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The Philosophy of William James

An Introduction

This is an accessible introduction to the full range of the philosophy of William James. It portrays that philosophy as containing a deep division between a promethean type of pragmatism and a passive mysticism. The pragmatist James conceives of truth and meaning as a means to control nature and make it do our bidding. The mystic James eschews the use of concepts in order to penetrate to the inner conscious core of all being, including nature at large. Richard Gale attempts to harmonize these pragmatic and mystical perspectives.

This introduction is drawn from and complements the author's much more comprehensive and systematic study, *The Divided Self of William James*, a volume that has received the highest critical praise. With its briefer compass and nontechnical style this new introduction should help to disseminate the key elements of one of the great modern philosophers to an even wider readership.

Richard M. Gale is Professor Emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh and Adjunct Professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

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For Mari Mori
Mother-in-Law Extraordinaire

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Preface

This book is a shorter and more popular version of my 1999 book, *The Divided Self of William James*. To achieve this I had to cut out all references to the vast secondary source literature and greatly simplify my discussion by omitting most of the technical parts of the book, such as would be accessible only to professional philosophers. I thank Terence Moore for initially suggesting this project and helping me as I proceeded, especially for checking my natural proclivity to be overly technical and rigorous, that is, boring.

The William James that I present is *my* William James. Any interpretation of James that purports to be *the* correct one thereby shows itself not to be. For James sought a maximally rich and suggestive philosophy, one in which everyone could see themselves reflected, being like a vast ocean out of which each could haul whatever is wanted, provided the right-sized net is used. But there isn't any one net that is *the* right-sized one. When a philosopher aims for maximum richness and suggestiveness it will result in numerous surface tensions and inconsistencies in the text. This gives great leeway to interpreters, which is just what James wanted, because it forces them to philosophize on their own. Too often sympathetic interpreters attempt to protect a great philosopher against his hostile critics by watering down his philosophy so that it winds up agreeing with our common-sense beliefs. They unwittingly trivialize the history of philosophy by rendering both the philosopher and his critics muddleheads, he for not being able clearly to say what he meant and they for failing to see that he was just

telling us what we already believed. *My* William James, in contrast, will be the bold and original James, the one who rightly triggered a storm of passionate criticism, both positive and negative. *Pace* Wittgenstein's perverse slogan that philosophy should leave everything just as it is, I think a philosophy should present a new vision that shakes things up by challenging many of our common beliefs. My motto as an interpreter is, "Don't trivialize the history of philosophy." When in doubt, go with the exciting version of the philosopher.