

# PRAGMATISM IN THE AMERICAS

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*Edited by*  
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**RELIGIOUSLY BINDING THE IMPERIAL SELF**  
*Classical Pragmatism's Call and Liberation*  
*Philosophy's Response*

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Alexander V. Stehn, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas–Pan American, received his Ph.D. from Pennsylvania State University in 2010. His primary interests are in ethics, social and political philosophy, and the philosophy of religion, especially as they appear at the intersections between U.S.-American pragmatism and Latin American liberation philosophy. He is currently working on a book on the philosophical uses of religion in the Americas.

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**E**duardo Mendieta has made an important gesture toward what we might call “Continental American philosophy” by announcing his hope that a future generation of scholars will begin to “develop, mature, and conceive a greater America that includes all of its subcontinents,” so that “we will begin to think of Latin American and North American philosophies as chapters in a larger geopolitical and world-historical school of American philosophy from this hemisphere.”<sup>1</sup> Under this banner, which I believe unites many of the reflections that constitute this volume, my essay examines the ethical and political significance of religion in classical American pragmatism and contemporary Latin American liberation philosophy, as exemplified in the works of William James and Enrique Dussel respectively.<sup>2</sup> These two American philosophical traditions share a metaphilosophy insofar as they take *experience* or *life* as both the fundamental point of departure and the necessary point of arrival for every philosophy worth its salt.<sup>3</sup> This in turn leads both traditions to have democratic political leanings, since it is *all* of human

experience or life *in general* (rather than the experience or life of philosophers and other social or economic elite) that must be taken seriously *theoretically* in order to improve things *practically*. And when it comes to the majority of humanity (as opposed to the majority of contemporary philosophers), the empirical facts suggest that religious experiences, practices, and commitments continue to play a very important role in life.<sup>4</sup>

My essay begins by providing a broad vision of how William James's *Principles of Psychology* and *The Will to Believe* were a two-pronged attempt to revive the self whose foundations had collapsed after the U.S. Civil War during what many intellectual historians have called "the spiritual crisis of the Gilded age."<sup>5</sup> Next, I explain how this revival was all too successful insofar as James inadvertently resurrected the imperial self, so that he was forced to adjust and develop his philosophy of religion in keeping with his anti-imperialism. James's mature philosophy of religion (as found in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *A Pluralistic Universe*) therefore articulates a vision of the radically ethical saint religiously bound to a decidedly pluralistic universe as constituting "the moral equivalent of war" (VRE, 292).<sup>6</sup> I evaluate James's philosophy of religion by comparing it to Enrique Dussel's psychological portrait of the imperialist ego, Dussel's attempt to religiously bind this ego, and the more radical philosophy that results. While arguing that James's pluralistic political commitments are imperiled by both his somewhat lopsided account of the self's religious *expansion* and the vagueness of his political vision, I suggest that Dussel's philosophy of liberation better theorizes the religious *contraction* of the self as a necessary part of ethical and political life and goes on to offer a more concrete and radically democratic philosophy. My overarching aim is to show how Dussel's liberation philosophy can help critically develop James's pragmatist claim that religion might provide a force for widely and positively transforming our ethical and political lives.<sup>7</sup>

*Late Nineteenth-Century Tedium Vitae and the Self of The Principles of Psychology*

James's *Principles* provides an account of the inner life of the individual that would soon come to lie at the center of the philosophy of religion articulated in *Varieties*. As George Cotkin has pointed out in a close contextual reading of James's life and work, many people after the U.S. Civil War were plagued by feelings of (in the words of the time) "moral sea-sickness" and "religious weightlessness."<sup>8</sup> *Principles* was written in a late nineteenth-century context when freedom of the will, individual possibility, and autonomy were all being called into question by the rise of scientism in an increasingly corporate, technocratic, and bureaucratic social order. Cotkin claims that people from James's social class in particular felt "hemmed into a world of increasing bureaucracy and ease; they confronted what James would designate as the *tedium vitae* [weariness of life]."<sup>9</sup> *Principles* met this context squarely by laying the foundations of the self upon physiology, describing human behavior as a series of reflex arcs. James unabashedly wrote a "psychology without a soul" using mechanical similes and metaphors: the brain was "like the great commutating switch-board at a central telephone station" (PP, 38), habit was the "enormous fly-wheel of society" (PP, 125), and so on. James redrew the self as utterly contingent and immanent while openly admitting that it was not one but many.

But even after resolutely facing these facts of selfhood in an increasingly scientific and industrial environment, James insisted that we could continue to speak of human agency. Reductionist, mechanical explanation only *almost* worked to explain human beings. It *did not* explain the way in which the stream of consciousness was *owned* and *interested*, selecting some things from the environment and ignoring others in order to create personal identity and sustain personal projects. No matter how muddled, the self was a felt center of interests, and contingent as the self might be, it felt its own power in shaping the reality it experienced. James's individual had the power

of positing an ideal organization of self and world and undertaking their realization through strenuous, heroic, and even warlike effort to escape from the *tedium vitae*. As Bennett Ramsey notes, “Mental functions became ‘weapons of the mind.’ Ideas were judged for their capacity to ‘draw blood.’ Self-power became the hero’s ability to stand his ground in a world of strenuous struggle and effort.”<sup>10</sup>

*Religion Unleashes the Strenuous Mood through The Will to Believe*

James took this heroic self and gave it a more explicitly *religious* mission in the essays that form *The Will to Believe*.<sup>11</sup> *Principles* had already given those suffering from the *tedium vitae* the chance to be heroes again, but James now endowed this task with a clear religious significance: the heroic self had to willfully bind itself to its ideal self and its ideal world in order to realize them.<sup>12</sup> In Cotkin’s words, *The Will to Believe* attempted to “expose the pretense of science, celebrate the ennobling powers of religious and moral belief, and combat both determinism and moral sea-sickness through an emphasis on voluntarism and heroic individualism as parts of historical and moral change.”<sup>13</sup> So not only did James restore the possibility for individual and social change, he placed them under the sign of God by arguing that there were good reasons for believing in the *possibility* that God needed our help, our “idealities and faithfulnesses,” to accomplish His own tasks and redeem the world (WB, 55). In fact, James even went on to speculate that God might “draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity” (WB, 55).

To summarize, the heroic religious task that James offered to his academic audience in *The Will to Believe* was to join God in saving oneself and the world at the same time through strenuous effort, thereby showing religious belief to be justified insofar as it proved uniquely capable of unleashing this effort and instilling life with meaning. While God’s existence was only a possibility and God’s metaphysical nature ultimately remained a mystery, the important thing was that the religious will to believe set free “every sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity” (WB, 161). In fact,

James even went so far as to say that if there were no traditional or logical grounds for believing in God, “men would postulate one simply as a *pretext for living hard*, and getting out of the game of existence its keenest possibilities of zest” (WB, 161; italics added).

*Religion and the Imperialist Expansion of the United States*

Whether it had much to do with James or not, near the turn of the century the United States adopted God as just such a “pretext for living hard.”<sup>14</sup> Shortly after the publication of *The Will to Believe*, the aggressive imperial self stood wholly resurrected in the United States under the leadership of Theodore Roosevelt, who became governor of New York, then vice-president, and finally president of the United States after establishing himself as a war hero in the Spanish-American War of 1898. The line had blurred between imperialist logic claiming the superiority of Anglo-Saxondom and religious logic claiming the superiority of Christianity, and the United States began to confuse its ways with God’s ways as missionaries readied themselves to Christianize the globe in conjunction with its Americanization. Given that James’s psychological diagnosis of his (academic) culture had rested, above all, on a perceived lack of passion, he was initially hesitant to unequivocally denounce the way in which such expansion aroused the zeal of U.S. crowds. While he did make a clear stand against “war fever” and jingoism as early as the Venezuela Boundary Dispute of 1895–96, he initially saw the war to come against the Spanish in Cuba as something that would initiate the United States into the brotherhood of truly powerful and important nations while giving the United States a chance to show the world its goodness.<sup>15</sup> While James would eventually become famous for his anti-imperialism through his opposition to the U.S. government’s policies during and after the Spanish-American War, he initially chose to see only honorable intentions in the U.S. military crusade against the Spanish in Cuba, writing his brother Henry, “Not a soul thinks of conquest or wishes it.”<sup>16</sup>

In short, although James was hard on “yellow journalism” from the start and consistently wary of the crowd and its mob mentality,

he initially had a soft spot for the way in which individuals were effectively escaping the *tedium vitae* through an active devotion to *some* cause. The task for James thus became to figure out how all of this passionate energy could be turned toward *good, peaceful* causes rather than *destructive, belligerent* ones. Indeed, this eventually became the subject of his famous 1910 essay titled “The Moral Equivalent of War,”<sup>17</sup> but the original idea appears eight years earlier in *Varieties* during James’s discussion of the religious saint (VRE, 292).<sup>18</sup> James’s discourse on saintliness, the climax of *Varieties*, was a direct attempt to maintain his own discourse of heroism and the importance of the individual, while precluding its imperial appropriation by religiously binding the self to the wider community of life to which we are generally blind.<sup>19</sup> In effect, James reworked his psychological portrait of the self in *Principles* by binding this self to “a wider self from which saving experiences come” (VRE, 405), thereby religiously endowing the new self with bonds of sympathy and responsibility that the old self lacked. But before I go on to further examine James’s attempt to replace the imperialist with the saint, I would like to turn to Enrique Dussel’s insightful portrayal of the psychology of the imperial self that both he and James attempt to religiously bind.

*Enrique Dussel’s Analysis of the Ego Conquiro  
and Its Religious Inversion*

In the foreword to *The Underside of Modernity*, Enrique Dussel summarizes his philosophical practice as follows: “The Philosophy of Liberation that I practice, not only in Latin America, but also regarding all types of oppression on the planet . . . begins a dialogue with the hegemonic European-North American philosophical community . . . concerning eurocentrism and the invisibility of ‘economics’ that in turn prevent the development out of poverty of the *greater part of humanity* as a fundamental philosophical and ethical theme.”<sup>20</sup> As part of his commitment to center his philosophy upon the experience and reality of the world’s poor and oppressed, Dussel gives an alternative reconstruction of the birth of modern philosophy in terms that

make colonialism part and parcel of the modern project rather than merely an unfortunate side-effect. While he does believe that his reinterpretation of modernity will enable us to begin to separate the “myth of modernity”—which justifies violence and oppression against (post-)colonial subjects—from “modernity’s rational, emancipative concept,” we must first squarely face the fact that the philosophically solipsistic *ego cogito* (“I think”) of René Descartes cannot be so conveniently separated from the ethically solipsistic *ego conquiro* (“I conquer”) of Hernán Cortés. In his lectures delivered on the quincentennial anniversary of Columbus’s “discovery” of what would come to be called “America,” Dussel writes: “For the modern ego, the inhabitants of the land never appeared as Other, but as the possessions of the Same to be conquered, colonized, modernized, civilized, as if they were the modern ego’s material.”<sup>21</sup>

Dussel also notes how this movement has been carried on (albeit in many different contexts) in perpetuity up to the present day (one only has to think of the irrational myth of the United States’ fundamental right to spread “freedom” across the globe under the Bush administration). Indeed, as we have just seen, the United States was coming into its own as a global imperial power just as James was launching pragmatism.<sup>22</sup> Having successfully conquered and sequestered its own Native American population and having fulfilled its “manifest destiny” to annex most of the Southwestern United States from Mexico, the United States turned to conquering the peoples residing in Cuba, Guam, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines. Dussel notes the paradoxical nature of the myth of modernity that underlies such actions: “While the conquest depicted itself as upholding the universal rights of modernity against barbarism, the indigenous peoples suffered the denial of their rights, civilization, culture, and gods. In brief, the Indians were victimized in the name of an innocent victim [Jesus Christ] and for the sake of universal rights. Modernity elaborated a myth of its own goodness, rationalized its violence as civilizing, and finally declared itself innocent of the assassination of the Other.”<sup>23</sup> In order to further explore the pathological psychology behind such horrific imperial actions, Dussel provides a

phenomenology of the *ego conquiro* (“I conquer”) as preeminently embodied in the person of Hernán Cortés, who explicitly saw himself as Christendom’s new Constantine, conquering the new world under the sign of the cross. Rather than experiencing itself as *bound to* God, as being *reduced* in relation to the divine, the *ego conquiro* undertakes a movement of unlimited expansion, practically experiencing itself as God, as larger than all of the lesser forms of life beneath it, which it attempts to reduce to mere instruments of its own will. An analogous logic also applies at the level of the national(istic) ego, which sees the history of other nations as merely contributing to the unfolding of its own divine destiny (precisely the same mixture of imperialism and religion that we have seen in the case of the war fever stirred up by “yellow journalism” and capitalized on by Roosevelt in James’s time).

In striking contrast, *critical* religious consciousness is reached on Dussel’s model through humility in the face of the Other and openness to the words of the Other. Such consciousness is religious insofar as it requires the *faith* that this is not just my world—that is, the *belief* that truly understanding the world requires my faithful acceptance of the Other and the Other’s world (even if this in turn opens the possibility for critical dialogue). More explicitly than James, Dussel contrasts the imperial religion of the conqueror, which is ultimately a fetishistic belief in one’s own superiority, with the genuinely ethical faith that responds to the fact that the lives of others revolve around their own centers of freedom that must be respected (the same fact that James claims we are all too blind to in his essay “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings”).<sup>24</sup> As a rebuttal to Hernán Cortés’s imperial ego, Dussel therefore introduces Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Spanish Dominican priest famous for his religious defense of the rights of the indigenous peoples of America. Las Casas was so bold as to claim that neither European religion nor European civilization could be spread by the sword and that Europe’s violence against the indigenous peoples was utterly unjustified and unprovoked (the very same points that James makes about U.S. violence against the Filipinos).<sup>25</sup>

The crucial thing to note here is that *both* Cortés *and* Las Casas were heroically religious, even though the objects of their religious faiths could not have been any more different from one another. To put things in Jamesian terms, religion is uniquely *powerful* insofar as it is capable of inspiring the strenuous mood and unleashing “the energies of men,” but it is *not necessarily good*.<sup>26</sup> Like James, Dussel ethically judges religion by its earthly fruits, but Dussel goes on to *clearly* distinguish between two fundamentally different modes of religious existence: *fetishistic* vs. *liberatory*.<sup>27</sup> For example, the *fetishistic* faith of Cortés (just like the *fetishistic* faith of Roosevelt) rests on a will to power that deafens its ears to the forms of life outside of its vision. Such a faith does not imbue *life per se* with meaning and purpose, but instead reserves these for only *its own life* (and the lives it chooses to recognize as worthy or valuable). While such a faith undoubtedly provides its own life with a meaning and purpose, it is fundamentally self-divinizing and destructive of other forms of life (as James suggests in “What Makes a Life Significant?”).<sup>28</sup> In contrast, the *liberatory* faith of Las Casas (like the faiths of James and Dussel) rests on a faith in the reality and value of the unseen inner lives of others. Such a faith has faith in its own finitude, its own fallibility, and is therefore marked by not just self-expansion but also self-contraction in the face of the Other and other ways of life. To further examine this self-expansion and self-contraction under the sway of religious faith, let us return to James’s discussion of saintliness in *Varieties*.

*James’s Ethical Saints: Reworking Asceticism  
to Counteract Human Blindness*

When historically contextualized, James’s portrait of saintliness can be read as an attempt to replace Roosevelt’s belligerently nationalistic vision of the war hero with the radically charitable vision of the saint, who provides a powerful yet peaceful method of heroically ameliorating self and society. While James had considered faith almost exclusively as an *expansive* mood in *Principles* and *The Will to Believe*,

subsequent events revealed the need to pay considerably more attention to the ways in which faith involves a mood of *contraction*, and *twice-born religion* is the category that results. Rather than overlooking, downplaying, or simply denying the reality of evil in both the self and the world (as once-born religions do), twice-born religions promise deliverance from evil. But this deliverance in the form of rebirth or conversion first requires the recognition that things like sorrow, pain, and death are genuine parts of reality. Nonetheless, in the saintly form of twice-born religion that most interests James, this recognition yields not complacency but rather an active struggle against sorrow, pain, and death. So rather than decry the self-contractive ascetic impulse like Nietzsche, James insists that it must be productively rechanneled. Whereas the older monastic asceticism “terminated in the mere egotism of the individual, increasing his own perfection” (VRE, 290), James envisions the new ethical saint as a hopeful replacement for the warrior, the most ancient and venerable type of hero: “What we now need to discover in the social realm is the moral equivalent of war: something heroic that will speak to men as universally as war does, and yet will be as compatible with their spiritual selves as war has proved itself to be incompatible” (VRE, 292).

James’s *Principles* had already shown how our sense of emotional intimacy with other parts of the universe naturally prompts actions of bodily, social, and spiritual “*Self-seeking and Self-preservation*” (PP, 293). In *Varieties* James continues to explain our behavior in this way, but he does so while dramatically widening the possible inclusivity of the self, so that even radical altruism appears in the guise of self-seeking. Indeed, the life of James’s ethical saint, who heroically struggles to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth in the form of peaceful prosperity for all, demonstrates that there are remarkably few limits on who or what can be possibly felt as genuine parts of one’s self. Unlike the imperial self, which expands by attempting to control the foreign forces that would otherwise bind it, James’s revamped religious self expands by freely submitting itself to a multitude of forces beyond itself, relinquishing rather than relishing control, losing its narrow ego to gain its wider self.<sup>29</sup> In fact, it seems that James also considers

the twice-born religious self to be the highest type because it has undergone a process of conversion in which it shifts from an autonomous, egoistic willfulness to a more relational and responsibly bound mode of being, allowing ideal and unseen forces outside of itself to guide its conduct. Religion thus performs a kind of miraculous practical function by bringing what would otherwise be remote intellectual ideas into the most intimate sphere of personal life as the “unseen” realm is *felt* to be a part (even the *ultimate* part) of reality. This feeling may in turn lead the faithful to “attain an altogether new level of spiritual vitality, a *relatively heroic level*, in which impossible things have become possible, and new energies and endurance are shown” (VRE, 196; italics added). According to James, then, the saints are crucial for social and political progress insofar as they are “impregnators of the world, vivifiers and animators of potentialities of goodness which but for them would lie forever dormant” (VRE, 285).

In sum, James consistently claims that the ascetic “no, no” or *contraction* of the saintly self ought to be a means to being better able to say and do “yes, yes” as the saintly self *expands* to include the needs of the broader community of life in its own life through acts of charity. According to James there is nothing contradictory in principle about loving others (even one’s enemies) as oneself, and although history provides few nonapocryphal examples of such degrees of saintly charity, it could undoubtedly be radically transformative for self and society alike (VRE, 228–29). Religious experiences, practices, and commitments can make radical social and political arrangements that would otherwise seem impossible *feel* as if they were possible. Given both religion’s unmatched power to create this feeling and the necessity of this feeling as a precursor to creating the reality, we can see why James believes religion is such a valuable possession of humankind, not just for personal psychological reasons, but for social and political reasons as well. Essentially, James believes that religion is capable of saving many people from their unthinking acceptance of the status quo, which involves the sheer egoism of “looking out for number one” at worst or the tribal egotism of looking out “for me and mine” at best, into the service of the ideal of constructing wider,

flourishing human communities as part of constructing a wider, flourishing self. In the life of the saint, self-help joins help of others under the sway of help from the power of the divine. James therefore implores his audience: “Let us be saints, then, if we can, whether or not we succeed visibly and temporally” (VRE, 299).<sup>30</sup>

In this audience-wide prescription, James lays bare his own faith in the relevance of saintliness to life, especially when we interpret his prescription in its historical context as an alternative to an ethics of domination and imperialism that was gaining (and has continued to gain) popular support. Despite James’s language of saintliness, that may be rather off-putting for contemporary readers, his exploration of sanctification as the *process* by which a person becomes radically ready and able to ethically respond to the demands of the “wider self” (understood as a dramatically extended *social* self) remains invaluable.

#### *James’s Hazy, Pluralistic Vision of the Universe as Republic*

As we have just seen, James consistently claims that the religious *contraction* of the self should always serve as a means to its subsequent *expansion*, so that not even the saint violates James’s claim that religion is “a monumental chapter in the history of human egoism” (VRE, 387). Even the most ethically charitable and politically radical service to *others* is rooted in *self*-interest, although religion may help one to feel that that rest of humanity or even the entire universe is a part of oneself! James further develops this theme in *A Pluralistic Universe*, arguing that “the vaster vistas which scientific evolutionism has opened, and the rising tide of social democratic ideals, have changed the type of our imagination,” leading people to believe that the divine must hold a “more organic and intimate” place in the universe (PU, 18). In the course of his discussion, James uses the word “intimacy” (or one of its derivatives) over fifty times, contrasting it with “foreignness” in his attempt to convince his audience to precursively *trust* rather than *be wary of* “the great universe whose children we are,” so that the world as a whole may slowly grow more intimate through our faith and effort (PU, 19).

James pleads for the importance of complementing our sweeping, abstract, and conceptual knowledge of the universe with a more *intimate* knowledge—that is, a particular, concrete, and intuitive appreciation of its parts—in order to overcome what James had earlier referred to as “human blindness.” He writes, “The only way in which to apprehend reality’s thickness is either to experience it directly by being a part of reality one’s self, or to evoke it in imagination by sympathetically divining someone else’s inner life” (PU, 112). Carrying out this sympathetic method will help put us in touch with the “wider self from which saving experiences come” of *Varieties*: “What we conceptually identify ourselves with and say we are thinking of at any time is the centre; but our *full* self is the whole field, with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can only feel without conceiving, and can hardly begin to analyze” (PU, 130). Although James does not explicitly make the connection, he seems to be grasping toward what the mystic experiences and what the saint practices: the ultimate *oneness* of the community of life.

But this is a very particular kind of intimate oneness: a oneness-in-manyness. James’s great hope is that his philosophy will help convince people that only with their help “does foreignness get banished from our world, and *far more so when we take the system of it pluralistically than when we take it monistically*” (PU, 143; italics added). He explains: “Our ‘multiverse’ still makes a ‘universe’; for every part, tho it may not be in actual or immediate connexion, is nevertheless in some possible or mediated connexion, with every other part however remote, through the fact that each part hangs together with its very next neighbors in inextricable interfusion. The type of union, it is true, is different here from the monistic type of *alleinheit*. It is not a universal co-implication, or integration of all things *durcheinander*. It is what I call the strung-along type, the type of continuity, contiguity, or concatenation” (PU, 146–47). Basically, James is saying that intimacy requires *both* genuine unity *and* genuine plurality, both oneness and manyness. Or to put it another way, intimacy is a particular form of plurality. Returning to one of his favorite (though underdeveloped) metaphors, James tells us that the universe is “more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom. However much may

be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective centre of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity" (PU, 145).

In a certain sense, James is simply stating the intellectually obvious: Every single thing is *in some way* (however remote) connected to or related with every other thing. But his statement quickly turns radical the moment that we begin to attempt to actively and sympathetically experience and practice these connections, as is demonstrated by the lives of the most charitable saints (think of Gandhi or Mother Teresa). Clearly, James's viewpoint *could* underpin a radical political philosophy,<sup>31</sup> but the worrisome thing is that his language may still lend itself to imperialistic appropriation. On James's humanistic model, there is no escaping that we are largely (if not solely) responsible for "banishing" foreignness from the world. Of course, any *careful* reader of James's texts would never mistake the way in which James suggests we "banish foreignness" (through radically charitable acts that effectively open our eyes to our deep and wide relations with other forms and ways of life) from the way in which a more imperialistic discourse would suggest we "banish foreignness" (through sheer military force, assimilation, and the like). Nonetheless, there is no question that James's language is easily appropriated by imperialism, since the fastest way to achieve unity (though not genuine Jamesian intimacy) is to simply destroy or assimilate plurality. James's vision is thus as beautiful as it is dangerous, as should become apparent the moment one thinks about what has usually happened historically when a given religion has decided that *foreignness* is the enemy to be rooted out.

#### *Dussel's Tighter Religious Binding: Toward a Politics of Liberation*

Of course, at bottom this liability may simply go with the tremendous ideological power of the religious territory, and it would be foolish to claim that a vision is bad or wrong simply because bad people can interpret it in the wrong way. But I am also worried that James's account of the religious saint so closely fits Dussel's description of the

*ego conquiro* as "an ego that just keeps on growing,"<sup>32</sup> especially since James's account was developed during the very period in which the United States was beginning to take center stage as a global imperial power. Admittedly, there is a crucial difference between James's ethical saint and Dussel's imperial conqueror. The narrow ego of James's ethical saint *dies* to allow the wider, religious self to commune with and participate in the entire community of life. In contrast, the narrow ego of Dussel's imperialist *conquers* the wider world. So while both the saintly self and the imperialist self *grow*, they grow in vastly different ways. In James's model, *good* growth is inseparable from painstakingly attempting to overcome the "certain blindness in human beings" by imaginatively and sympathetically putting oneself in the place of others, which requires faith in the reality and value of their inner lives.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, while the self of James's twice-born saint is *transformed* and dramatically *widened*, it is never *decentered*.

We are thus left with a version of the exceedingly basic but perplexing philosophical question: "Is ethics ultimately rooted in self-interest (of a dramatically enlightened and widened self perhaps)? Or is ethics rooted in the cessation (even if only momentary) of self-interest?" James clearly leans toward the former, asking us to consider the religious and philosophical hypothesis that our "wider self" includes the entire universe and to join his ethical saints in attempting to let every other Other's needs *into* our intimate sphere. In contrast, Dussel clearly opts for the latter, claiming that *exteriority*—"the ambit whence other persons, as free and not conditioned by one's own system and not as part of one's own world, reveal themselves"—is "the most important category for philosophy of liberation."<sup>34</sup>

Of course, the pragmatic principle offers us a method for tackling this dispute. What *practical* difference does it make to say that (metaphysically speaking) ethical life is rooted in a supremely enlightened and expansive being-for-self that includes the being-of-others as a part of its own life *versus* saying that (metaphysically speaking) ethical life is rooted in a supreme willingness to put being-for-self on hold in order to responsibly be-for-others? To be perfectly honest, I suspect that these two positions may ultimately boil down to a (no doubt

important) difference in emphasis, since James never allows an ultimate *identification* of the self and the Other and Dussel never allows so much difference between self and Other for *indifference* to be a sensible option. But to try and get a better handle on the difference, let us consider a concrete case, that of hunger, for as Dussel reminds us, “All of this acquires practical reality when someone says, ‘I’m hungry!’”<sup>35</sup>

If we were to pose Ralph Waldo Emerson’s question—“Are they my poor?”<sup>36</sup>—to James’s ethical saint, the answer would be a resounding “Yes!” whereas it seems Dussel’s response would be something like, “No, the poor do not *belong* to me, but their poverty reveals my *responsibility* to them.” To oversimplify things a bit, James thinks that the ethical and political way forward is the Emersonian way, the way of identifying ourselves with the lives and needs of the other parts of the cosmos that in some mystical way are parts of ourselves,<sup>37</sup> whereas Dussel thinks that the ethical and political way forward is the Levinasian way, the way of recognizing that the hungry, for instance, are *not* parts of our selves or our systems, but that nonetheless (if the language of “belonging to” is even appropriate), we belong *to them*.<sup>38</sup>

Undoubtedly, either way could be metaphysically or psychologically descriptive of what happens when an individual responds ethically to the existence of unjust hunger and poverty in the world. But as should be more or less obvious from the preceding discussion, James’s option is far easier for politicians like Roosevelt to appropriate in paternalistic or imperialistic ways, and may even at bottom be an expression of the “ontological expansion” endemic to James’s race, gender, and class.<sup>39</sup> Dussel’s option, on the other hand, simply may not be psychologically motivating, especially for the exceedingly narrow selves of U.S. consumer culture. Of course, this may simply be all the more reason to tell the average U.S. consumer that he or she ought to become a “hostage” to the poor and the needy in hopes of *interrupting* an unthinking devotion to consumerism. In the end, where we place (and where we *should* place) the emphasis is inseparable from the concrete context from which we are asking the question.

Both James and Dussel, insofar as they both reject any sort of “view from nowhere,” might be able to agree on this point.

But what I think is easily more important than asking this question, which runs the risk of becoming an idle metaphysical dispute, is simply pointing out that James’s political vision of a pluralistic republic remains altogether too vague and abstract. While James made it very clear that he was *against* imperialism, it remains a lot less clear what he was *for* apart from vague references to “the reign of peace and the gradual advent of some sort of socialistic equilibrium” (ERM, 170). This is precisely where I think Dussel’s liberation philosophy could prove an invaluable resource for challenging and developing James’s philosophy of religion by providing it with more political content. For starters (and I do not have time to offer anything more than a start), we can take James’s discourse about “the unseen,” pair it with his talk of “human blindness,” and realize that a lot of what religion deals with in terms of “the unseen” is an undeniable economic and political reality. For Dussel, when it comes right down to it, there are concrete aspects of “the unseen” that James largely failed to analyze—for example, the way in which the oppressed are “unseen” by the eyes of the dominant political system or the way in which most people in the United States *fail to see* how our economic system depends upon the exploitation of the global poor. In short, Dussel can help us connect the dots James left between human blindness and the religious realm of the unseen.

Likewise, Dussel’s careful attention to the differences between *fetishistic* and *liberatory* religion could help us vigilantly maintain the difference between the way in which neoliberalism in the United States and elsewhere often walks hand in hand with imperial and nationalistic theocracy and the way in which other forms of religious faith (the religious underpinnings of the civil rights movement are often taken as a paradigmatic case) make genuine contributions to social justice. As Dussel tells us, “To have an *ethical* conscious, one must be *atheistic* vis-à-vis the fetishistic system *and* one must have *respect* for the other *as other*.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Dussel’s ongoing process of

*liberation* is directly parallel to James's ongoing process of *sanctification*: liberation is the process by which selves are *freed* from their bondage to oppressive forces just as sanctification is the process by which selves are ethically *bound* to other centers of freedom. Both processes may *sound* otherworldly, but for Dussel and James they are the earthly, "economic" processes by which self and society are progressively transformed. At bottom, the pragmatic point is that religion is tremendously powerful, potentially transformative, and that people will undoubtedly continue to use it. Dussel helps us to faithfully continue and confront James by asking: What will they use it for? As a way of maintaining their own blindness to injustice? Or as a way of being able to say with integrity, "I once was blind, but now I see"?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

RELIGIOUSLY BINDING THE IMPERIAL SELF: CLASSICAL  
PRAGMATISM'S CALL AND LIBERATION PHILOSOPHY'S RESPONSE  
*Alexander V. Stehn*

1. Eduardo Mendieta, *Latin American Philosophy: Currents, Issues, Debates* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 5. Of course, emphasis on the unity of "America"—even when sincerely undertaken as a way to foster dialogue between the plurality of countries that constitute North, Central, and South America—inevitably carries with it two very substantial

risks: (1) Inter-Americanism implicitly negates America's indigenous populations, since the name "America" itself is of decidedly European and colonial origin. For a discussion of this "cover up," see Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), (2) Likewise, pan-American projects threaten to obscure the substantial North–South power differential, often smuggling imperialism in under the guise of mutual interest and intimacy, as insightfully discussed in Sophia A. McClennen, "Inter-American Studies or Imperial American Studies?," *Comparative American Studies* 3, no. 4 (2005). These two dangers are nonetheless mitigated by the lack of widely recognizable alternatives to the term "America" at present and this volume's self-conscious refusal of the dangerous but typical reduction of American philosophy (in the broadest, inter-American sense) to "American" philosophy (in the narrow, nationalistic sense).

2. Extending Mendieta's insightful claim that philosophical reconstructions of pragmatism are always somehow linked to social and political reconstructions of America, I would like to suggest that this volume's attempt to understand pragmatism *in and through* the Hispanic world thereby contributes its mite to a United States whose physical and intellectual borders alike are fundamentally permeable, a United States that is reciprocally (rather than imperially) constituted by its relations to the Hispanic world that lies both beyond and within the United States itself.

3. Here I am simply extending the scope of the claim for metaphilosophical common ground made by Gregory Pappas in Chapter 10 to cover the case of pragmatism and liberation philosophy.

4. According to a survey report released by the Pew Global Attitudes Project in 2002, 59 percent of people in the United States considered religion to be very important personally, the highest percentage of any "developed" nation surveyed. The majority of people in every Latin American country (with the exception of Argentina) also considered religion to be very important personally, ranging from 80 percent of people surveyed in Guatemala to 57 percent in Mexico. See The Pew Research Center, "Among Wealthy Nations . . . U.S. Stands Alone in Its Embrace of Religion," <http://peoplepress.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=167>.

5. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981; henceforth PP); William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979; henceforth WB). See Bennett Ramsey, *Submitting to Freedom:*

*The Religious Vision of William James* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6.

6. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985; henceforth VRE); William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977; henceforth PU).

7. While I admittedly spend more time laying out James's claims than Dussel's claims in this essay, my hope is that the use of Dussel to critique and develop James performs a sufficient reversal of the imperialistic flow of power in which it is generally Latin America that needs to be challenged to develop along the lines of the United States.

8. George Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 72.

9. *Ibid.*, 10.

10. Ramsey, *Submitting to Freedom*, 48–49.

11. While I am quickly telling the story of James's work as a linear, chronological development for the sake of clarity and convenience, this should *not* be taken to mean that I am endorsing the traditional view that James's thought follows clear lines of progressive development (from psychology, to religion, to philosophy *proper*), especially since such interpretations are often used to minimize the importance of James's sustained interest in religion. Instead, I agree with James's biographer Robert Richardson, who argues that James's central concerns always had psychological, religious, and philosophical facets. See Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 364.

12. It is the emphasis on *binding* that leads me to follow Bennett Ramsey in designating this activity as *religious* in the etymological sense of "to bind together."

13. Cotkin, *William James*, 79.

14. To be fair to James, he tells us that *The Will to Believe* was written for *academic* audiences plagued by "too much questioning and too little active responsibility" (WB, 39). James admitted that if he "were addressing the Salvation Army or a miscellaneous popular crowd it would be a misuse of opportunity to preach the liberty of believing as I have in these pages preached" because "what mankind at large most lacks is criticism and caution, not faith" (WB, 7).

15. For more on James's biography as it relates to the formation of his anti-imperialist stance, see the chapter titled "The Imperial Imperative" in Cotkin, *William James*, 123–51.

16. For more on James's anti-imperialism—the political issue on which he spent the most time, thought, and practical effort—see the section “James as Reformer” in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996), 242–52. For the quotation here, see Cotkin, *William James*, 133.

17. In William James, *Essays in Religion and Morality*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 162–74. Henceforth ERM.

18. This essay is a partial attempt to remedy the fact that exceedingly little secondary literature on *Varieties* seriously considers that James composed it while firing off regular rejoinders to Roosevelt's successful imperialistic appropriation of the discourse of heroism. James was particularly infuriated by the way in which Roosevelt's 1899 speech titled “The Strenuous Life” appropriated James's discourse while dramatically changing the ends to which strenuousness should be directed.

19. This blindness is, of course, the subject of “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” published in 1899 shortly after he became a full-blooded anti-imperialist. In William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 132–49. Henceforth TT. We should also recall that the famous 1898 lecture that launched pragmatism, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results,” was delivered at Berkeley only a month after the ceasing of hostilities in the Spanish-American war. In William James, *Pragmatism*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 255–74. All of which is to say that James's pragmatism is bound up with his anti-imperialism, which in turn informs his philosophy of religion and pluralistic metaphysics.

20. Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor and the Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1996), vii.

21. Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “The Other” and the Myth of Modernity*, trans. Michael D. Barber (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 35.

22. Ironically, much of the international criticism of James's pragmatism, which was launched in conjunction with his *anti-imperialism*, focused on pragmatism's connection with *imperialism*. While not the focus of my essay, I would argue that the danger of James's pragmatism is *not* its imperialism but rather the ease with which it is *appropriated* by an imperialist discourse.

23. Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas*, 50. While Dussel concentrates in this book on the original conquest of the American continent and its Amerindian population, he insists that the same logic operates in the later age of global U.S. imperialism. James actually rails against the very same “civilizing” logic in “The Philippine Tangle” published in 1899: “We are to be missionaries of civilization, and to bear the white man's burden, painful as it often is. We must sow our ideals, plant our order, impose our God. The individual lives are nothing. Our duty and our destiny call, and civilization must go on. Could there be a more damning indictment of that whole bloated idol termed ‘modern civilization’ than this amounts to?” William James, *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 157. Henceforth ECR.

24. James writes: “Now the blindness in human beings, of which this discourse will treat, is the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves” (TT, 132).

25. In “The Philippine Tangle,” James writes: “The issue is perfectly plain at last. We are cold-bloodedly, wantonly and abominably destroying the soul of a people who never did us an atom of harm in their lives” (ECR, 157).

26. While *Varieties* highlights the way that religion can be powerfully used for good purposes, James openly admits that it can also be used for evil ones: “By the very intensity of his fidelity to the paltry ideals with which an inferior intellect may inspire him, a saint can be even more objectionable and damnable than a superficial carnal man would be in the same situation” (VRE, 294–95). For James, then, the problem is *not* that zealous individuals like Roosevelt and his Rough Riders are too devoted or obedient to God, but rather that such a God, “full of partiality for his individual favorites,” is not ethically worthy of devotion or obedience (VRE, 277).

27. Dussel's most sustained discussion of fetishistic vs. liberatory religion can be found in Enrique Dussel, “The Concept of Fetishism in Marx's Thought (Elements for a General Marxist Theory of Religion),” *Radical Philosophy Review* 6, no. 1, 2 (2003): 1–28, 93–129. James implicitly draws something like this difference in *Varieties*, but he simplistically attributes almost all of “the basenesses so commonly charged to religion's account” as stemming *not* from religion per se, but rather from “religion's wicked practical partner, the spirit of corporate dominion” and “religion's wicked intellectual partner, the spirit of dogmatic dominion” (VRE, 271). After all, one can be ethically faithful in a corporate context just as easily as one can be dangerously dogmatic in an individualistic context.

28. The general thrust of this essay is that we ought to sensitize ourselves to the significance of the inner lives of others and that such sensitization marks “an increase of religious insight into life,” which in turn augments the “religion of democracy” (TT, 156).

29. I am borrowing this notion of religious submission from Ramsey, *Submitting to Freedom*.

30. James does go on to nuance his claim as follows: “Each of us must discover for himself the kind of religion and the amount of saintship which best comports with what he believes to be his powers and feels to be his truest mission and vocation. There are no successes to be guaranteed and no set orders to be given to individuals, so long as we follow the methods of empirical philosophy” (VRE, 299). We can see here how James remains an empiricist to the end insofar as he continues to judge saintliness by what he terms its “economic” fruits.

31. For a thoughtful working out of James’s radical pluralism by a political scientist, see Kennan Ferguson, *William James: Politics in the Pluriverse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

32. I translate this phrase from Dussel’s description of the *yo conquisto* (“I conquer”) as “*un ego que continúa creciendo*” in a lecture titled “Filosofía Moderna y Filosofía Colonial” given at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México on February 13, 2008. The ambiguity of the Spanish contains the tension I am trying to elaborate insofar as the verb *crecer* can be rendered as “to grow” in a number of distinct senses: from “grow in size,” to “grow up,” to “develop,” to “evolve.” While Dussel clearly meant his description to have a negative connotation, I am fascinated by James’s attempt to develop an account of the growth of the ego in decidedly *positive* terms.

33. Dussel also suggests that we undertake this sort of faithful, imaginative, and sympathetic movement, especially in chapter 6 of *The Invention of the Americas*, which invites us “to change skins and to see through new eyes” in order to sympathetically imagine the European “discovery” of America as experienced by its indigenous peoples (74).

34. Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003), 33, 40.

35. *Ibid.*, 41.

36. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson and Mary Oliver (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 132–53.

37. For a more detailed study of this expansive movement and an incisive analysis of its potential pitfalls, see Ramón del Castillo, “The Glass Prison:

Emerson, James, and the Religion of the Individual,” in *Fringes of Religious Experience Cross-Perspectives on William James’s The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Sergio Franzese and Felicitas Kraemer, *Process Thought*, V. 12 (Frankfurt: Ontos, 2007).

38. To make this point, Dussel prefers Levinas’s term *hostage* to any language that might be construed as that of ownership: “The hostage is an innocent, just person who ‘witnesses’ the victim (the other). The victim suffers a traumatic action. The hostage suffers ‘for’ the other. . . . Out of his or her own satisfaction (i.e., the absence of need), the hostage responds to the victim.” Enrique Dussel, “‘Sensibility’ and ‘Otherness’ in Emmanuel Levinas,” *Philosophy Today* 43, no. 2 (1999): 126–27.

39. The term “ontological expansion” is borrowed from Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). It is but a new term for some old ways of thinking about James’s own social blindness that were first and most famously expressed by Max C. Otto, “On a Certain Blindness in William James,” *Ethics* 53, no. 3 (1943): 184–91.

40. Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 59.