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WILLIAM JAMES ON DEMOCRATIC INDIVIDUALITY

William James (1842–1910) argued for a philosophy of democracy and pluralism that advocates individual and collective responsibility for our social arrangements, our morality, and our religion. In James's view, democracy resides first and foremost not in governmental institutions or in procedures such as voting, but rather in the characteristics of individuals, in the qualities of their mind and conduct. It is a philosophy for social change, counseling action and hope despite the manifold challenges facing democratic politics, and these issues still resonate strongly today. In this book, Stephen S. Bush explores how these themes connect to James's philosophy of religion, his moral thought, his epistemology, his psychology, and his metaphysics. His fresh and original study highlights the relevance of James's thought to modern debates, and will appeal to scholars and students of moral and political philosophy.

STEPHEN S. BUSH is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Brown University. His publications include *Visions of Religion: Experience, Meaning, and Power* (2014).

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For Kara and Mason

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Preface

Individualism's loudest proponents these days are libertarians and right-wing politicians and their constituencies. In advertising it, they absolve themselves and their society of responsibility for public goods, in particular those of political and economic equality. Feminists, radical democrats, and other people on the left oppose individualism vociferously for this very reason. Nevertheless, even in their robust commitment to public things, these critics of individualism hardly want to see mindless conformity on the part of the citizenry, uncritical deference to this or that official. We need, then, a robust theory of individualism that clarifies the right sort of personal responsibility and opposes the wrong sort. This book argues that William James provides just this sort of theory, and that in doing so he has a vital contribution to make to democratic theory. Many readers of James have regarded his work as apolitical, so the task before me is doubly challenging: to defend an unpopular concept by means of an atypical reading of a major figure. Thankfully, the task is made somewhat easier by the fact that important work has recently been done from a number of directions showing that James does have a political philosophy. I will build on this work and extend it by focusing on individualism and responsibility as the key political concepts in James's work. I will show how these ideas are integrally related to his philosophy more broadly; they are threads that run through his reflections on topics as varied as truth, knowledge, religion, ethics, and metaphysics.

The following people provided valuable assistance in my reflections on these topics, through conversation and in some cases by reading selections of the manuscript or earlier versions of it: Ermine Algaier, Fannie Bialek, Belinda Bush, Mark Cladis, Andrew Dole, Lin Fisher, Eric Gregory, Marie Griffith, Jodie Jinnette, Alex Klein, Tal Lewis, David Lamberth, Alex Livingston, Adelaide Mandeville, Leigh Schmidt, Bonnie Sheehy, John Marvin Sipp, Jeff Stout, Katie Tabb, Dan Vaca, Ian Ward, Debbie Whitehead, and Daniel Williams. I would also like to thank the audiences at various locales where

I presented portions of this book: the Brown University Department of Religious Studies, the Brown University Religion and Critical Thought Colloquium, the Fellows Seminar of the Brown University Cogut Center for the Humanities, the Western Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in 2014 and the Eastern Division meeting in 2017, and the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion in 2010, 2015, and 2016. I am also grateful to members of the William James Society and of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy for hosting several of those presentations. I have taught James at both the undergraduate and graduate levels at Brown, and I have consistently been challenged, enriched, and encouraged by the students in those classes. I am thankful for the support I received from the Cogut Center for the Humanities and from the Wriston Fellowship at Brown to work on this manuscript. Thanks are also due to my editor at Cambridge University Press, Hilary Gaskin, and the two anonymous readers of this manuscript.

I am grateful to the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* for granting me permission to republish here a few paragraphs from my article, "Religion Against Domination: The Politics of William James's Individualism" 83/3 (September 2015), 750–779.

The Department of Religious Studies at Brown continues to be a fantastic place to teach, think, read, and write. The spirit of collegiality and friendship that pervades the community, in addition to its intellectual excellence, has provided a thoroughly pleasurable context for working on this book. Susan Harvey and Mark Cladis have served as chair of the department during my time at Brown, and I am so appreciative of all their support and advice for me, especially during my years as a junior faculty member. My colleagues in Religion and Critical Thought, Mark, Tal, Andre Willis, and Paul Nahme, have been valuable friends as well as coworkers, and the same is true of everyone else in the department. Another colleague at Brown, Jared Lindahl, has been a partner in thinking about existentialism (a theme I explore in relation to James), as we have worked through the oeuvre of Ingmar Bergman together, all the while drinking fine ales, in our Beergrman sessions. Jeff Stout, Eddie Glaude, and Cornel West taught me pragmatism at Princeton University and continue to do so, and they exemplify its virtues in their teaching, speaking, writing, and conduct. I am incredibly fortunate to have had such mentors, teachers, and friends. Jeff has been generous and wise with his advice at crucial moments; I appreciate that and his friendship so very much.

I am more grateful than ever for Belinda Bush. My life is rich for our partnership. I appreciate so much her political resolve, and also her

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intelligence, wisdom, and wit. Her persistence in caring about the things that matter most in life challenges and inspires me. Over the course of writing this book, my children, Kara and Mason, have grown from tiny, needy beings to self-sufficient, capable individuals. I worry about their future. At present, our elected officials and their corporate sponsors have thrown themselves into the tasks of destroying education, healthcare, the arts, humanities, and the environment. They are doing so with such ferocity that it is hard to understand their motives as mere self-interest; they seem to take active delight in the suffering of the poor, and they seem to be determined to expand the ranks of the poor. I'm anxious about the world in which my kids will grow up. But I see grounds for hope in Kara's resourcefulness, confidence, and wicked sense of humor and Mason's affection, love for learning, and imagination. They both keep me on my toes; certainly they do not exhibit the conformism and undue deference to authority about which James was so worried, at least not in respect to parental authority! It gives me great pleasure to dedicate this book to them.

Abbreviations of James's Works

- CWJ *Correspondence of William James*. 12 vols. Edited by Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992–2004.
- ECR *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*. Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- EP *Essays in Philosophy*. Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- ERE *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Edited by Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976.
- ERM *Essays in Religion and Morality*. Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- ML *Manuscript Lectures*. Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- MT *Meaning of Truth*. Edited by Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.
- P *Pragmatism*. Edited by Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.
- PP *Principles of Psychology*. 3 vols. Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.
- PU *Pluralistic Universe*. Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977.

Abbreviations of James's Works

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- TT *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*. Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- VRE *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.
- WB *Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.