the ideal of progress, we risk denying the power of the past and the constitutive limits it imparts on us. This presents an ethical challenge insofar as a progressive conception of history condones a willful forgetting of the past for the sake of the future possibility of progress.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, when hope is tied to a concept of progress, hope becomes affectively indistinct from optimism. This can be understood as ethically problematic insofar as optimism blinds us to the tragic features of moral life that include loss, regret, failure, death, and the sorrowful butchering of ideals. When we fasten hope to progress, we risk transcendentalizing something that should remain immanent lest we refuse our limits and losses.

James's melancholic meliorism offers a non-idealized conception of hope. James's lament against the all-form of salvation held by absolutists is that it is too idyllic and too saccharine because it denies life's "dregs" – those "permanently drastic and bitter" remnants that invariably lie at the bottom of life's cup.¹⁰²

99 George Shulman, "Hope and American Politics," *Raritan* 21 (3) (2002): 1–19.

100 *Ibid.*, 1.

101 As scholars working on the epistemology of ignorance have shown, such active forgetting of the past is problematically linked to structural forms of oppression. See Charles Mills, "White Ignorance" and Linda Martin Alcoff, "Epistemologies of Ignorance Three Types," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

102 James, *Pragmatism*, 142. For more on James's concept of finitude and the limit this places on his meliorism, see Gavin, *William James in Focus* and Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!*

His meliorism is one that affirms the ambiguity of hope insofar as it is affectively tied with melancholy. Melancholy provides hope with constructive limits. It tinges hope with a breath of sorrow. Melancholy prevents hope from becoming an unconditional ideal that wrests us away from a confrontation with actuality. Hope expresses a possibility, but it is a possibility that is *of* this world. As an immanent possibility, it presents us with a way to *cope* with actuality without aiming to transcend or overcome it.

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