Introduction

James and Politics

When William James surveyed the world at the dawn of the twentieth century, he was often prone to despair. He saw extreme, gilded-age, extreme disparities of wealth. He contemplated poverty-stricken families so destitute that a father, too sick to provide for his children, would commit suicide. He saw privileged young adults devoting themselves to the advancement of their careers, unconcerned with others' welfare. Deep divides in the polity troubled him: class divisions fraught with mutual misunderstanding and hostility. Political corruption disgusted him. Lynch mobs alarmed him. He worried that his fellow citizens were conforming unthinkingly to the status quo political culture, acquiescing to the powers that be. And his severest reaction came against what he regarded as a sudden shift in US values from democracy to imperialism. He was genuinely surprised – and outraged – by the US invasion of the Philippines in 1899. Wealth inequality, unjust and imperialistic American wars of aggression, white supremacy, corrupt elites, and a docile electorate: his world and his concerns sound remarkably like ours.

But did James have any proposals to address these issues? Did he have a constructive vision for how to contest these maladies? Did he have a political philosophy that could account for social ills and oppose them? Most of his readers have thought not. James has exercised enormous influence on a range of topics in the disciplines of psychology, epistemology, metaphysics, and religion. In a life (1842–1910) that spanned the Civil War, the gilded age, and the opening decade of the twentieth century, he shaped the intellectual culture of the North Atlantic through his decades-long career at Harvard, first teaching anatomy, then psychology, then philosophy; through the lectures he delivered nationally and internationally; and through his books and published essays. He still deservedly enjoys his reputation as a founder of modern psychology, as an originator of the

American philosophical school called pragmatism, and as one of the greatest figures in American religious thought. But many regard him as silent on the topic of political theory.

It is true that James has few explicit discussions of political philosophy. But a theme pervades his work that challenges the apolitical reading: individuality. James hopes for a world in which individuals will creatively express their own particular ideals and values. And the flip side of individuality is pluralism. James's taste for plurality and variety when it comes to religion is famous: one only need consult the title of his classic text, *Varieties of Religious Experience.* In that book, he does not promote any particular religious tradition as exclusively true, but he casts as broad a net as he can, celebrating the diversity of people's religiosity. And James's promotion of variety is not limited to religious matters. His vision for human life in general welcomes difference and novelty.

Given that individuality and pluralism are political ideals often linked to democracy, does that mean James has a political philosophy? An increasing number of scholars are answering yes. In a break from the prior consensus that James ignores political theory, a new interpretation is emerging. A growing company of historians and political philosophers have begun to mine his writings for a philosophy of public life. They argue that his commitment to individuality and pluralism are political in nature. If they are right, then political ideas suffuse James's writings, serving as a constant backdrop to everything he is doing, even if they infrequently appear in the foreground.

Are they right? No one doubts that individuality is a central theme in James's corpus. But widespread disagreement persists as to what the political significance of James's individualism is, and indeed, whether there is any. James has been pegged as a quietist, anarchist, republican, libertarian, radical democrat, and liberal! Furthermore, despite the increased attention scholars are giving to his political thought and despite the well-known centrality of individualism and pluralism to his religious thought, hardly anyone has discussed the connections between James's philosophy of religion and his political philosophy. Scholars of religion have not addressed his political thought and scholars of politics have not addressed his religious thought.[1]

[1] Deborah Coon and Jeremy Carrette both discuss the political implications of James's views on religion, so they are important exceptions to the general rule that the literatures on James's political philosophy and philosophy of religion are exclusive of each other. Deborah T. Coon, "'One Moment in the World's Salvation': Anarchism and the Radicalization of William James," *Journal of American*

In this book, I will explore James's understanding of individualism extensively, offering an account that shows not only that individuality is political for James, but that it is political in a specific way: individuality is at the heart of James's understanding of democracy, and indeed we can best describe James's politics as one of democratic individuality. Further, I will argue that the individuality that sits at the heart of James's understanding of religion is itself political in nature. *Varieties* famously defines religion in individualistic terms, as the "feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (VRE 34). Some have thought that James's individualistic religion is politically quietistic, but I will argue that the opposite is the case. And not only do James's political commitments affect his understanding of religion, an unconventional sort of religion is for him part and parcel of the political life he valorizes. He thinks that morality and politics demand an activist commitment on the part of agents. Religion has a vital motivational role in sustaining such activism.

No one doubts that James is committed to individualism, but the key thing is to figure out what his individualism involves. (Some authors distinguish significantly between "individualism" and "individuality," but I will use both words more or less interchangeably to refer to a philosophy, practice, or attitude that regards in principle every person as distinct from others in their group and that values these differences.) At present there are very few systematic investigations of the political ramifications of James's conception of individualism, and no book-length treatments of his conception of individualism as a political ideal.[2] My conviction is that a sustained analysis of individualism across his corpus will bring clarity to the nature of James's political ideas. James's political philosophy is individualistic in that it poses qualities of individuals as the centrally important feature of democracy. James's hopes for democracy do not reside, in the first instance, in laws, institutions, or political parties. He thinks that institutions and organizations have inherent tendencies to foreclose individuality, fostering instead docility and

History 83, no. 1 (June 1996): 70–99; Jeremy R. Carrette, *William James's Hidden Religious Imagination: A Universe of Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2013). I discuss Coon and Carrette critically below. Another exception is Alexander Livingston, who rightly connects James's figure of the saint in *Varieties* to his anti-imperialism. Alexander Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!: William James and the Politics of Pragmatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 90–95.

[2] James O. Pawelski has a book-length treatment of James's individualism, but the discussion does not reference political matters except briefly in passing. James O. Pawelski, *The Dynamic Individualism of William James* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

unquestioning conformity. All the more so the larger they are. Behemoths have extraordinary power, and if inhabited by members who do not critically evaluate the institutions' means and ends, they can inflict enormous harm. So in James's perspective, democracy resides first and foremost not in governmental institutions or in procedures such as voting. It is to the citizens we must look: if enough individuals possess democratic habits and attitudes, then laws, institutions, and political parties will form in ways that serve individuality instead of snuffing it. The mere fact that James emphasizes personal qualities like habits, as opposed to institutions, does not in and of itself make him an individualist, since a virtue theorist or civic republican could hold that personal qualities of character are what matters politically but advocate that people's habits conform to those of their group. To be sure, James wants to see certain shared habits, but the habits in question are ones that foster attitudes of treating – in important ways – oneself and one another as distinct from the group. James also endorses treating people as members of a group in certain respects, so his views on the relation between groups and individuals are complicated. But the attitudes that take oneself and others to be distinct from the group are essential to what democracy is for James.

James's response to the evils of imperialism, poverty, and corruption, then, is to see the development of democratic traits among the citizenry. He is not opposed to institutional reform, but institutional reform must be rooted in the development of democratic individuality among the populace. A reform is legitimate to the extent that it fosters or is based in the development of citizens' democratic qualities. Any attempt to reform institutions that does not address the conduct and attitudes of citizens will ultimately fail to resolve the problem for which the reform is intended and will no doubt cause new problems as well.

To address from the outset the potential for some misunderstandings, I want to be clear that individuality, for James, is not the default state of people. It is not a given. If anything, docile conformity is our default state. Democratic individuality is something that must be cultivated in an ongoing endeavor. Its cultivation requires the assistance of education and public intellectuals, as we shall see, but ultimately it is the work of the individuals themselves. And the cultivation of democratic individuality, though it aims for relative independence of thought and conduct, is not out to break ties with the community or achieve self-sufficiency. James's selves, even at their most individualistic, are thoroughly interdependent with their social and natural surroundings. To cultivate one's individual identity is not to abnegate one's group identity; rather, a group identity is

a precondition for the cultivation of individuality. We should not think of Jamesian individuality as atomism, egoism, or libertarianism. A commitment to individualism is not restricted to one's own individuality, it is for the individuality of all; it is a commitment to see that one's fellow citizens have material resources and a cultural and institutional environment in which to cultivate their distinct outlook and vocation.

The Four Qualities of Jamesian Individualism

What then are the qualities of the individual that constitute democratic individuality? My explication of James's individualism in this book will focus on four themes that recur throughout his writings. For James, individualism, in its political dimension, consists primarily of the qualities of mind, emotion, and conduct that I will identify under these headings: responsibility, sensitivity to strangers, meliorism, and religiousness. Each of these in some way orients us toward individuals – one's self and others – as distinct from the groups in which they live.

First, the Jamesian individual is one who is responsible. To be responsible for oneself is to regard oneself as not merely a passive product of one's environment. Individuals who are responsible are ones who critically evaluate their beliefs, values, and conduct. One regards oneself as in some sense capable of shaping one's own life. This does not mean we generate our beliefs for ourselves by ourselves. James admits that we receive from our society a great deal of our beliefs and values. His account of individualism is not a tale of self-contained, self-sufficient units. Our personal identity is constituted in part by others' recognition of us (PP 1.279–281). Further, we are to a large degree made up of habits that are socially shared and socially acquired (PP 1.109). A sizeable portion of our knowledge is inherited: "We plunge forward into the field of fresh experience with the beliefs our ancestors and we have made already" (P 122). James is so attuned to the sociality of the self that he can say that his philosophy is "essentially a *social* philosophy, a philosophy of '*co*'" (ERE 99).

But just the same, James labels his philosophy as individualistic (CWJ 8.521–522). We are highly determined by our social context, but the small bit of ourselves that enables us to make our own way is what occupies James's thoughts: "There is very little difference between one man and another; but what little there is, *is very important*" (WB 191). And one important thing that makes his philosophy individualistic is that he wants us reflectively and critically to take the values, beliefs, and patterns of conduct that we acquire through socialization and make them our own.

It is not enough to persist passively and unthinkingly in one's socially inherited perspective.

So the capacity to shape one's own life should not be construed as a type of self-determination that occurs independently of our social setting or as a self-authorship so thorough that it owes nothing to anything but the self. Rather, the sort of creative self-fashioning that James has in mind has to do with seeing oneself as capable of making interventions in the self as received from society. This is a matter of directing and redirecting the self in particular ways, not self-creation ex nihilo. "We are spinning our own fates," James says (PP 1.130–131). In "Will to Believe," he describes our orientation toward life's meaning and significance as a "choice": "Each must act as he thinks best" (WB 33). In "What Makes a Life Significant," James says that a meaningful life must be conducted in pursuit of ideals that grasp the individual and that are specific to the individual (a worthy ideal for one person might not be for another). Our conduct in matters of what makes our life significant cannot be a matter of "sodden routine," it must express our commitment to consciously held ideals (TT 163). He tells us, in "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," that "each one of us has some single specialized vocation of his own" and that each "should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings" (TT 138, 149).

We are responsible not just for the conscious selection and pursuit of the ideals by which we live our lives, but also for our beliefs more broadly. James's political individuals are ones who regard themselves as an epistemic authority. Again, James is keenly aware of the large extent to which we are dependent on our society and history for our beliefs and values. Nevertheless, individuals still play an essential role in the development of their beliefs and values. James wants people to recognize this role, and he rejects any notion of uncritical deference to epistemic authorities, whether such authorities are political, moral, religious, or philosophical. James celebrates that "the authority of 'the State,' and that of an absolute 'moral law,' have resolved themselves into expediencies, and holy church has resolved itself into 'meeting-houses,'" and he chides, "Not so as yet within the philosophic class-rooms" (P 125). When people recognize the role of human behavior in constituting knowledge generally and their own role as individuals in determining their particular body of knowledge, they will appropriately regard their "dignity and . . . responsibility as thinkers" (P 123). For James, knowledge in important cases comes from a process that involves acquiring new candidates for belief, for example through perception or the testimony of others, and accepting the belief for oneself or not

in accordance to whether it coheres with one's existing beliefs (P 34–37). Since the stock of existing beliefs varies from person to person (though it is to a wide degree shared), whether or not one accepts a candidate for belief can vary from person to person. Further, one's choices about that to which one gives one's attention affect the possible candidates for belief to which one will be exposed. If I look left, I will acquire one set of beliefs; if right, another. Even the standards employed to determine whether or not to accept a candidate for belief vary, and James thinks this is a good thing (P 36, 118–119). In this conception of knowledge, it is not that one never defers to external epistemic authorities, but rather one does so consciously and critically. One's own authority consists in part in one's awareness of one's own role in determining the epistemic authorities to which one will defer.

The political implication that follows from being aware of one's own epistemic authority is that one will not relate to any single political (or religious or moral) authority in an unquestioning, uncritical manner, but will regard oneself as responsible to sift through others' claims to determine how well such claims mesh with one's own perspective, values, and attitudes and how well the claims mesh with what one knows to be true from other epistemic sources. James's worry is that we will conform to the norms of our social and political institutions uncritically and so participate in the evils that such institutions are prone to commit. He expresses this worry most eloquently and forcefully in his letters.

> I am against bigness & greatness in all their forms; and with the invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets or like the capillary oozing of water, and yet rending the hardest monuments of man's pride, if you give them time. The bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed. So I am against all big organizations as such, national ones first and foremost, against all big successes and big results. (CWJ 8.546)

"The individual," he says in another letter, "as soon as he realizes that the machine will be irresistible, acquiesces silently, instead of making an impotent row . . . We defend our rotten system. Acquiescence becomes active partnership."[3] In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James sets aside the study of religious institutions to focus on the individual's experiences. He worries about the "second-hand" religion of the "ordinary religious believer, who follows the conventional observances of his country, whether it be Buddhist, Christian, or Mohammedan. His religion has been made

[3] Quoted in Coon, "One Moment," 91.

for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit." It is the "original experiences" that James wants to study, where the "relation goes direct from heart to heart, from soul to soul, between man and his maker" (VRE 15, 32–33). He thinks that the second-hand religion of institutions has strong tendencies to produce the serious evils of authoritarian abuse, domination, and violence, for example, "the baiting of Jews, the hunting of Albigenses and Waldenses, the stoning of Quakers and ducking of Methodists, the murdering of Mormons and the massacring of Armenians." Religion too easily serves as a "mask" of piety that allows xenophobia to unleash persecution on heretics and outsiders (VRE 271).

Responsibility for beliefs and conduct is not just an individual matter for James, it is also corporate. One of the hallmarks of pragmatism is the emphasis on the collective human role – and human responsibility – for knowledge and truth. "The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything," says James (P 37). Collective human interests and needs play an essential role in determining how we conceptually classify our surroundings. Our assignment of meanings to terms is not an activity that occurs devoid of our practical projects, but is to facilitate those projects. This raises complicated questions about the objectivity of the truth of our assertions, which we shall examine in Chapter 2, but the point is that the universe does not impose itself on us in a way that makes human minds and languages passive, disinterested mirrors of nature. Similarly, in the case of our moral values, human activity, specifically the activity of making demands upon one another, is what generates morality. Neither God, nature, nor anything metaphysical dictates right and wrong independently of human social practices.

So unreflective conformity – and all that stems from it – is one of the primary evils with which James is concerned. Individualism opposes docility, fostering the ability of individuals to evaluate their received practices in order to reflect on the legitimacy of the practices and their effects, so as to endorse those that they regard as legitimate and contest those they do not.

The second quality of democratic individuality is that individuals are sensitive to others, especially strangers. Just as one holds oneself responsible for one's own beliefs and values, one regards others as responsible for theirs. One does not presume to understand their ideals, motives, goals, or preferences in advance of careful listening to their own articulation of these things. One tries not to foist one's own ideals upon others. James develops his account of sensitivity to others most extensively in his essay

"On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," which he described in a letter as "the perception on which my whole individualistic philosophy is based" (CWJ 8.521–522). In particular, James is concerned about how we evaluate the values of those who differ significantly from us. He is worried that we will discount the things about which others care if they are not things about which we care. By applying my own standard to others' concerns and behaviors, I act as though there is only one standard in the world: my own. In fact, according to James, there is a plurality of legitimate standards and systems of value. A democratic society should try to incorporate this plurality to the highest extent possible. "Hands off," he says, "neither the whole of truth, nor the whole of good, is revealed to any single observer." He challenges his readers to make the most of their own opportunities "without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field" (TT 149). Americans' inability to appreciate others' values led directly to imperialism and the country's deadly attack on the Philippines in 1899. He attributes the Americans' willingness to dominate the Filipinos to smug confidence that their political ideals are superior. He mocks the Americans' attitude: "We are here for your own good; therefore unconditionally surrender to our tender mercies, or we'll blow you into kingdom come" (ECR 156). In this case and more generally, the political significance of sensitivity or receptivity to others is that people who are responsive to the perspective of others will not support political policies that are developed without consultation with those who are affected. We should not presume to understand others' behavior and motives. We should approach the lives of strangers with a recognition that we are not competent to pronounce what is best for them; they must specify that themselves. We must cultivate the ability to listen carefully to others' accounts of their own values and preferences. What makes this sort of sensitivity to strangers individualistic is that in addition to refusing to impose my own cultural attitudes on another culture, I also must be sensitive to the way in which particular individuals do not subscribe to attitudes prevalent in their culture, always keeping in mind the irreducible differences between people and their groups.

The third quality of democratic individuality is meliorism. This word expresses the commitment of James and other pragmatists to work actively for the betterment of society. The effort is directed toward the improvement of misery and suffering that are caused or rectifiable by our societal arrangements. Jamesian individualism is not egoism, a concern for one's own well-being that stops at the borders of one's own self. Rather, it is a commitment to the development of individuality in one's peers as well as

in oneself, and this commitment is expressed first and foremost in working to alleviate social misery, since those who are homeless, sick, and hungry cannot easily devote resources to the attainment of individuality. So opposition to suffering and privation is both justifiable as an end in itself and because individuality requires resources. Meliorism is to be distinguished from optimism and pessimism. Optimism is an assurance that things will turn out well in human history, and thus it leads to passivity, since one thinks good outcomes will occur regardless of one's own agency. Pessimism has no hope at all, and so also undermines agency. Meliorism, in contrast, "treats salvation," however one might define it, "as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become" (P 137). The actions of people who regard themselves as agents in history make up the conditions of salvation. A collection of such agents participates in a "social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done" (P 139). An essential aspect of James's account of melioristic individuality is his belief in the creative potential of individuals. James thinks that even though people are to a high degree determined by the relatively stable habits and attitudes they inherit from their society, they are not limited to those fixities. Rather, they can generate novelty and if their social group appropriates this novelty, social change results (see Chapters 7 and 8).

The fourth quality of democratic individuality is religiousness. This is perhaps surprising, and certainly the most controversial quality of the four, since so many are of the opinion that religion and politics are properly kept separate. And many doubt that religious commitments are rational. For his part, James thinks that religion has a unique and vital role to play in democracies. It is important to note, though, that he has an unconventional understanding of religion, as we will shortly see. To understand the role of religion in democracy, we have to consider James's discussions of the strenuous life in *Varieties*, "Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," and elsewhere. James conceives of morality as quite demanding, so demanding that he can describe it as a war. Morality requires that we sacrificially put ideals and others' needs above our own narrow and personal interests. Furthermore, many of our moral endeavors will involve defeat, and in those moments, we need fortitude lest we despair and surrender hope. He thinks that it is extremely difficult to satisfy the demands of the moral life. Perhaps we can do it for a short while, but over the long haul, it becomes harder and harder to maintain one's motivation to live morally. What is required then is an ongoing "strenuous" attitude, by which one persists in