

Winchester Unitarian Society
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“Why We Need William James More Than Ever”

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The title of my talk this morning is “Why We Need William James More Than Ever.” The title, of course, expresses my own opinion. I hope that my remarks this morning will persuade you to give some credence to my view or, at the least, will inspire you to learn more about James so that you may form your own opinions on this issue. What I propose to do, in the short time that I have this morning, is, first to sketch, somewhat impressionistically, who William James was, and then to discuss briefly those aspects of his work—and perhaps more importantly, his approach to the questions that he dealt with—that, I believe, provide a pathway for thinking clearly about the great problems we confront today on almost every level, and especially on the national level. And what do we need more today than clear thinking?

Who was William James?

So, to begin with, who was William James? I am sure that many of you already know about him, but perhaps others don't. James lived from 1842 to 1910, during a turbulent and creative period of American History. He was a man whom the 20th century English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead described as “that adorable genius, William James.” The great American essayist, and

contemporary of James's, John Jay Chapman, described James as "simply the only man [in America] who wasn't terrified at ideas, moonstruck at a living thought, but alive himself." And James's recent biographer Robert D. Richardson, marveled at "[t]he matchless incandescent spirit of the man."

Our centering thought this morning offers an insight into who William James was. The words quoted are from an autobiographical work by W.E.B. Du Bois, another towering figure about whom I am sure many of you know. In 1895 Du Bois became the first African American ever to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University. Du Bois, who was a sociologist, historian, civil rights activity, and one of the co-founders of the NAACP in 1909, had come to Harvard in 1880 after receiving a bachelor of arts degree that same year from Fisk University, the relatively new black college located in Nashville, Tennessee. As the quote implies, one of the reasons Du Bois came to Harvard was to study with James, and he tells us that James became his friend and mentor—often inviting the young black student to the James home on Irving Street in Cambridge for meals, and in 1892, famously taking Du Bois with him to visit the young Helen Keller, then at the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, MA. For the rest of his life (Du Bois lived from 1868 to 1963), Du Bois credited James with, among other things, teaching him to think clearly. That James readily accepted Du Bois as an equal—which based on Du Bois's testimony he did—speaks volumes for James's character.

In addition to the many male students he inspired, James also made a vivid and inspiring impact as a teacher on his female students. For example, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) studied with him at Harvard in the 1890s. As Robert Richardson describes:

Speaking about the creative life a few months before her death, Stein said: “Everything must come into our scheme, otherwise you cannot achieve real simplicity. A great deal of this I owe to a great teacher, William James. He said ‘never reject anything. Nothing has been proved. If you reject anything, that is the beginning of the end as an intellectual.’ He was my big influence,” Stein went on,” when I was at college. He was a man who always said, ‘complicate your life as much as you please, it has got to simplify.’” (p. 317).

Jacques Barzun, in his marvelous book, *A Stroll with William James*, tells another anecdote about James’s interaction with a young woman at Harvard. When walking across the Harvard campus with James and another, male student, she remarked of an imposing figure coming towards them who seemed to be in a world of his own, “[w]hoever he is, he is the epitome of the absent-minded professor.” To which Professor James responded, “What you really mean is that he is present-minded somewhere else.” (p. 6) (This quote conveys, I think, something of James’s lively and delightful intelligence.)

It is somewhat ironic that, due to his long association with Harvard (he earned his medical degree there, and then taught at Harvard in various positions continuously from 1872 until his retirement in 1907), it is commonly supposed that the James family was native to Massachusetts. In fact, unlike say Du Bois, who was born and raised in Great Barrington in the Berkshires, James was not from Massachusetts.: The

remarkable James family came from Albany, New York, and William James (like his equally famous younger brother, the novelist Henry) was born in New York City.¹ But it would be hard, in fact, to say that William, and his brothers and sister, were, in fact, native to any particular place, because their father, Henry James, Sr., a thinker, philosopher, and writer in his own right, was a restless man and had a habit of frequently uprooting his family and taking them to Europe, where, among other things, he sought better educational opportunities for his children. William, like the others², had a truly international upbringing and, as a result, was fluent in French and German, and well-acquainted with European science and scholarship—and throughout his life had strong relationships with almost all of the leading European thinkers of his day.

Despite his international education, and the time spent in foreign capitals, there was probably never a more “American” philosopher and thinker than William James; he somehow always kept in touch with his roots here. But that did not lessen—and, indeed, it may in part explain—his international influence. By the time of his death in 1910, James was probably the most internationally recognized American thinker ever.

¹ It should be noted that, when James attended medical school at Harvard, his family moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts. (Richardson, p. 525.)

² William had three brothers and a sister. The brothers were Henry, Jr. (one year younger), Wilkinson, and Robertson. His younger sister was Alice. Of the five, William, Henry, and Alice developed into remarkable individuals. Wilky and Bob did not—probably because of the traumatic impacts they suffered as soldiers in the Civil War. Wilky, for example, was an adjutant to Robert Gould Shaw, commander of the Negro 54th Regiment, and was badly wounded in two assaults on Fort Wagner barely survived the assault on Fort Wagner. Wilky enlisted at age 17, and took a copy of *Les Miserables* to war with him because it reminded him of Paris.

To be sure, Emerson, before him, had made a real impact in Europe. It is said, for example, that Friedrich Nietzsche never traveled anywhere without a set of Emerson's essays.

But William James was the first, I believe, to be invited to speak to appreciative audiences in Europe. Perhaps his most famous work today, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (which Jacques Barzun has called the third volume of James's *Psychology*, his other great book), is made up of the twenty Gifford lectures he delivered in Scotland in 1901 and 1902 to enthusiastic and responsive large audiences. James alludes in his first lecture to the fact that, before, the intellectual current had seemed to run all from east to west (that is, from Europe to America), and hopes that, starting with his lecture, the current has begun to run from west to east, and that many more of his countrymen will be invited, after him, to lecture in Scotland and in Europe.

And while history has often borne out the truth of Jesus' saying at Mark 6:4 that "a prophet is . . . without honor . . . in his hometown," this was definitely not true of James, whose popularity at home—i.e., throughout the United States—was immense and who was always in demand as a lecturer.³ (In this regard he reminds one of Emerson.) Indeed, his local eminence is attested to by the fact that he was asked to give the oration at the dedication of the Shaw Memorial in Boston, although he also had a personal connection to the event—his younger brother Wilky had been

³ It is a fact, I believe, that James's lectures—like Emerson's—were often the fruit of his need to earn the money needed to support his family. We all have benefitted from his financial needs!

Robert Gould Shaw's adjutant and was wounded twice during the 54th black regiment's assault on Fort Wagner (Morris Island, South Carolina).

The last thing that I will say specifically about James the man is that, like his brother Henry, he was a great writer. But, William's writing style is very different from Henry's: it is energetic, straightforward, and direct, fueled by a generous use of vivid imagery. Here is one example:

“Place yourself at the center of a man's philosophic vision and you understand at once all the different things it makes him write or say. But keep outside, use your post-mortem method, try to build the philosophy out of single phrases, taking first one and then another in seeking to make them fit and of course you fail. You crawl over the thing like a myopic ant over a building, tumbling into every microscopic crack or fissure, finding nothing but inconsistencies and never suspecting that a center exists.”

A Pluralistic Universe, p. 263.⁴

Ideas that Can Help Us Today

I would now like to turn to those aspects of James's thought that I believe are so necessary for us today. Interestingly, what I think fits best into this framework, are not so much James actual conclusions, especially with regard to his philosophic views (although I think in many ways he was right philosophically), but more his general approach to problems, to observation, and to understanding ourselves and our fellow human beings. These aspects of James legacy were formed, to a large extent, by his

⁴ Jacques Barzun, who identified that quote, thought that as a prose master James ranked with the other American masters, who he identifies as Emerson, Melville, Mark Twain, and Henry James. (Barzun, p. 289) Barzun identified the quote that I have used in my text.

close observation of *particulars* in his life-long study of psychology, which I believe gave him a taste for studying individual cases, rather than over-arching, one-size-fits all theories of human behavior or the nature of reality.⁵

First, I think we could all benefit from using James's radical empiricist approach to the great questions confronting us. By this James mean that, rather than beginning with generalizations or over-arching concepts, we build from the ground up, as it were, starting with *every aspect of* the real world that we experience Here's how James put it in his late work, *Radical Empiricism*:

I give the name of "radical empiricism" to my *Weltanschauung*. Empiricism is known as the opposite of rationalism. Rationalism tends to emphasize universals and to make wholes prior to parts in the order of logic as well as in that of being. Empiricism, on the contrary, lays the explanatory stress upon the part, the element, the individual, and treats the whole as a collection and the universals as an abstraction. My description of things, accordingly starts with the parts and makes of the whole a being of the second order."

And, importantly, James add that for an empiricism to be radical—as he insists it should be—it "must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, *not exclude from them any element that is directly experienced.*" So, for example, James points out that it is not simply experiences, in isolation, that must be included, but also "the relations that connect experiences must themselves be

⁵ James's first great work was his *Psychology*, which was published in 1910. His *Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1902, is sub-titled "A Study in Human Nature." In 1910 James met Sigmund Freud at a conference on psychology at Clark University in Worcester, MA. While he was impressed by Freud, and credited him with having done important work, James was uneasy with Freud's apparent reliance on sexuality as the sole explanation for the phenomena he (Freud) observed. For James, no single explanatory framework was ever desirable

experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as ‘real’ as anything else in the system.” (p. 25)

In other words, the empiricism that James advocates is not simply materialism—which only takes account of physical reality—but something much broader. Thus, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James includes in his study the real-life experience by many figures down through history of things that cannot be seen—i.e., the spiritual realm. And indeed, James concluded, famously, that based on these and his own experiences, he firmly believed that most of us do possess the sense that there is more to life than our mere material existences, and that there was indeed more to life than that. Most importantly, by emphasizing that the empiricist method must “not exclude . . . any element that is directly experienced,” radical empiricism “confers equality of status on all the intellectual and spiritual activities of” of humanity—and “it shows up the superstition that science alone is in touch with the real and can say anything useful about it.” (Barzun, p. 119)

I believe that James’s radical empiricism is an antidote to any attempt to limit reality to that which is quantifiable, to only statistics or numerical cost/benefit analysis. James’s empiricism insists that, when developing policy for example, those in government must take into account the entire range of existing facts—including those that cannot be easily measured but are nonetheless very real.

James’s brand of radical empiricism, and the way he practiced it, leads me to the second important way in which I believe James can be of great help to us now.

For me, one thing that makes reading James such a bracing experience for me is that he seems to have been that rare thinker--that true scientist--who formed no *a priori* judgments, in other words he did not make assumptions without evidence about things, or people, or experiences. Thus, for example as a psychologist he placed the sub-conscious, which he preferred to call the subliminal self, on a continuum with the conscious self. The fact that inspiration and insight might come from the sub-conscious did not, in and of itself, invalidate them. Indeed, he even observed that: “If the grace of God miraculously operates, it probably operates through the subliminal door.”

Similarly, when reporting the many individual religious experiences that he gathered together for *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, once again James was not judgmental in his approach—he reported the experiences objectively, as valid and real to the people experiencing them. He certainly did not reject them out of hand as flights of madness or fancy as others might have done. And as a result, we have from James’s hand a magnificent tapestry—or more accurately a wonderful patchwork quilt—that truly reflects the tremendous variety of the religious experiences throughout history.

On the subject of a priori judgments: How many times in each day, do I automatically make assumptions about the people we meet and the news stories that we read, about events happening here and there? I certainly have judged people I don’t know—which would be an *a priori* judgment—only to discover when I met

them that I had been all wrong about them. Especially, have I found this to be the case with people who I may disagree with politically, or who come from very different parts of the country: getting to know them usually pulverizes my *a priori* judgments about them. And, crucially, avoiding *a priori* judgments about people has over the years proven to be beneficial to me, because it has broadened my understanding usually not simply of them, but also of myself.

I note that an effort not to make *a priori* judgments may be particularly important in the area of religion. How many of us, based purely on assumption, have made judgments—both negative and positive--about religions foreign to our traditions or just unfamiliar to us?

James's rejection of an *a priori* approach is tied in, I think, with his rejection of the "psychologist's fallacy" that was described in our first reading this morning. And here, perhaps, is a most important teaching of William James: never assume that other people think or feel as you do, but try to understand them on their own terms (which is only possible if we communicate with them in an open and unprejudiced way).

A third aspect of James's mature thought that I think might help us today is his understanding of our world and the universe as essentially *pluralistic*. This can be seen vividly in our second reading this morning: for James the universe is not, at bottom, a single thing, nor is there a single explanation behind reality. James contrasted his pluralistic view with what he termed the "philosophy of the absolute" which, he

writes in *A Pluralistic Universe*, conceives that “the divine exists authentically only when the world is experienced all at once in its absolute totality.” In contrast, the pluralistic view—radical empiricism—“allows that the absolute sum total of things may never be actually experienced or realized in that shape at all, and that a disseminated, distributed, or incompletely unified appearance is the only form that reality may yet have achieved.” Let us not be mistaken here: James himself was no “lover of disorder and doubt as such. Rather [he said] I fear to lose the truth by the pretension to possess it already whole.” (*Varieties*)

While the philosophy of the absolute that James battled against in his day may no longer so prevalent or powerful in the philosophical circles, I believe that James’s view that the world is a manifold place, filled with differing realities that might not seem to intersect, could be a very important maxim for our own time. It would militate against efforts to change other cultures and regimes, and to impose one set of beliefs on everyone—both domestically and internationally. (If I may let politics intrude: the Democratic convention in the summer of 2016 seemed to me to be the embodiment of a pluralistic universe; while the Republican convention seemed the very opposite.)

Finally, James saw that the pluralistic world that we live in is a dynamic, changing place, where the moral and religious certainties of one generation may not be those of the next. As he notes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as

Nothing is more striking than the secular alteration that goes on in the moral and religious tone of men, as their insights into nature and their social arrangements progressively develop. After an interval of a few generations the mental climate proves unfavorable to notions of the deity which at an earlier date were perfectly satisfactory: the older gods have fallen below the common secular level, and can no longer be believed in. Today a deity who should require bleeding sacrifices to placate him would be too [bloody] to be taken seriously. . . . Once, on the contrary, his cruel appetites were of themselves credentials.”

James was not blind to the fact that many would resist the historical progress he described, especially in the religious sphere, and he knew that the reaction against change could be fierce. Nor was he blind to the fact that this type of historical change might obscure truths articulated in the older vision that might have value.

Nonetheless, he saw clearly that each generation defines the divine and the deity in the way that works best for it. Here I can't resist quoting one further sentence from the *Varieties*:

“Luther, says Emerson, would have cut off his right hand rather than nail his these to the door at Wittenberg, if he had supposed that they were destined to lead to the pale negations of Boston Unitarianism.”

So to recap, I think we need William James today, because today perhaps more than ever we need clear thinking. And I think that the qualities and points I have discussed—a reliance on radical empiricism which takes into account—and values—our whole range of experience, a resistance to making *a priori* judgments, especially about those who may be different than we are, an acceptance that we live in a many-sided world—a pluralistic universe—and a recognition of the historical force of

change, especially in morals and religion, may help us think more clearly about the crises we now face, because we will face those crises without prejudice or prejudgment, judging reality as it is.