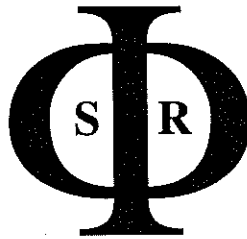


**SOUTHWEST
PHILOSOPHY
REVIEW**



*The Journal of
The Southwestern Philosophical Society*

**Volume 14, Number 2
July, 1998**

SOUTHWEST PHILOSOPHY REVIEW

SOUTHWEST PHILOSOPHY REVIEW

Editor: J. K. Swindler, Wittenberg University

Vol. 14, No. 2

July, 1998

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REMAKING THE MODERN MIND: WILLIAM JAMES'S RECONSTRUCTION OF RATIONALITY

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Philosophers have sought an unchanging, universal mold in which to cast their experiences, hoping thereby to escape the precarious indeterminacy of existence. The "real" world, for many empiricists, or our way of apprehending the world, for many idealists, is thought to have a fixed structure. Rationality aims at an ahistorical (objective) representation of this permanent structure.

Thankfully, the past few decades have witnessed a growing concern to reveal the futility of this quest for absolute standards. What is desired instead is a theory that will prove responsive to the *humanness* of rationality. The classical pragmatist tradition in American philosophy provides a tremendously fruitful yet still too often overlooked framework for accommodating, clarifying, and extending current explorations of human reason.

The prototypical view of reason as dispassionate and transcendent has goaded some pragmatist philosophers fruitfully away from the concept of "rationality" altogether. For example, with his conception of "intelligence" as the mediation of problematic situations, John Dewey carried pragmatism to new heights by dismissing altogether traditional epistemology's longing to exactly align the subjective with the objective.

Although William James was hesitant to go as far as Dewey did in accepting the radical implications of his pragmatism, James's intellectual and personal struggles gave rise to distinctive, newly-forged tools.¹ As scholars come anew to James, novel insights emerge and aged misperceptions resurge. This essay deposes prevailing misconceptions of James (especially those concerning subjectivism and radical relativism) by offering a somewhat comprehensive glimpse of his reconstructed model (in effect, a condensed reconstruction of his reconstruction). In order to emphasize the magnitude of James's break with the philosophic tradition while also meeting the need for an article-length treatment, I sketch a number of interrelated claims and relate them to work in the American, Anglo-American, and Continental traditions without pretension of thoroughly developing in this essay the larger ramifications of any one issue. I make the following claims: Rationality is embodied, evolving, and practical, and as such it is subject to physical, conceptual, and

historical constraints. Further, rationality is contingent upon points of view, and it is characterized by an educated aesthetic response that can emerge from trust in a situation's potentialities.

I. Rationality is Physically, Conceptually, and Historically Constrained in a Way that Must be Recognized If Human Activity is to be Well Directed

Woe to him whose beliefs play fast and loose with the order which realities follow in his experience (PM, 99, 94).

James's brand of "realism" has appeared convoluted to many philosophers. As in Russell's caricature of "The Will to Make-Believe," James is accused of having thrown our "compass overboard" and of adopting "caprice as our pilot" (VRE, 263; 257). E. M. Adams, for example, declares that James gives us a picture "of a culture gone wild, cut loose from epistemic accountability to the real world."²

Our reflected-upon beliefs are not simply Freudian wish-fulfillments or arbitrary Derridean fabrications.³ Our reasonings must take account of our physical, cultural, and interpersonal environments. "Our ideas," James asserts, "must agree with realities... under penalty of endless inconsistency and frustration" (PM, 101; 96).⁴

James is often accused of neglecting the role of external existences in our best reasonings. He attributes this misunderstanding to the predominance of subjective language in his writings (MT, 130), language used to counter the supposition that the truth-seeker is irrelevant to a definition of truth.

As an example, consider James's sculpting metaphor for the selective (or intentional) character of human consciousness: "Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone!" (PP I, 277; 289).⁵ James's metaphor has been criticized, perhaps not unjustly, for highlighting the contribution of the individual while concealing the way an impinging world sets situations. Nonetheless, the artist cannot express herself through the medium without, so to speak, allowing the medium to express itself through the artist. It resists being given just any sort of form. The good sculptor, like the good reasoner, is one whose habits are coordinated with these recalcitrant features.

This is Jamesian realism: If reason is aimless, then our surroundings destroy us rather than sustain us. It is not ghostly coincidence, as it is for the correspondence theorist, that rationality is structured as it is. Rationality is our organized, evolved response to reality's multitudinous structure. With a different range of organism-environment interactions, the necessary for adaptation would produce a different human reason. Our theories of rationality must situate us in the environments from which our rational

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capacities emerged and in response to which these capacities evolve. Only in *this* way do we avoid being "cut loose from epistemic accountability to the real world."⁶

Let me turn now to James's theory of truth. In *Pragmatism*, James offers as a generic definition: truth means "agreement with reality." This statement has fueled debate on whether James was ultimately a correspondence theorist.⁷ But he argues that the correspondence theorist says this *and nothing more*. For James, truth as correspondence is a meaningless abstraction if it is not pragmatically grounded. The only *meaning* of agreement with reality lies in whether a belief *works*.

James's notion of workability is intelligible only in the context of the pragmatic theory of belief. Beginning with Peirce's 1877 "The Fixation of Belief" the classical pragmatists, inspired by the Scottish philosopher and psychologist Alexander Bain's 1859 *The Emotions and the Will*,⁸ contended that rationality stems from the necessity for adapting to discordances in our experience in a way that re-establishes a composed state of expectation. The live creature struggles to adjust to environing conditions and to establish continuous coherence in its experience. Beliefs are the consequences of and materials for this adaptive process.

For Bain, and later for Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey, belief is not an affirmative propositional attitude that maps external reality, nor is it a clear and distinct intuition in the mind's eye nor a strong association of ideas. "The basis, and ultimate criterion, of belief," James quotes in the margin to his copy of Bain's *Emotions*, "is Action."⁹ Bain explains the process of a belief becoming "educated":

[W]e encounter a failure, in other words, a breach of sequence... This failure, or interruption, produces a mental *shock*, a breach of expectation, a disappointment, which unhinges and discomposes the mind. It is in point of fact destructive of the prior state of expectation, that state cannot be renewed without a roundabout process... It becomes a serious part of our education to surmount, reconcile, and accommodate, these interrupted sequences.¹⁰

A belief, then, is "an attitude or disposition of preparedness to act" which re-establishes, through a process of "education," a composed state of expectation following a period of doubt. Pragmatism, Peirce will say, is "scarce more than a corollary" to Bain's theory of belief.¹¹ Scientifically or humanistically satisfying beliefs, for Peirce and James respectively, are those which help us to get along in the world in a productive way that fits our lives to the world's facts.

This resolution of discordance into belief announces itself through what James calls the sentiment of rationality. The felt mark of rationality is "unimpeded mental functioning" (SR, 65; 324). If expectations are dis-

rupted, an “uneasiness takes possession of the mind.” When James speaks of a belief working, then, he means either that a belief is functioning with relatively few impediments, or that a transition has been effected from a state of perplexity to one of comprehension (SR, 57; 317).

James proposes that a belief’s rationality is recognized by certain psychological marks. This does not intimate an insouciant disregard for objective traits of the world—a view proliferated by the neopragmatist Richard Rorty. A merely subjective sentiment could lay no claim to interactive workability! A belief agrees with reality if it guides us in a productive direction, and a direction is productive if fluid interaction—mental, physical, cultural, or interpersonal—is maintained or re-established. A belief is rational if it helps us determine courses of thought and action that will *deal* with and *adapt* us to realities at hand.

But what is this reality with which a belief must help us to deal? That is, what *constrains* or *gives direction* to rationality? James makes a three-fold distinction.¹² Implicitly modifying Hume, James divides reality into, first, matters of phenomenal, concrete *fact*, and second, “flagrantly man-made” relations of ideas. However, neither of these classes is “without the human touch.” As Putnam frequently quotes James: “The trail of the human serpent is over all.”¹³ (Nonetheless, James sometimes contradicts himself by positing both an evolved world and a real, eternal conceptual world. E.g., see PM, 101; 95 and PM, 119; 111.¹⁴)

Reality also consists of, third, a dynamic, prefigured body of “funded truths,” a background or setup of previous dealings with facts and ideas. These truths have been assimilated; they are “the humanized mass” of our beliefs (PM, 119; 112). James’s notion in the *Principles of Psychology* of the “horizon,” “penumbra,” or “fringe” (a pivotal influence on Husserl’s phenomenology and Gadamer’s hermeneutics¹⁵) includes these established, evolving circuits for meaningful interaction. Our reasonings are tethered by a horizontal context of funded truths that checks our inquiries to keep them from moving forth haphazardly.

In summary, to avoid entanglement our beliefs must deal productively with concrete facts, abstract principles, and prefigured truths. The pragmatist, James exclaims, is pent in “between the whole body of funded truths squeezed from the past and the coercions of the world of sense about him” (PM, 111-12; 104).

As a truism, there are external existences. But propositions or beliefs do not have the magical ability to “refer” on their own to objects. James summarizes:

The mere fact of appearing as an object at all is not enough to constitute reality. That may be metaphysical reality, reality for God; but what we need is practical

reality, reality for ourselves; and, to have that, an object must not only appear, but it must appear both *interesting* and *important*... *Reality means simply relation to our emotional and active life* (PP II, 924; 295).

Pragmatically, then, we can speak meaningfully of reality-for-us and indeed of reality-for-others, but not of a hidden reality-in-itself. We cannot just “look and see” what a world-in-itself is like. Still it is *reality* for us, and not a fiction. James’s model of rationality consequently dissolves the Cartesian gap between ideas and external objects.

The human touch cannot be bracketed out of reality—an insight forcefully developed and articulated by James’s Continental soulmates in the phenomenological (beginning with late Husserl), genealogical, and hermeneutic traditions. Kant recognized this, but he did so at the expense of both petrifying the human touch and severing thinking from feeling.

Our reflected-upon beliefs are not merely fabricated by the play of signifiers and motivated by our pre-postmodern “nostalgia for meaning,” nor are they anchored in a foundational or transcendent matrix. Nor are beliefs grounded by an idea-fact correspondence, nor solely because of a harmonious cohesion of funded truths. Our beliefs are grounded by their workability. And a belief works only if it is reflexively guided by features of an empirical situation. “We must find a theory that will *work*,” James urges, “and that means something extremely difficult,” for “our theories are wedged and controlled as nothing else is” (PM, 104; 98).¹⁶

II. Rationality is Embodied, Evolving, and Nonessentialist

[T]he only meaning of essence is teleological and... classification and conception are purely teleological weapons of the mind. The essence of a thing is that one of its properties... so important for my interests that in comparison with it I may neglect the rest (PP, II, 961; 335).

James sees philosophy as having fallen from a robust concern with human existence. He retrieves rationality from its abstract elevations in a supposedly pure formal realm and returns it to the embodied experience of living organisms interacting with and adapting to natural, physical, interpersonal, and cultural environments.¹⁷ (It is significant, however, that James’s devotion to “the individual, the person in the singular number” led him to downplay—though not to dismiss—the role of socio-cultural environments in rationality.¹⁸)

A view has prevailed that the situated activities of the human organism are peripheral to cognition. This is due in part to the assumption that the categories through which we have a world ideally correspond in a one-to-one fashion with objective entities that have fixed properties and stand in determinate relations to one another. Yet, as contemporary cognitive

scientists are recognizing, things do not naturally exist in these categories wholly independent of human cognizers.¹⁹ This is not to say, with some idealists, that ready-made minds have molded a formless reality. Categories have evolved as a practical, ordered response to the world's structure.

On the standard view of knowledge, according to James, "the basis of every classification is the abstract essence embedded in the living fact" (SR, 60; 320). The categorizer is thus incidental to correct classifications. If the knower is incidental to the *nature* of knowledge, the final word on a subject may, in principle, be catalogued. This view is essentialistic, as it supposes that a true definition of "X" is equivalent to a circumscribing set of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be admitted *once and for all* "in" the category "X".

Of course, the lesson of Darwinism is that that which is fixed and finished does not precede that which is coming-to-be. There just is no essential nature of things to catalogue. Why, then, are we such inveterate essentialists, slighting the human context of categorization?

James provides an answer: We name categories after what stands out most distinctively in a situation, and we neglect the rest. We thereby get taken in by our own clarities. We commit what James terms the "psychologist's fallacy," focusing on the substantive parts of experience to the neglect of the transitive process. This leads us to take abstractions—like Greek and medieval "forms," British empiricism's "ideas," or pre-Darwinian "species"—and to reify them as objective verities. Thus our essentialism. James's self-styled "radical empiricism" (versus *British* empiricism, which ignores our direct experience of continuities and relations) is distinctive for his awareness of our tendency to forget that abstractions originate in practical *purposes*, that "classification and conception are purely teleological weapons of the mind" (PP, II, 961; 335). This proclivity of philosophy for drinking of the river of Lethe, and not of the stream of experience, is dubbed by Dewey *the* philosophic fallacy.

This fallacy is exemplified in theories of rationality by the subject-object dichotomy. There is no science, no *techné*, without the evolution of some variant of a knower-known distinction. So, *for adaptive purposes*, we speak of thought and thing, subject and object, unextended and extended, mental and physical, mind and brain, consciousness and matter, internal and external, idea and sensation, experience and nature, signifier and signified, representation and represented, word and object..., and *then* we tend to think our words correspond to objectively existing entities or states of affairs. What James calls the categories of "common sense"—e.g., things, kinds, minds, bodies, subjects and attributes, etc. (PM, 85; 80)—are rooted in this

tendency to turn teleological distinctions (abstractions *for the sake of*...) into ontological ones (disjunctions in the very nature of things). Failure to attend to the genealogy of philosophic categories has petrified intellectual tools that might otherwise be of service to us. We have inherited, for example, the notion that there is a discrete thing called consciousness superimposed onto the brute appearance of some material things. This consciousness is presumed separable from matter just as the pigment of oil paint is separable from its base. But a paleontologist of truth exposes this as a chimera.²⁰ James rebuffs the tendency to "stereotype the forms the human family had always talked with, to make them definite and fix them for eternity" (PM, 92; 86).

Evolution did not halt with the advent of modern categories. Reality is not a static, brute given with which beliefs must abstractly correspond. The prevailing notion that beliefs ideally map reality-in-itself ignores the way we appropriate our world through understanding it. It thereby alienates philosophy from lived experience.²¹ Hence, James writes:

The simple classification of things is, on the one hand, the best possible theoretic philosophy, but is, on the other,... a monstrous abridgment of life... This is why so few human beings truly care for philosophy (SR, 61; 320-21).

It is readily apparent that James's model challenges some tendencies in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. Even Putnam's criticisms of subject-object dualism, inspired partly by James, falter with the internal-external distinction upon which Putnam's "internal realism" rests. Thus his assertion that there can be no one correct linguistic description of reality is not freed from the legacy of correspondence theories. Putnam's view of language and conceptual systems is insufficiently sensitive to extra-conceptual traits of the world that set and define the problems that motivate the evolution of thought and language. For Putnam, philosophical inquiry begins and ends with language, not with organism-environment *interaction*. How language non-propositionally represents reality-in-itself is taken to be the essential problem of philosophy. James, meanwhile, *grounds* language in an embodied, evolving, pre-linguistic horizon of meaning.

III. Rationality is Contingent upon Perspective

For what a contradictory array of opinions have objective evidence and absolute certitude been claimed!... [T]here is indeed nothing which some one has not thought absolutely true, while his neighbor deemed it absolutely false (WB, 23; 16).

The pluralistic radical empiricist does not quest after objective certitude. Aware of our natural limitation to habitual points of view, her urge for truth is for modes of enriching and constructive apprehension of experience.

There is no God's-Eye-View—neither epistemically nor ontologically. Attempts to filter out the universe's crudity are more likely to end in sickly maladaptation than in expansive philosophical vision. Hence James's fallibilist hypothesis of “noetic pluralism,” that “the widest field of knowledge that ever was or will be still contains some ignorance” (PM, 81; 77). There is no point of view, actual or possible, “from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact” (WB, 6; ix). Possibilities and indeterminations are ultimately just what they appear to be.

This notion of indeterminacy led Charles M. Bakewell to preface (tongue in cheek) his 1907 criticisms of James's *Pragmatism*:

It reads like the philosophy of a 'new world' with a large frontier and, beyond, the enticing unexplored lands where one may still expect the unexpected. It appeals to one's sporting blood and one's *amour du risque*, for it is hospitable to chance. It is a philosophy in which one can take a gamble, for it holds that the dice of experience are not loaded.²²

James would likely have appreciated this characterization.

Even if the world *were* fixed, finished, and absolutely determined, we would be unable to apprehend it as such. There exists no universal human reason that, rightly cultivated, would enable all rational agents to reach precisely the same conclusions (a claim investigated more recently by Quine in his work on the underdetermination of statements²³). But as we have seen, for James the absence of bedrock does not entail radical relativism. Truth remains what it has *always* been independent of our theories about it: the continuous confirmation (and falsification) of hypotheses.

James goes beyond grudging tolerance to embrace competing perspectives. There is, James observes, “nothing improbable in the supposition that an analysis of the world may yield a number of formulae, all consistent with the facts” (SR, 66; 325). As Nietzsche observes contemporaneously with James: “There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing;’ and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing; the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing; our ‘objectivity,’ be.” “An eye turned in no particular direction,” Nietzsche adds, is “completely unthinkable.”²⁴ Instead of setting out as isolated individuals to construct a foundational perspective, communal dialogue between diverse perspectives allows us to develop progressive, well-tested points of view that are grounded in fact.

IV. The Confirmation of an Individual's Point of View is Aesthetically Grounded

Although all men will insist on being spoken to by the universe in some way, few will insist on being spoken to in just the same way (SR, 74; 332).

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In his watershed essay of 1879, “The Sentiment of Rationality,”²⁵ James implies that philosophers have missed the whole *point* of rationality: the restoration of manageability to problematic situations. Because this restoration is the culmination of a process characterized by doubt, it is marked by “a strong feeling of ease, peace, rest.” James dubs this state of resolution the rational sentiment, a tell-tale sign that fluid interaction has been restored.

James treats rationality as an *aesthetic* activity, a move out of step with Enlightenment categories severing cognition from emotion. It is easy to see why James's conjunction of “sentiment” with “rationality” has been regarded as an oxymoron. Understanding (*Verstand*), according to Kant, is wholly constrained by our conceptual structure and has nothing to do with feeling. In understanding, fixed and universal concepts in a purely formal realm give structure to presented material images. An aesthetic judgment, by contrast, has no such determinateness. It is a matter of subjective feeling (albeit “common” or universal feeling, for Kant). With the aesthetic, Kant writes in the *Critique of Judgment*, “the basis determining [the judgment] is the subject's feeling and not the concept of an object.”²⁶

James simultaneously de-subjectivizes the aesthetic and de-objectivizes understanding, highlighting the strictly functional nature of the distinction between thinking and feeling. A felt resolution to a line of inquiry is part and parcel of rationality. The rational sentiment is a record of all of our experience to date, and it ferments and incubates throughout an experience. We feel a reestablishment of fluent activity when we hit upon a course that meshes with our past experience and with our future expectations. This sentiment is educated, both by the whole of our individual and cultural experience and also by the exigencies of empirical situations.

There is no translucent solution of pure reason to be revealed by centrifuging “wish and will and sentimental preference” from our experience (see WB, 18; 8). Our passionate nature is essential to our rationality; it cannot be precipitated out through a Cartesian training of the will. Moreover, such an abstraction is “ideally as inept as it is actually impossible” (SR, 77; 335) since our educated sentiment of rationality is an invaluable guide for negotiating life's twists and turns.

To further clarify the aesthetics of rationality, consider that this sentiment will evidently be *felt* to some extent differently by individuals, according to their *temperaments*. According to James, the quest for certainty is founded on a misconception of rationality; a conception that neglects “the potentest of all our premises,” our temperament (PM, 11; 9).

One aspect of temperament explored by James is a religious sensibility for how things *ultimately* hang together: “that curious sense of the whole

residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious, which in some degree every one possesses" (VRE, 36-7; 45). We each have a "dumb sense" of "the total push and pressure of the cosmos" (PM, 9; 7). This felt sense for the ultimate structure of things is a primary determinant for what will appear reasonable to us. It expresses itself in concrete situations as "a sort of dumb conviction that the truth must lie in one direction rather than another" (SR, 78; 335).

But temperament is more than this. In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James observes: "A man's vision is the great fact about him" (PU, 20).²⁷ We each have "visions, modes of feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life, *forced on one by one's total character and experience*" (PU, 20-1, my emphasis). Temperament, then, is a function of character. Our characters are clusters of habits; that is, clusters of established inclinations to think or act this way rather than that (see PP I, 104-28). Temperament marks out paths we can traverse. It is no more subjective than are our habits (say, of driving a car or throwing a ball), since our "common-sense prejudices and instincts are themselves the fruit of an empirical evolution" (VRE, 264; 257). Temperament is, for good or ill, a socialized setup of possibilities—"the voice of human experience within us" (VRE, 265; 259). Insofar as our educated behaviors enable us to deal effectively with reality, they are truths. The fittest of these cumulative truths *tend* to survive, while the unfit tend to be eliminated (see VRE, 266; 259).

But temperament also makes the world uniquely mine or yours. We weave our individual tapestries from the shared strands of an otherwise inexpressive chaos. A life may be composed in a major or minor key; our affinities may lie with "flowers and birds and all enchanting innocencies," or we may inhabit a world of "dark human passions" (VRE, 73; 77). Disparate worlds are woven from the same strands.

Temperament both educates our expectations and has a blinding effect. If something contradicts our point of view—say, contradicts our theory—we may simply not *attend* to it because it does not *interest* us. Temperament guides our purposes and interests, which in turn guide our attention. This selective attention explains why novelties that would jar prior commitments usually escape our notice.

The phenomenon of selective attention sheds light on the aesthetics of rationality. When we *must* modify old opinions, we marry new truth to old with "a minimum of jolt and a maximum of continuity" (PM, 35; 31). Marrying new truth with old thus gives an aesthetic continuity to experience.²⁸

What, briefly, is involved in this aesthetic continuity? As experienced,

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the quest for truth is story-structured—it is toward resolution of discordance, not objective correspondence. "Things tell a story," James writes. Events fall "into a dramatic form [an "aesthetic union"], with a start, a middle, and a finish" (PM, 70; 67). When the drama of rationality brings conflicts to a fitting close, thought turns elsewhere.

We are in a dynamic and purposive process of *composing* our experience just as the composer of music configures a tone with a heightened sense for the dying echo of the prefigured flow of tones and a dawning sense of the future flow (see PP I, 246; 255). The present is funded by the past, it *fits* the past and inclines us toward "the next day's funding operations" (PM, 107; 101). Rationality, then, is a story-structured, aesthetic capacity (or, to employ Paul Ricoeur's and Alasdair MacIntyre's terms, it is "narratively structured").²⁹

V. This Rational Sentiment can Emerge from Trust in a Situation's Potentialities

How can we exclude from the cognition of a truth a faith which is involved in the creation of the truth? (SR, 84; 340)

There is "a certain kind of truth" (WB, 28; 24) which can emerge from a sort of faith because faith—preparedness to act even though doubt remains plausible—is the origin of personal contribution. We act as if something were true, and our experience *may* continue to confirm it.

In "The Sentiment of Rationality," James uses a formula, "Mx," to discuss this, where "M" stands for mundane phenomena, "the entire world *minus* the reaction of the thinker upon it," and "x" stands for our personal contribution as vitalized by faith (SR, 81; 338). "M" has countless possibilities which "x" can actualize. For example, for a pessimistic temperament, "M + x expresses a state of things totally bad. The man's belief supplied all that was lacking to make it so, and now that it is made so the belief was right" (SR, 83; 339).

In an indeterminate world, the self-fulfilling prophecy is the lifeblood of personal and social growth. A sort of faith or trust, then, must be admitted "as an ultimate ethical factor" (SR, 82; 339). This is James's "will to believe" hypothesis. One may "run the *risk of acting as if...*" (WB, 31; 27) something were true in cases where "faith in a fact can help create the fact" (WB, 29; 25). Nonetheless, faith is checked by the recalcitrance of self and world. Faith does not move mountains, nor can it instill beliefs without a mainspring in established habit and temperament. James denies the possibility of such moral magic. The will to believe is *not* the "will to make-believe." I offer James's plea on behalf of a predicament that he felt so painfully in his own life:

When you find a man living on the ragged edge of his consciousness, pent in to his sin and want and incompleteness, and consequently inconsolable, and then simply tell him that all is well with him, that he must stop his worry, break with his discontent, and give up his anxiety, you seem to him to come with pure absurdities. The only positive consciousness he has tells him that all is *not* well, and the better way you offer sounds simply as if you proposed to him to assert cold-blooded falsehoods. "The will to believe" cannot be stretched as far as that. We can make ourselves more faithful to a belief of which we have the rudiments, but we cannot create a belief out of whole cloth when our perception actively assures us of its opposite (VRE, 174; 173).

VI. Rationality is Practical

All our theories are *instrumental*, are mental modes of *adaptation* to reality (PM, 94; 87).

Beliefs often falter when challenged by novel situations so that an adaptation of a former way of acting is demanded. Since we are active participants in the world, not disengaged spectators of it, thoughts are concrete *acts*, and knowing is an instrument for the enriched satisfaction of our ever-emerging practical purposes.

Engaged problem-solving is central rather than peripheral to our rationality. Thus a view of truth as immutable and encyclopedic, or as in any way springing from outside of the natural and human arena, contributes little to the human endeavor. We must not, says Peirce, look at the future "as something that will have been past."³⁰ We must not, James echoes, "pretend that the eternal is unrolling, that the one previous... truth [is] simply fulgurating and not being made" (PM, 116; 110).

James remakes the intellectual architecture of modernity, toppling the traditional assumption that our reasonings and actions can be measured by an absolute standard. In its place he offers a new model of rationality—one that recognizes its ineliminatively temporal, aesthetic, evolving, embodied, and practical character. Rejecting the Janus faces of foundational certitude and radical relativism, James transfers the burdens of reflective life to situated human intelligence. With this intelligence we can no longer pretend to escape the perils that accompany the freedom to co-compose our own lives.

Note on Citations and Abbreviations

Citations from James are to *The Works of William James*, edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press). Citations are abbreviated SR for "The Sentiment of Rationality," PP, I and PP, II for *The Principles of Psychology* Volumes I and II, WB for "The Will to Believe," VRE for *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, PM for *Pragmatism*,

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MT for *The Meaning of Truth*, ERE for *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, and PU for *A Pluralistic Universe*. Harvard citations are followed by a page reference to a more widely accessible edition where this seemed helpful. I have selected the following editions for cross-references: *Pragmatism* (1907; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981).

The Principles of Psychology, Vols. I and II (1890; New York: Dover).

"The Sentiment of Rationality," In John McDermott, ed., *The Writings of William James* (1882; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902; New York: Mentor, 1958).

"The Will To Believe," in *The Will To Believe and other essays in popular philosophy* (1896; New York: Dover).

A Pluralistic Universe (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909).

Notes

¹ See Charlene Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (SUNY Press, 1990) for a discussion of James's hesitancy.

² E. M. Adams, *The Metaphysics of Self and World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 30.

³ James's realism is similar to Dewey's. In his Introduction to *Essays in Experimental Logic*, Dewey acknowledges "that certain brute existences, detected or laid bare by thinking but in no way constituted out of thought or any mental process, set every problem for reflection and hence serve to test its otherwise merely speculative results" (MW 10:341). This serves to distinguish James and Dewey both from idealists and objectivists. Contrary to idealism, James and Dewey do not "start with a power, an entity or substance or activity which is ready-made thought or reason and which as such constitutes the world" (MW 10:338). Contrary to analytic realism or objectivism, they deny that "even though it [experimentalism] were essential in *getting* knowledge (or in learning), it has nothing to do with knowledge itself, and hence nothing to do with the known object: that it makes a change in the knower, not in what is to be known" (MW 10:339). These 1903 "Chicago school" *Essays* influenced James.

⁴ As will be discussed, James's distinction here between ideas and realities is functional rather than ontological or epistemological.

⁵ On the sculpting metaphor, see PM, 119; 112 and PP, I, 277; 288-89. Cf. PU, 9-10 and WB, 103. James uses numerous other metaphors to emphasize distinctive features of consciousness, a fact discussed by Seigfried in *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*, 209-235.

⁶ Adams, *Metaphysics of Self and World*, 30.

⁷ This debate has continued unabated. For a contemporary misreading of James (and Dewey) along these lines, see Roderick Chisolm, *The Foundations of Knowing* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 190.

⁸ The other installment of Bain's two volume *magnum opus* is *The Senses and the Intellect*, published in 1855. In the mid-nineteenth century, J.S. Mill and Bain (1818-1903) were the two standard psychologists, both associationist, of the English-speaking world. Herbert Spencer and Bain shared this influence in the

later nineteenth century. See Max Fisch, "Alexander Bain and the Genealogy of Pragmatism," in *Peirce, Semiotic, and Pragmatism*, ed. Ketter and Kloessel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 79-109.

⁹ In Fisch, *Peirce, Semiotic, and Pragmatism*, 92-3.

¹⁰ In Max Fisch, "Alexander Bain and the Genealogy of Pragmatism," in *Peirce, Semiotic, and Pragmatism*, 86. This is quoted from a "Note on the chapter on Belief" in an 1872 edition of *Mental Science*. Bain writes in the 1899 *Emotions* of "two opposing tendencies" in belief, namely "primitive credulity" and "acquired scepticism." "In our beliefs, therefore, we are placed between two urgencies; the primitive tendency to accept whatever has not yet been contradicted, and the depressing or discouraging effect of contradictions" (513). Experience is indeed the greatest teacher. "In those checks and interruptions of the primitive tendency, experience comes to the rescue by purifying and correcting the sequence, and giving it a shape that no longer brings disappointment" (515-16). Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1899).

¹¹ In Fisch, *Peirce, Semiotic, and Pragmatism*, 93 (CP 5.12). By "pragmatism," Peirce is here referring to his 1871-73 *Popular Science Monthly* articles, "The Fixation of Belief" and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear."

¹² On James's threefold distinction, see, e.g., PM, 102; 96, 119; 111-12, and MT, 129.

¹³ Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (Open Court, 1987), 16-21.

¹⁴ It is difficult to see how an "eternal" conceptual world could be consistent with James's contention that "relations of ideas" are not "without the human touch." Perhaps because James was hesitant to go as far as Dewey did in accepting the radical implications of a pragmatic reconstruction of rationality (Seigfried's contention), James neglects to carry his thought to its logical fruition and therefore finds himself involved in contradictions.

¹⁵ On the "horizon," see: Harvard edition PP.I, 246-47, 249-50, 270-71, 446-47, PP, II, 695; Dover edition PP.I, 255-56, 258-59, 281-82, 472-73, PP.II, 49. The notion of a "horizon" has been more fully articulated since James. The horizon is the field of experience upon which all meaning is dependent. Dewey elaborates it as a pervasive, "underlying qualitative character that constitutes a situation" (LW 5:248, "Qualitative Thought"). In his Introduction to *Essays in Experimental Logic*, Dewey criticizes James's use of the "penumbra" and "fringe" metaphors because they suggest something peripheral to rather than suffusing experience. Hans-Georg Gadamer writes of his and Husserl's use of the term: "According to *Husserliana* VI, p. 267, the concepts of 'horizon' and of 'horizon consciousness' were in part suggested by William James' idea of 'fringes.'" In *Truth and Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 521, 138n. Constituting an enlarged horizon is the essence of education into the established patterns of interpretation of the community: the social horizon. See also Thomas Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (SUNY Press, 1987).

¹⁶ James's *The Meaning of Truth* is a sustained defense of the pragmatic conception of "agreement with reality" (against such critics as Bertrand Russell).

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For example, James refutes "the slanderous charge that we deny real existence.... [T]he existence of the object whenever the idea asserts it 'truly,' is the only reason, in innumerable cases, why the idea does work successfully, if it work at all" (MT, 8).

¹⁷ James frequently alludes, for example, to the way somatic sensations pervade conscious activity, forming a felt horizon that orients us in the world. Although his account is less developed than the work of Merleau-Ponty, Piaget, Gibson, and most recently, Mark Johnson, James's corpus is characterized by his recognition that mental experience has a bodily basis. He asserts: "Our entire feeling of spiritual activity, or what commonly passes by that name, is really a feeling of bodily activities whose exact nature is by most men overlooked" (PP.I, 288; 301-2). Anticipating Mark Johnson's recent work on "image schemas," James even speaks of schematic structures of imagination that emerge from our embodiment. He writes, for example: "In reasoning I find that I am apt to have a kind of vaguely localized diagram in my mind, with the various fractional objects of the thought disposed at particular points thereof, and the oscillations of my attention from one of them to another are most distinctly felt as alternations of direction in movements occurring inside the head" (PP.I, 287-88; 300-01). For a detailed discussion of the embodied basis of cognition, see Mark Johnson, *The Body In The Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). A major forthcoming work on the subject by Mark Johnson and George Lakoff is *Philosophy in the Flesh* (Basic Books, 1998). For a treatment of James's views on the interpenetration of the mental and physical in the context of Johnson's work on embodiment, see Steven Fesmire, "Aerating the Mind: The Metaphor of Mental Functioning As Bodily Functioning," *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* (Vol. 9, No. 1, 1994).

¹⁸ "Surely," James argues (implicitly against Peirce), "the individual, the person in the singular number, is the more fundamental phenomenon, and the social institution of whatever grade, is but secondary and ministerial" (from James, *Memories and Studies*, quoted in McDermott, *Streams of Experience*, 44). James acknowledges the "social self" as one among numerous aspects of the self, but, unlike Dewey and Mead, he does not focus on the self as irreducibly social. In the *Principles*, he does not advance far beyond the fact that humans are "gregarious animals" (see PP.I, 281-83; 293-96 and PP.II, 1047; 430 and PP.I, 300-302; 314-17). James tips his hat toward the social self in "The Will to Believe," acknowledging that the patterns of interpretation of the community are essential to our temperament. Our "pre-existing tendencies" to believe this or that, he notes, grow in an "intellectual climate." "Our faith is faith in some one else's faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case" (WB, 18; 9). "Our social system backs us up" (WB, 18; 9). He takes this up again in the *Varieties* via Jonathan Edwards' encultured schemas of religious conversion (VRE, 165; 165). But he immediately returns to "first hand and original" experiences of *individuals*. He tries to go beyond the social to get at "original" experiential phenomena. Later, in *A Pluralistic Universe*, James defends his attack on Absolute idealism by observing how diverse life-stories interweave: "The world that each of us feels most intimately at home

with is that of beings with histories that play into our history, whom we can help in their vicissitudes even as they help us in ours" (PU, 49). Cf. PU, 31-2. Also, see PM, 71; 67 on "interlacing" narratives, and PM, 139; 130 on the "social scheme" in conduct. For a general account of James's conception of the self, see John McDermott's "The Promethean Self and Community in the Philosophy of William James," *In Streams of Experience* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986).

¹⁹ This is supported in recent work by the linguist George Lakoff. See Lakoff's *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

²⁰ See "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" and "La Notion de Conscience," in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 105-117. A summary of the second part of "La Notion de Conscience" may be helpful: James suggests that we try to understand the notion of consciousness not by presupposing the heterogeneity of the mental and physical, but by starting with *the stuff of experience* as such. If we take experience as our starting point (thus blending subject and object at the outset) we find that this "inveterate dualism which seems impossible to drive away from our view of the world" is in fact a purely *contextual* phenomenon. The *same* root experience (which James calls a "pure experience") becomes either a mental or physical phenomenon because of the practical situation, i.e., because of the purposes that we have. The audience's experience of the lecture room takes on a conscious aspect when considered from the point of view of the experience of an individual who will always regard the room as an integral part of his or her own personal history. But this same "pure experience" of the room takes on a very different hue if "experienced as" (in Wittgenstein's terms) a physical thing, say, in the context of considering the room's relatedness to other rooms in the same building, or in considering the building's construction history. It is "absolutely the same stuff," James contends, that, depending on the context in which it is conceived, becomes either mental or physical. Thus the notion of consciousness is one of *function*, not of *ontology*. Consciousness does not "exist." For insight into controversies surrounding the first appearance of James's theory of pure experience, see Eugene Taylor and Robert H. Wozniak, *Pure Experience: The Response to William James* (Theonnes Press, 1996).

²¹ Anglo-American philosophy has tended toward such views. As a prototypical example, consider D. M. Armstrong's treatment of belief: "Beliefs... are structures in the mind of the believer which represent or 'map' reality.... The *truth* of propositions, and so the truth of what is believed, is determined by the correspondence of actual or possible belief-states, thoughts or assertions to reality." See D. M. Armstrong, *Belief, Truth and Knowledge* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

²² In *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 16 (1907), 625.

²³ See W. V. O. Quine's work on the underdetermination of our statements by facts or data. Formulations, Quine observes, do not exhaust the existent. There is no one-to-one correspondence between language and fact. Our concern must be with the importance of a given statement within our larger web of beliefs. Contrary

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things. Such descriptions must be seen in the larger context of our belief systems. Because the denial of certain beliefs demands an overhaul of our belief system, we must discover in what ways a belief will either jostle or harmonize with this system. Although James would find Quine's view of interweaving beliefs promising, he might argue that Quine is not adequately responsive to the extra-mental factors involved in disrupting our established beliefs. Truth as fluid interaction entails more than a coherence of funded truths.

²⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, W. Kaufmann, Trans., (1887; New York: Vintage, 1989), III, 12, 119.

²⁵ This article, as printed in *The Will to Believe* (1897), is a composite of two articles. The original was printed in *Mind*, 1879, 4, 317-346. McDermott, in the bibliography of *The Writings of William James*, writes: "About one-fifth of this [original] essay was combined with [a second article from] 1888...., and reprinted in 1897,.... This new article bears the name of 'The Sentiment of Rationality,' but is not to be confused with the original article. The latter is reprinted entire in 1920" (819).

²⁶ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Trans. W. Pluhar (1790; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), S. 17, Ak. 231.

²⁷ Citations for *A Pluralistic Universe* are to the 1909 Longmans, Green, and Co. edition.

²⁸ That James saw the aesthetic to be intimately woven with temperament is made explicit in *A Pluralistic Universe*, 12 (cf. PU, 45). For a more thorough discussion of the aesthetic dimension of rationality, in its aspects of *unity or simplicity* (the drive to give coherent form to the relative chaos with which we are confronted) and *clarity* (to be understood along the lines of Hume's "vividness" of sense impressions), see Seigfried's *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*, 30f. In James, see especially the first (1879) version of "The Sentiment of Rationality," which makes distinctions concerning the aesthetic that are not found in James's revised essay.

²⁹ Much recent work in this direction goes under the vague term "narrative." See, e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* and Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, especially Vol. 1, chapt. 3, "Time and Narrative: Threefold Mimesis." Also see Mark Johnson's *Moral Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), chapt. 7. Johnson writes: "Narrative in my sense is not merely linguistic and textual. Rather, I shall argue that *narrative characterizes the synthetic character of our very experience*, and it is figured in our daily activities and projects. The stories we tell emerge from, and can then refigure, the narrative structure of our experience" (163).

³⁰ Peirce, "Letters to Lady Welby," in Weiner, ed., *Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings* (New York: Dover), 386.