

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03778-5 - The Divided Self of William James

Richard M. Gale

Excerpt

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Introduction

William James (1842–1910) was considered America’s leading philosopher and psychologist during his lifetime, a distinction that many still claim for him today, though Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey must be recognized as serious contenders for the former title. There is no need for this book to say much about James’s life, as there already are numerous excellent biographies, in particular those by Ralph Barton Perry (*TC*), F. O. Matthiessen (*WJ*), Gay Wilson Allen (*WJ*), Jacques Barzun (*SWJ*), Howard Feinstein (*BWJ*), and George Cotkin (*WJ*). After a peripatetic childhood in which his father, the theologian Henry James, Sr., hustled him and his younger siblings, among whom was the novelist Henry James, Jr., from one European nation to another in search of an adequate education, and a brief stint as a painting student of William Morris Hunt, William entered the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard in 1861. Upon graduation in 1864 he enrolled in the Harvard Medical School, completing the M.D. degree in 1869, with a year off to participate in Louis Agassiz’s research expedition to Brazil. After suffering serious ill health and depression from 1869 to 1872, William became an instructor in physiology at Harvard, where he spent his entire career until his retirement in 1907. He rapidly moved up the academic ladder, becoming instructor in anatomy and physiology in 1873, assistant professor of physiology in 1876, assistant professor of philosophy in 1880 and full professor in 1885, and a professor of psychology in 1889. Additions will be made to this bare-bones biographical sketch when it will contribute to our understanding of his philosophy, which is the primary concern of this book.

The best way to characterize the philosophy of William James is to say that it is deeply rooted in the blues. It is the soulful expression of someone who has “paid his dues,” someone who, like old wagon wheels, has been through it all. Whereas its immediate aim is to keep him sane and nonsuicidal – “to help him make it through the night” – its larger one is to help him find his way to physical and spiritual health. In this respect James is very much in the Nietzschean and Wittgensteinian mold. His is not a nihilistic V.D. blues of the “I have had my fun, if I don’t get well no more” variety, but rather of the “I can get well and have my fun” sort. The deep difference between James and Dewey is that Dewey couldn’t sing the blues if his life depended on it.

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One form the blues takes for James is “The Many Selves Blues.” James is about as complex and multitalented as a man can get. Within him are numerous potential selves each crying out for full self-actualization. This poses both an *engineering* and an *ontological* problem for him. The former consists in his genius and passion being almost limitless but his time being radically restricted, thereby creating a competition between his many different selves for sufficient time for self-realization. This conflict finds expression in a letter he wrote when he was twenty-six.

Whatever we are *not* doing is pretty sure to come to us at intervals, in the midst of our toil, and fill us with pungent regrets that it is lost to us. I have felt so about zoology whenever I was not studying it, about anthropology when studying physiology, about practical medicine lately, now that I am cut off from it, etc., etc.; and I conclude that that sort of nostalgia is a necessary incident of our having imaginations, and we must expect it more or less whatever we are about. (*LWJ* 1:128)

The same sentiment is found in this humorously exaggerated, though nevertheless seriously intentioned, autobiographical aside, written twenty-two years later in *The Principles of Psychology*.

I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest. Not that I would not, if I could, be both handsome and fat and well dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, be a wit, a *bon-vivant*, and a lady-killer, as well as a philosopher; a philanthropist, statesman, warrior, and African explorer, as well as a ‘tone-poet’ and saint. . . . But to make any one of them actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed. (*PP* 295)

James’s highly fictionalized description of the “accomplished gentleman,” who “has tasted of the essence of every side of human life, being sailor, hunter, athlete, scholar, fighter, talker, dandy, man of affairs, etc., all in one,” is more of the same Walter Mittyish fantasizing (*PP* 1057).

Although James did not seriously contemplate actualizing all these selves, and certainly not pursuing all of these professions, he did want to find a way of life that would maximize the realization of the full range of feelings, thoughts, and emotions that these selves experienced. For James, every type of experience is revelatory of some aspect of reality; and thus the more rich and varied our experiences, the more aspects of reality we uncover and become intimate with. If there had been a virtual-reality machine available that could simulate the experiences of all these different selves, James would have gladly plugged into it, for this would have enabled him vicariously to know what it is like to be these many different selves. The conflict that James felt so acutely did not so much concern the choice of a profession, as has been contended by many of his psychobiographers, as it concerned what existen-

INTRODUCTION

3

tial stance to take toward the world. In particular, should it be that of the scientist, religious believer, moral agent, aesthete, or mystic? A virtual-reality machine, however, would have failed to satisfy James's most basic underlying aspiration, namely, to be a free Promethean agent in respect to his own self-realization. It would not have been enough for all of his many selves to be actualized, resulting in his having the full range of experiences open to him. He had also to bring about this self-realization through his own free, morally responsible actions. His ultimate quest was to be a Promethean agent who was the right sort of active cause of his maximizing his full range of potentialities.

James's quest for full self-realization took an especially lustful form. What was required was not only that each of his many selves got actualized, or at least got actualized in the attenuated, vicarious manner that a virtual-reality machine would afford, but did so with maximal richness and variety. He comes across as a Kierkegaardian aesthete bent on seeking ever new and exciting experiences of all the Walter Mittyish varieties. To be sure, James craved the morally strenuous life above all else, but only when the proper healthy mood was upon him, and mainly because of the thrilling tingles he derived from it, "the stinging pain inside my breast-bone," as he described it in a letter to his wife (*CWJ* 4, 571). The thought that there are genuine possibilities "is what gives the palpitating reality to our moral life and makes it tingle . . . with so strange and elaborate excitement" (*WB* 183). One ought to postulate the existence of God "as a pretext for living hard, and getting out of the game of existence its keenest possibilities of zest" (*WB* 161). James's quest for the maximal array of zest and tingles makes him the ultimate hipster, a veritable experience junkie, even when it involves so seemingly stodgy an activity as the moral life.

There is a story about another famous hipster, Charlie Parker, that could almost be true of James. When the Bird was playing at a club on Fifty-second Street, he was once found by members of his group rolling around naked in the back of a garbage truck between sets. Thinking he was juiced, they pulled him out and asked him why he was doing this, to which he soberly replied that if you go out and do something different between sets, when you get back on the stand you might have a fresh idea. That could just as well have been William James, only he would have been rolling around naked in a pile of professional journals in the stacks of the Harvard library or, more likely, experimenting with laughing gas or mescaline in the hope that he might finally understand Hegel. He claims the former did the trick, but only while he was under its influence!¹ Obviously, if the war on drugs is to succeed, Hegel must be banned, for he provides too great a temptation to his reader to get

¹ See Ralph Barton Perry (*TC* 161–2).

high (“Just say no to Hegel”). Both James’s and Parker’s exceedingly low threshold of boredom and wild passion for everything that life had to offer continually drove them to seek out new ways of experiencing the world. James’s youthful passion for painting was one way in which he pursued his pluralistic need for novelty. Arthur O. Lovejoy remarked that “William James brought . . . to human nature, and the world of ideas, the artist’s freshness and purity of vision” (*TP* 94). James also availed himself of the perspective of the novelist in his attempt to understand what made the world go round, this requiring that he penetrate to the inner consciousness of things in the way in which a novelist does for each of her fictional characters.

The thesis of this book is that James’s underlying quest was to find a philosophy that would enable us, as the beer commercials enjoin, to have it all, to grab for all the gusto we can. Running throughout James’s writings is an obsessive use of the metaphor of leaving all doors and windows open so as not to block any experience from entering in. “Philosophy, like life, must keep the doors and windows open” (*SPP* 55). Pluralism accepts “a universe unfinished, with doors and windows open to possibilities and uncontrollable in advance” (*SPP* 73; see also *ML* 412). “The most a philosophy can hope for is not to lock out any interest forever. No matter what door it closes, it must leave other doors open for the interests which it neglects” (*PU* 19). “When one’s affections keep in touch with the divinity of the world’s authorship. . . . It is as if all doors were opened, and all paths freshly smoothed” (*VRE* 373; see also 381). “Because the current of thought in academic circles runs against me . . . I feel like a man who must set his back against an open door quickly if he does not wish to see it closed and locked” (*VRE* 411). Even James’s taste in architecture and landscaping gave expression to his desire for open doors and openness in general. His sister, Alice, quotes him as extolling the virtues of his summer home in Chocorua by saying, “Oh, it’s the most delightful house you ever saw; it has fourteen doors, all opening outwards.”² His son, Henry, wrote that “James was an insatiable lover of landscape, and particularly of wide ‘views.’ His inclination at Chocorua was to ‘open’ the view, to cut down obstructing trees, even at the expense of the foreground” (*LWJ* 1:272).

Sometimes he used the metaphor of lowering or bursting the dam to express the same sentiment: “Man lives *by* habits, indeed, but what he lives *for* is thrills and excitements. . . . The dams of routine burst, and boundless prospects open up” (*ERM* 122). Dickinson Miller, James’s student, disciple, and close friend, as well as his most outlandishly unfair critic, claimed that because James sought for the full “richness and satisfaction of human life . . . he would have us open our minds to every

²Quoted from Perry (*TC* 175).

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[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

means, even the most unexpected or unaccredited. . . . ‘Open doors and windows’ to any idea, mood, attitude, propensity, that might possibly aid toward the great end” (*PA* 54–5). There is another possible biographical explanation for James’s open door metaphor – his need to flee his family and find his own space just after each of his children was born. Gerald E. Myers, the best of all the James expositors, has suggested that this same penchant finds expression in James’s metaphor for experience as being like the successive perchings and flights of a bird, the flights being his need to depart from home after a child’s birth because “any perching-place was soon uncomfortable, including his own home.”³ James’s attraction to the metaphors of open doors and lowered dams is the antithesis of the preferences of the hero of August Wilson’s play *Fences*, who liked fences because they blocked intrusion from outside influences. James was especially concerned not to fence out intrusion from the supernatural cosmic consciousness that envelops our ordinary finite minds. “We with our lives are like islands in the sea . . . there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir” (*EPR* 374). The key point is that we not fence out this surrounding mother-sea of consciousness.

James realized that every actualization carries on its back an indefinite number of negative fleas – possibilities that go unrealized. If the table is blue, then it is not red, not yellow, and so on. If James is doing anatomy, then he is not doing anthropology, not doing zoology, and so on. In this vein, James poignantly asked, “Shall he follow his fancy for Amelia, or for Henrietta? – both cannot be the choice of his heart” (*WB* 154). This gives rise to “The Agony of Actualization Blues.” James went so far as to characterize a choice between competing desires as “deliberately driving a thorn into one’s flesh” (*PP* 1141), also as a “tragic situation” because “some part of the ideal must be butchered” (*WB* 154).

James’s personal horror at the thought that we have only a finite future duration, that all ends with our death at some future time, is based, no doubt, on the realization that the sort of maximally rich actualization of his many selves that he craved would require an unlimited amount of time. The letter he wrote to Alice about her imminent demise expresses his feeling that our worldly life is farcical, because our innermost ideals are infinite in their demands but we have only a finite time in which to realize them.

I know you’ve never cared for life, and to me, now at the age of nearly fifty, life and death seem singularly close together in all of us – *and life a mere*

³Introduction to *The Correspondence of William James*, xliii.

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farce of frustration in all, so far as the realization of the innermost ideals go to which we are made respectively capable of feeling an infinity and responding. (LTR 1:310; my italics)

His famous “farewell” letter to his dying father also expresses a feeling of regret about the brevity of one’s life. “And it comes strangely over me in bidding you good-bye how a life is but a day and expresses mainly but a single note. It is so much like the act of bidding an ordinary good-night” (*LTR* 1:220). In response to those who eschewed consideration of what the indefinite or unlimited future held in store in favor of a more short-range view, James claimed that “the mind with the shortest views is simply the mind of the more shallow man” (*P* 56). Common to all religions is the faith that “Perfection is eternal” (*WB* 29), that “an ideal order . . . shall be permanently preserved” (*P* 55). In a remarkable letter he wrote when sixteen, James heartily endorses Rousseau’s claim that “Life is gone in an instant. In itself it is nothing. Its value depends upon the use to which you put it. The good which you have done is lasting and that alone, – and life is valuable only by that good” (*CWJ* 4, 13). If we cannot last forever, at least we can produce something that will. Such immortality is a distant second best for James; he would have resonated to Woody Allen’s remark, “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my works but by living forever.”

It is interesting to note that for agents intent on achieving full or unlimited actualization of all their many different selves there is an important conceptually based temporal asymmetry between their attitudes toward the past and the future: Whereas they regret that their future existence is finite they do not regret in the same way that their past existence is. The reason for this is that whereas their past finitude does not limit their possibilities for full or unlimited self-realization, their future finiteness does. For James, it is tragic that we are not temporal fatmen in the future direction, for what we need for full or unlimited self-actualization is enough time, and there never is enough. While all of a self-realizer’s present first-order intentions might require only a finite future time for their realization, it is an essential part of this self-realizer’s agenda to have the second-order intention always to have a new intention, always to have her projected horizon recede as she succeeds in satisfying former intentions; and, thus, death always represents a cutting off of her possibility for a fuller self-realization of her inherent potentialities.

The *engineering* problem – “The Agony of Actualization Blues” – admits only of amelioration through making the best use we can of our limited time. In contradistinction, the *ontological* problem arises from a clash between the perspectives and interests of James’s many selves. Henry Adams claimed that James “was disabled by the multiplicity of his experiences, each with its shock and mystery, each implying its own

world, each world different.”⁴ Eugene Fontinell did not exaggerate when he wrote that “James’s ‘scientific’ bent, combined with his religious sensibility, gave rise to what at times appears to be almost schizophrenia” (*SGI* 113). This creates “The Divided Self Blues.” Who are these different selves, and how are they to achieve unification? The underlying thesis of this book is that the primary clash was between James’s Promethean and mystical selves, and the ultimate aim was to find some way in which he could unify them, or at least reconcile them with each other so that they could lie down together in peace.

I. The Promethean Pragmatist

As a result of Ralph Barton Perry’s masterpiece, *The Thought and Character of William James*, the “official” view has become that James’s “Divided Self Blues” involves a conflict between his scientific and religious-moral aspirations (see especially 122 and 259). Pragmatism is seen as James’s way of healing this breach within his divided self by showing that there is a pragmatic method for determining both meanings and truths that these opposing selves share in common, thereby allowing him to actualize both of these selves with a clear conscience. For, if one of them is legitimate, so is the other; and, since no one wants to deny the legitimacy of science, religion and morality ride the coat tails of science to respectability, being subject to all of the rights and privileges thereunto appertaining. Pragmatism, thereby, serves as the ultimate mediator or reconciler – but, as we shall see, not the synthesizer or unifier – between his tough- and tender-minded selves.

Charles Morris rightly characterized the overall tenor of James’s philosophy as the “‘Promethean’ or ‘pioneer’ type . . . favored by young American culture” (*PM* 11).⁵ James’s preferred term for his philosophy was “humanism,” according to which the world is, as F. C. S. Schiller had said, “what we make of it” (*P* 117).⁶ Metaphorically, it says that

⁴Quoted from Neil Coughlan (*YD* 112).

⁵John McDermott, in chapter 3 of *SE*, also uses the term “Promethean” to characterize the philosophy of James. James preferred the word “humanism” for his philosophy. To my knowledge, he used “Prometheus” only twice. In an unpublished notebook of 1903, he suggested as the motto for his planned magnum opus on metaphysics the following quote from *Moby Dick*: “God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates” (*MEN* xix). Another occurrence is in a letter to Thomas Davidson in 1882. “In saying ‘God exists’ all I imply is that my purposes are cared for by a mind so powerful as on the whole to control the drift of the universe. This is as much polytheism as monotheism. As a matter of fact it is neither, for it is hardly a speculative position at all, but a merely practical and emotional faith which I fancy even your Promethean *Gemuth* shares” (quoted from Edward Madden’s introduction to *WB* xxix).

⁶James also used “humanism” to mean that, “though one part of our experience may lean upon another part to make it what it is in any one of several aspects in which it may be considered, experience as a whole is self-containing and leans on nothing” (*MT* 72).

“the trail of the human serpent is . . . over everything,” meaning that human interests and endeavors are omnipresent, coloring not only the way in which we depict reality but even the very nature of this reality (*P* 37).⁷ It will be seen that our interests, along with the actions guided by them, play a crucial role in determining the following: which world, among the many possible worlds, is the actual one; an idea’s truth; the existence of value and obligation; meaning and reference; the distinction between the mental and the physical; and even our own personal identity over time. In all these cases we make things to be a certain way by freely taking them to be so. There is a sensorily given that is independent of our will and that imposes limitations on what we can create, in the way in which a marble block limits the creative possibilities of the sculptor. By taking the given in a certain way we create meaning and value, and fashion a cosmos out of a fluid and fugitive chaos.

There are several sources for James’s Promethean vision of man. His depiction of man as a creator of a cosmos out of the “big, blooming, buzzing confusion” of the sensorily given, in addition to being deeply rooted in James’s artistic nature, also derives from the surrounding culture of his day. On the one hand, there is the myth of the American pioneer who carves a human habitat out of a wilderness that continued to have inspiring influence in spite of the actual disappearance of the physical frontier. James had a “vision of a world to be organized, not one found in tidy completion,” as Jacques Barzun aptly said (*SWJ* 199). The clearing of forest land by North Carolina mountaineers is glorified by James, although not without serious reservations, as Ellen Suckiel has pointed out to me, as “a very paeon of duty, struggle, and success” (*TT* 134). He even delighted in posing for pictures at Chocorua looking every inch like a backwoodsman. According to Horace Kallen, James gave “an expression of what was noblest in the life and labor of the pioneer generation that in the nineteenth century brought into growth the arts and sciences of industrial civilization” (*ML* 55).

James failed to notice that this definition is logically distinct from the Schillerian one in that someone could be a thoroughgoing materialist and thus qualify as a humanist in the *MT* sense, and yet be an ardent scientific realist, and thus not qualify as a humanist in the Schillerian sense.

⁷An interesting question is why James chose a pejorative way of designating his beloved doctrine. Both he and his father, at various places in their writings, used the unqualified phrase “the trail of the serpent” to designate something as evil; for example, William speaks of “the trail of the serpent of rationalism” (*P* 16). So why should “the trail of the *human* serpent” represent something we should be happy about? I can think of two possible explanations, which can be used singly or together. His usage was a tongue-in-cheek ploy to disarm his rationalist or intellectualist opponents by diplomatically letting them know he is aware that they will see a form of evil in it and, furthermore, by expressing some sympathy for their point of view. Another explanation is that he himself, or at least one of his many selves, aspired to objective truth and thereby viewed his brand of humanism as a booby prize. We shall see that the mystical self of James did reach out for just such a truth about the true nature of reality.

Another source of James's Prometheanism was the technological breakthroughs that modern science made possible and which produced an unbridled optimism that there would be unlimited progress in the future. James experienced in his life the transition from trails to rails.⁸ Barzun has pointed out that between 1889 and 1914 "nearly every idea of the twentieth century was hatched" (*SWJ* 182). Among the inventions were the automobile, the airplane, the movies, the X-ray, the wireless, and the use of electricity to power the factory, home, and city.

The greatest source of inspiration for the Promethean view, however, was supplied by Darwinian biological psychology, which depicted a human being as an organism whose mind was an instrument for securing a favorable adjustment with the environment. "*The pursuance of future ends and the choice of means for their attainment are thus the mark and criterion of the presence of mentality in a phenomenon*" (*PP* 21). Our biological nature determines us to be creatures continually on the make. "The current of life which runs in at our eyes or ears is meant to run out at our hands, feet, or lips . . . perception and thinking are only there for behavior's sake" (*WB* 92). The "I think" that Kant claimed to be an accompaniment of our every mental act or state is enriched by James with the "I will": "the last of presuppositions is not merely . . . that 'I think' must accompany all my representations, but also that 'I will' must dominate all my thinking" (*WB* 103). James Edie has pointed out that, for James, "There is a 'subjunctive' aspect of perceptual experience, and this is the reason why Husserl and Merleau-Ponty say that consciousness, on this primary level of experience, is more of an 'I can do' than an 'I think that,' an invitation to exploration rather than to contemplation" (*WJP* 5).

Darwinian evolutionary theory showed that when we are confronted with an object "the germinal question . . . is not the theoretic 'What is that?' but the practical 'Who goes there?' or rather . . . 'What is to be done?'" (*PP* 941). Herein James anticipated the recent movie starring Joe Louis, Ginger Rogers, and Clint Eastwood, *Duck, Dance, or Draw*. The point of the movie's title is the necessity of being prepared to act toward objects in a way that will be practically beneficial. All of our concepts, therefore, are teleological instruments that we have forged to aid us in gaining power over our environment by depicting objects in a way that tells us how we should act toward them – fight them, dance with them, make love to them, shoot them, shake hands with them, attempt to dissolve them in aqua regia, and the like. Toward this end, James's pragmatic theory of meaning reduces the meaning of a concept to a set of conditionalized predictions that connect action with experience, such a prediction being of the form "If we perform an action A,

⁸For a fuller account see Daniel W. Bjork (*CS* 2–5).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

then we shall have some experience E.” Armed with a battery of concepts that present us with these conditionalized predictions, we can act upon the objects that confront us in a way that will satisfy our needs and desires. Even metaphysical doctrines are so rendered: theism, for example, is reduced to the conditionalized prediction that if we collectively exert our best moral effort, good will win out over evil in the long run. This is the central tenet of James’s beloved religion of meliorism and becomes the prime candidate for a “will-to-believe” option, in which we are morally permitted to believe upon insufficient evidence or epistemic warrant when doing so helps to bring about an overall desirable state of affairs. An idea or belief becomes true when the actions based on it produce the desired practical results of satisfying these needs and desires, and in many cases it is we who bring about these results, often as a result of our prior will-to-believe-based acceptance of some evidentially or epistemically nonwarranted proposition.

What follows is a brief overview of my book whose purpose is to supply the reader with a synoptic vision of how the different chapters hang together. Chapter 1 will show how James’s Darwinian-based Prometheism gives rise to a type of utilitarian ethical theory that holds us to be morally obligated always to act so as to maximize desire-satisfaction, that is, to act in a way that enables us, if not to have it all, to have as much of it as we can under the given circumstances. Since we are determined by our very biological nature to be always intent on satisfying some felt need or desire, it seems reasonable to make the attainment of this our moral ideal. For what other end could we have? James’s naturalization of ethics resembles the attempt of natural law theorists to deduce normative conclusions from a scientifically based account of man’s nature, with the exception that James did not think that the former is entailed by the latter, agreeing with Hume that *ought* does not follow logically from *is*. Rather, given the scientific account, the normative conclusion appears to be the only practically viable alternative open to us human beings. To ask whether it really is good for us to act in accordance with our nature is an idle question in just the way that a skepticism-in-general is. The challenge of the deontologist, who holds there to be intrinsically valuable states, such as justice, will figure prominently in the discussion, the outcome of which will be that James must find some way to accommodate these deontological moral intuitions within his desire-satisfaction maximizing ethical theory.

Chapter 2 will show that belief is an *action* for James in the sense that we can either believe at will (intentionally, voluntarily, on purpose) or at will do things, such as acting as if we believe, that shall self-induce belief. When this is combined with our moral obligation always to *act* so as to maximize desire-satisfaction, it follows that we are always mor-