In this study, Russell Goodman explores Wittgenstein’s long engagement with the work of the pragmatist William James. He argues that James exerted a distinctive and pervasive positive influence on Wittgenstein’s thought. The book details the commitments of these two philosophers to concrete human experience, the priority of practice over intellect, and the importance of religion in understanding human life.

Tracing in detail what Wittgenstein learned from *The Principles of Psychology* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the author provides considerable support for Wittgenstein’s claim that he is saying “something that sounds like pragmatism.” Goodman finds that Wittgenstein displays a pragmatist philosophical persona – attuned to the human interests served by our theorizing, flexible enough to move on without having every question answered.

This provocative account of the convergence in thinking of two major philosophers usually seen as members of discrete traditions will be welcomed by students of Wittgenstein, William James, pragmatism, and the history of twentieth-century philosophy.

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Wittgenstein and William James

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For Anne
“The books of all the great philosophers are like so many men. Our sense of an essential personal flavor in each one of them, typical but indescribable, is the finest fruit of our own accomplished philosophic education.”

William James (P, 24)

“The difficulty is to know one’s way about among the concepts of ‘psychological phenomena’. . . one has got to master the kinships and differences of the concepts. As someone is master of the transition from any key to any other one, modulates from one to the other.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein (RPP, 1054)

“Concepts lead us to make investigations; are the expression of our interest, and direct our interest.”

Wittgenstein (PI, 570)

“. . . the world can be handled according to many systems of ideas, and is so handled by different men, and will each time give some characteristic kind of profit, for which he cares, to the handler, while at the same time some other kind of profit has to be omitted or postponed. . . science and . . . religion are both of them genuine keys for unlocking the world’s treasure-house to him who can use either of them practically.”

William James (VRE, 116)
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Preface

I first began to think about James and Wittgenstein while working through the *Wittgenstein Workbook* published in 1970 by Christopher Coope, Peter Geach, Timothy Potts, and Roger White. Near the end of this slim but useful volume is a one-page list of parallel passages from James’s *The Principles of Psychology* and Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. Over the years, as I discussed the readings from this list in seminars, I learned to free myself from the view of the relationship between Wittgenstein and James that was enunciated by the authors of the *Workbook*—and many others. For according to this “received view,” James was important for Wittgenstein primarily because he committed, in a clear, exemplary manner, fundamental errors in the philosophy of mind. I found that although Wittgenstein did find such errors in *The Principles of Psychology*, he loved William James, both as a personality in his own writings and as a philosopher. I learned that *The Principles* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* exerted a vast positive influence on Wittgenstein’s philosophy, early and late.

In 1990, on a trip to Cambridge sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, I discussed Wittgenstein and James with Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe, both of whom attended Wittgenstein’s classes in the late 1940s. Wittgenstein considered using James’s *Principles* as a text for these classes, and the published notes by his students, including Geach, show that it was a main object of study. When I asked Professor Anscombe if Wittgenstein had ever referred to other texts of James in his lectures or conversations, particularly
Preface

Pragmatism, she uttered a statement that haunted me for years: not only had Wittgenstein not read Pragmatism, she told me vehemently; but if he had read it, he would have hated it.

The Wittgenstein Workbook makes no mention of Wittgenstein’s ambiguous relation to pragmatism. This topic was first treated at some length in Robin Haack’s 1982 paper “Wittgenstein and Pragmatism.” It was raised in a previous paper, “Must We Mean What We Say?” (1958), by Stanley Cavell, whose remarks about pragmatism I consider in Chapters 1 and 6. However, the earliest commentator on Wittgenstein’s relation to pragmatism is Wittgenstein himself. Twice in writings from the last four years of his life he considers, uneasily, his own relation to pragmatism. I begin with one of these occasions in Chapter 1, and I consider the second in Chapter 6. These chapters on pragmatism frame the book’s interior chapters on Wittgenstein’s readings of James’s Principles of Psychology and Varieties of Religious Experience.

The question of Wittgenstein’s pragmatism cannot be adequately considered without an assessment of his relationship to James; and an assessment of his relation to James requires an assessment of his relation to pragmatism.

I am especially indebted to William C. Dowling and Richard Gale for advice and commentary on the manuscript of Wittgenstein and William James. I also received helpful comments from Steven Affeldt, Thomas Alexander, Tom Burke, John Bussanich, Stanley Cavell, James Conant, Linda Dowling, David Dunaway, Timothy Gould, Susan Haack, Barbara Hannan, Larry Hickman, Christopher Hookway, Alasdair MacIntyre, John McDermott, Brian McGuinness, David Owen, Fred Schueler, Ken Stikkers, Ellen Suckiel, Sergio Tenenbaum, Bruce Wilshire, Aladdin Yaqūb, and readers for Cambridge University Press. The Department of Philosophy and the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of New Mexico provided unstinting support for my research, including a sabbatical leave, for which I would particularly like to thank Dean William C. Gordon and Dean Michael Fischer. Thanks also to audiences at sessions of the American Philosophical Association, Pacific and Central Divisions, and the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, where I presented parts of the book; and to audiences at the Universities of Hertford, Sheffield, Southampton, and Pennsylvania. Thanks to Donna Rivera and Gabriel Camacho for checking citations.
Preface

As always, my children, Elizabeth and Jacob, contributed in untold ways to my writing. I dedicate this book to their mother – my wife, friend, and companion, Anne Doughty Goodman.

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Abbreviations

Works by Ludwig Wittgenstein


Abbreviations


The numbers following the Wittgenstein abbreviations are either section numbers (e.g., TLP, 6.32) or page numbers (e.g., LE, 79).

Works by William James


All of the numbers following the James abbreviations are page numbers (e.g., PP, 472).