



THE HEART OF WILLIAM JAMES

Edited by Robert Richardson

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EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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THE HEART OF WILLIAM JAMES

*For John J. McDermott,
teacher, philosopher, scholar, and friend, who writes
“for those among us who believe in intellectual passion
rather than settling for intellectual inquiry.”*



Introduction

Opening an Eye of the World

The World According to James

William James was in England in late 1899 and early 1900, trying to write the lectures that would become *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, when the Boer War broke out. The war went badly for the English at first, and, hoping to persuade the Christian God to intervene on the English side, an interdenominational church group declared January 7, 1900, as a “Day of Humiliation and Prayer.” James wrote a letter to the *London Times* to suggest that “both sides to the controversy might be satisfied by a service arranged on principles suggested by the anecdote of the Montana settler who met a grizzly so formidable that he fell on his knees, saying, ‘Oh Lord, I hain’t never yet asked ye for help, and aint agoin to ask ye for none now. But for pity’s sake O Lord, don’t help the Bear’” (*Correspondence*, vol. 9).

He had a point, he understood that there exist points of view other than one’s own, and he had a sense of humor. The *Times* declined to print his letter. James was ahead of his time on many issues, and we are fortunate that most of his views did get printed. From our current point of view, in 2010, a hundred years after his death, James looks very much the prophet, and his work is as relevant and life-changing in our times as it was in his. James chose Darwin, chemistry, physiology, and neurology over traditional metaphysics and theology, and his work marked the real beginning of our age of neurophysiology and neurobiology. It is James who first and most convincingly taught us that the mind is *always* active, even in sleep or hypnosis, that rationality not only follows feel-

ing, but it *is* a feeling, that many emotions follow rather than lead to physiological responses and physical actions, that we can no longer draw a clear line between the mind and the body, and that the mind is largely brain function and is rooted in physiology. James did not think consciousness exists as a thing or as a place, but only as a function. It may be, he proposed, that the furthest we can get is to suggest that thoughts follow from one another, that the thought is itself the thinker. James understood that the fringes of consciousness are as important as the centers, that “attention is the same fact as belief.” He also understood that chance is the same fact as freedom, that “chance begets order” (as his friend Charles Sanders Peirce put it), and that evolution needs us as much as we need it. Every choice we make is one more specific nomination for one particular useful adaptation instead of another. The father of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson, credits James with the founding insight of that organization—that self-mastery comes only after self-surrender and an admission of hopelessness and helplessness. James knew that truth is a process, that reality is experience—but *all* of experience—and that truth and reality are actually verbs, just as it can be argued that God is a verb.

The Life of William James

William James was born on January 11, 1842, at the Astor House in New York City. Family legend has it that Emerson, who was lecturing in New York in early March, came to see and give his blessing to the infant, which may or may not account for the marked streaks of Emersonian thought in William James’s later work.

William’s younger brother, who would become the great novelist Henry James, was born fifteen months after William. William and Henry were very close throughout their lives, as may be seen from their letters—published as volumes 1–3 of the *Correspondence of William James* by the University of Virginia Press—and from Henry’s memoirs *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) and *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914). The reason why Rebecca West’s observation that Henry wrote fiction like a philosopher and William wrote philosophy like a novelist is so often and so warmly remembered is because William and Henry were very much involved with and influenced by each other’s work. William read and commented on everything Henry wrote, and Henry read William’s writings and pro-

claimed himself in close agreement, saying, for example, after *Pragmatism* appeared, that he had all his life “unconsciously pragmatized,” and telling his brother “you are immensely and universally *right*.”

The father of this unusually accomplished family (we should not forget two other brothers, Wilky and Robertson, both of whom fought in the Civil War, and the gifted sister, Alice, the diarist, who was the youngest of the five children) was Henry James Sr., a wealthy, eccentric, brilliant Swedenborgian and Sandemanian enthusiast. (Robert Sandeman taught a strict and clergyless Calvinism; Michael Faraday was an active Sandemanian.) Henry Sr. was a spellbinding talker, a man of dispersed, unlikely, and improvident talents held loosely together by vast personal charm. His own father had bought the upstate New York village of Syracuse in 1824 for thirty thousand dollars. Henry Sr. inherited then flung away his portion of one of the great American fortunes of his era, leaving all four of his sons in the (fortunate) position of having to work for a living. Henry Sr., described by his biographer as a “blocked and monomaniacal hierophant,” wrote one unwanted, unsellable, unread book after another. One evening when the whole family was at work in the living room, each at his or her own studies, William drew a sketch for a frontispiece for his father’s next book. The sketch survives; it shows a man beating a dead horse.

The family moved constantly. In America they lived in New York City, then Newport, Boston, and Cambridge. In between American places, they lived abroad, in London, Windsor, Paris, Boulogne-sur-Mer, and Geneva. The children rarely finished a school year in one place. Between the ages of ten and sixteen, William went to at least nine different schools, not counting home tutoring. Because Henry Sr. had spent his college years (before expulsion) drinking, smoking cigars, eating oysters, and avoiding bills, he assumed that college was the problem and forbade his children college education. William, like Henry, was then essentially self-educated, by which means he avoided many of the preconceived ideas and attitudes that come with a classical or standard education. William was allowed to attend Harvard’s Lawrence Scientific School (in effect a European-style school with masters and apprentices, super-specialized and with no general education whatever) and he eventually earned an MD at Harvard Medical School at a time when the requirements both for admission and for graduation were less than stringent. William James had no high school diploma, no college degree,

and no PhD. He was nevertheless extremely fortunate in his teachers, who included Charles W. Eliot in chemistry, Jeffries Wyman in comparative anatomy, and Louis Agassiz, on whose Amazon expedition of 1865 William James was a trusted lieutenant. James revered Agassiz as a teacher, but broke sharply with Agassiz's anti-Darwinian creationism.

If William James was fortunate in his family and his teachers, he was even more fortunate in his friends and early colleagues, who included Chauncey Wright (who had reviewed Darwin so succinctly and brilliantly that Darwin had Wright's piece reprinted for general distribution in England); Charles Sanders Peirce, the great semiotician, philosopher, and, as James insisted, the father of pragmatism; and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., the great jurist who said "the life of the law is not logic, it is experience." All of these men, like James, were members of the celebrated Metaphysical Club in Cambridge, a group which, if we include Asa Gray, Darwin must have had in mind when he observed that "there were enough brilliant minds in the American Cambridge in the 1860s to furnish all the universities of England."

William took his MD degree in 1869. He was twenty-seven. He had intended to be a scientist, which was not a paying proposition in the America of the time, although medicine—it was thought—could give a person a steady income. But in reality William James was drifting, and had been for some time. He had no plans to practice medicine, and, with no real alternative, he felt increasingly despondent. His back went out on him while he was working without much interest as a surgical resident at Massachusetts General Hospital. The neurasthenic young man now fell into near-suicidal despair, which was only further darkened by the tragic death of his cousin Minnie Temple. Minnie had been alive to her fingertips; she was the real-life model for Henry James's Daisy Miller and Milly Theale. All the young men were in love with Minnie, William more than most.

Appointments to teach first physiology then anatomy at Harvard College in the early 1870s hauled William James out of despair and gave him the first steady work of his life. In 1876 he met Alice Howe Gibbens, whom he married in 1878, when he was thirty-six. He had begun to teach physiological psychology, and he agreed that same year to prepare a book on psychology for the publisher Henry Holt. The marriage, the regular teaching, the new subject, and the book contract cleared the dark skies over James's head and started him off on a new life.

Twelve years and four children later, in 1890, the forty-eight-year-old James published his first real work, *The Principles of Psychology*. While he had taken forever to grow up, his last twenty years were, by contrast, crowded, active, fulfilling, and rewarding. In 1890, the year of *The Principles of Psychology*, he had just built a house at 95 Irving Street in Cambridge, where he was a professor at Harvard in a department soon to be famous. His family flourished, he acquired a summer place in Chocorua, New Hampshire, book followed book. *Psychology: Briefer Course* came out in 1892, *The Will to Believe* in 1897, *Talks to Teachers* in 1899, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902, *Pragmatism* in 1907, *A Pluralistic Universe* and *The Meaning of Truth* in 1909. By the time of his death on August 26, 1910, he was widely known and admired. One French paper came out with a black border on the issue announcing his death. He had met Freud, Jung, Bergson, and Vivekananda. He had taught Theodore Roosevelt, W. E. B. Du Bois, Gertrude Stein, and George Santayana. Even his own children were fond of the man Alfred North Whitehead once called “that adorable genius.”

Chance, Attention, Belief, Conversion, and Action

The writings of William James are a standing rebuke to conventional thought, received ideas, professional jargon, classical education, and all the other ways in which what James calls “the enormous fly-wheel” of habit governs our minds as well as our bodies. Reading James continues to change lives. The pieces in this volume are not intended to cement James’s reputation in philosophy, psychology, or religious studies, or to sample his views; they have been chosen for their direct appeal to a general reader. Each piece is complete, and they have been arranged in chronological order, so that one may follow, though one need not, the trajectory of James’s thought.

“What Is an Emotion” is James’s early, notable, and still controversial argument that many of our emotions follow from (rather than cause) physical or physiological reactions. He argues, for example, that we are afraid because we run, not that we run because we are afraid. “The Dilemma of Determinism” is a dazzling attack on those who claim (and they still do) that everything we do is determined by forces outside our control. “The Perception of Reality” is a chapter from *The Principles of Psychology* that makes the still-startling contentions that “will and belief

are two names for the same fact,” and “attention and belief are the same fact.” “The Hidden Self” takes off from the same work of Pierre Janet’s that Freud’s theory of the unconscious leans on, but comes to quite a different view. One learns from this essay, for example, that the point of automatic writing and hypnosis is to get in touch with the hidden self. This has a therapeutic use that is still of value today. James’s chapter on “Habit” is another classic. James argues for the power of habit, but also is at pains to show how we can nibble away at habit and change it. His piece “The Will” is connected to his view of determinism. We do have an exertable will, James says, and he gives homely, detailed, persuasive examples. “The Gospel of Relaxation” is a popular piece, a sort of self-help classic that argues for the benefits of letting go of the fist-clenching self.

“On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” was a favorite of William James himself. It sets out to show how the most difficult thing for any of us is to really understand people who are unlike ourselves. This stirring essay would serve as a Declaration of Interdependence for any society, group, or country seriously dedicated to diversity and tolerance. “What Makes a Life Significant” is another good piece to read in hard times. James’s argument is thoughtful, complex, and applies mainly to the ordinary people who do most of the world’s work. “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” is the opening shot of the pragmatism revolution. Given at Berkeley as a talk, this essay introduces pragmatism not only in a philosophical but also in a religious context. “The Philippine Tangle” gives us William James in a blind rage at the American government’s belligerent involvement in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. It is angry enough and anti-imperialist enough to make good reading now, and it will remind many readers today of the American involvement in Iraq.

The “Sick Soul” chapters from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* give us the heart of the religious situation. They follow and explain the chapters on the religion of healthy-mindedness. The “Sick Soul” chapters explore the darker, more painful side of life, and include glimpses of both William James and his father at their lowest, most despairing ebb. “The PhD Octopus” is the work of a man who had no PhD and therefore understandably had no exalted notion of its value apart from the actual learning of a particular person. This is a great protest against mandarinism and formalism in education and an argument for the individual student. “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” delighted Bertrand Russell and oth-

ers in its radical suggestion that there is no such thing or entity as consciousness. There is only a function, a process, a stream of impressions. This is a key insight for James's concept of radical empiricism. "The Energies of Men" is one of James's links with Emerson and Emerson's belief that we habitually operate way below our full potential. This piece leads straight to the human potential movement. "Concerning Fechner" is the most intellectually daring piece here. It considers the Fechnerian (Fechner was a German physicist and thinker) panpsychic world in which everything—*every thing*—is alive. This links James with Jung and beyond, as he considers the possibility that there is a world soul and we are each connected to it through our own minds.

Finally, "The Moral Equivalent of War" is a justly celebrated piece, which will be one hundred years old in 2010. John Dewey thought we should be grateful to James for the phrase and the mere suggestion that such a thing might come into being. The essay is one of the best anti-war pieces ever written.

Ever Not Quite

One of James's most valued correspondents was an unlikely, off-center, homegrown philosopher from upstate New York named Benjamin Paul Blood. "Certainty is the root of despair," Blood had written.

The inevitable stales, while doubt and hope are sisters. Not unfortunately the universe is wild—game flavored as a hawk's wing. Nature is miracle all. She knows no laws; the same returns not, save to bring the different. The slow round of the engraver's lathe gains but the breadth of a hair, but the difference is distributed back over the whole curve, never an instant true—ever not quite. (*Essays in Philosophy*)

James's central work was aimed at central things. What Blood presented as metaphor James sought in action. Pragmatism was, he insisted, a "doctrine of action" and "the study of all human powers and means." Radical empiricism held that while experience is all that matters, all experience must be included. In psychology James's emphasis was always on possibilities for treatment, the therapeutic imperative, the unlocking of personal energies. His self-help strain comes from his conviction that our thoughts have a shaping power over our bodies. He drew strength from knowing that rationality itself is a sentiment or feel-

ing, and from knowing that conversion is a psychological process that sets loose new energies and leads to rebirth.

Beyond all this, but including all this, is William James's enlargement of our field of vision and our field of attention. He was drawn to edges, fringes, borders, and margins. It is significant that the greatest variety of species are found in borderlands, at the edge of the sea or the edge of the forest. James seemed to know instinctively that borders are in fact centers for life. So he avoided marginalizing himself; instead he annexed the marginal and extended his—and our—field of interest to include all the edges and fringes. He was interested in the fringes themselves, but, as often as not, the margin also provides a new approach to the central page. The main stage is accessed via the wings.

Emerson, in his essay "Experience," listed what he considered "the lords of life"; they were illusion, temperament, succession, surface, surprise, reality, and subjectiveness. Nicolas of Cusa, that pluralist in Christian clothing, thought "the precondition for the abundance of nature lies in what is restless, limited, changeable, and composite." Italo Calvino projected six lectures (and completed five) on lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, and consistency. In like manner, William James defended "incompleteness, 'more,' uncertainty, insecurity, possibility, fact, novelty, compromise, remedy and success" as being authentic realities. James further thought of the organization of the self as "a system of memories, purposes, strivings, fulfillments, and disappointments." And he declared that philosophy "has always turned on grammatical particles, 'with, near, next, like, from, towards, against, because, for, through, my.'" These words, he said, "designate types of conjunctive relations, arranged in a roughly ascending order of immediacy and inclusiveness."

William James had the most free-ranging mind of any American thinker, and the chief source of his liberty, as his student, friend, and colleague Santayana put it in *The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy*,

was his personal spontaneity, similar to that of Emerson, and his personal vitality, similar to that of nobody else. Convictions and ideas came to him, so to speak, from the subsoil. He had a prophetic sympathy with the dawning sentiments of the age, with the moods of the dumb majority. His scattered words caught fire in many parts of the world. His way of thinking and feeling represented the true America, and represented in a measure the whole ultramodern, radical world.

William James believed, as Emerson had, that self-trust is the quality on which a good life is best built, and—again like Emerson—James gave us the reason *why* we may safely trust our best impulses: “If we survey the field of history and ask what feature all great periods of revival, of expansion of the human mind, display in common, we shall find, I think, simply this: that each and all of them have said to the human being ‘The inmost nature of the reality is congenial to powers which you possess’” (*The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 2).

As neurophysiology and neurobiology make rapid strides—almost daily—in showing us precisely how the brain works, all the while reminding us just how fantastically complicated the brain really is, we see, as no previous generation has, a clearer and clearer form in the slowly dissolving mist. We see that we each have within us a something, call it brain or mind or process, that reflects, thinks about, and responds to, and thus, in a sense, contains the world. When and if there is a final reality, something on which everyone will eventually agree, it will be seen to be commensurate with powers we in fact possess.

James stood for the individual, and he argued that each individual matters. Beyond that, James believed that we are connected, though not always in ways we see or understand. “Our lives are like islands in the sea,” he said in the late essay “Confidences of a Psychical Researcher,”

or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves, and Conanicut and Newport hear each other’s fog-horns. But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean’s bottom. Just so 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.

Further yet, James refused the easy notion that man is the measure of all things. “I firmly disbelieve, myself,” he wrote in the concluding paragraphs of *Pragmatism*,

that our human experience is the highest form of experience extant in the universe. I believe rather that we stand in much the same relation to the whole of the universe as our canine and feline pets do to the whole of human life. They inhabit our drawing-rooms and librar-

ies. They take part in scenes of whose significance they have no inkling. They are merely tangent to curves of history the beginnings and ends and forms of which pass wholly beyond their ken. So we are tangents to the wider life of things.

Emerson and James matter then not because they are part of the history of American thought, but because they are right. Right and deeply practical. William James was a teacher, and some of his best and most convincing writing came when he was talking to teachers. Here is the last paragraph of his little collection of talks to teachers, and it is every bit as applicable and practicable now as it was a hundred years ago. With his "see to it" and his "I beg you," we can actually hear the voice of the man himself as he leans over the lectern toward his hearers.

Spinoza long ago wrote in his *Ethics* that anything that a man can avoid under the notion that it is bad he may also avoid under the notion that something else is good. He who habitually acts *sub specie mali*, under the negative notion, the notion of the bad, is called a slave by Spinoza. To him who acts habitually under the notion of good he gives the name of freeman. See to it now, I beg you, that you make freemen of your pupils by habituating them to act, whenever possible, under the notion of a good. Get them habitually to tell the truth, not so much through showing them the wickedness of lying as by arousing enthusiasm for honor and veracity. Wean them from their native cruelty by imparting to them some of your own positive sympathy with an animal's inner springs of joy.

In essay after essay, James calls us to live a fuller, richer, better life, to seek out and use our best energies and sympathies. As every day is the day of creation and of judgment, so every age was the new age once, and William James's writings are still the gateway to many a new world.



Note on the Texts

The pieces in this collection are all complete and are without exception taken from the definitive nineteen-volume *The Works of William James*, published by Harvard University Press 1975–1988 under the general editorship of Frederick H. Burkhardt, with Fredson Bowers as textual editor and Ignas K. Skrupskelis as associate editor. For more information, please see the Acknowledgments section (pp. 335–337). All quotes from James are also from the Harvard University Press edition. Irregular capitalization and spelling have been silently corrected in a few places, but otherwise the texts remain unchanged.



Chronology of William James's Life

- 1842 Born January 11, Astor House, New York City.
- 1843 Brother Henry born April 15. Family goes to London in October.
- 1844 Family goes to Paris, then Windsor, England. Father's vastation (devastating spiritual experience).
- 1845 Family returns to New York City. Brother Wilky (Garth Wilkinson) born July 21.
- 1846 Brother Bob (Robertson) born August 29.
- 1848 Sister Alice born August 7.
- 1855 Family moves to London, then Geneva. William attends boarding school. Family returns to London in October.
- 1856 Family moves to Paris in June. William attends Fourierian school.
- 1857 Family moves to Boulogne-sur-Mer. William attends Collège Impériale.
- 1858 Family returns to America, moves to Newport, Rhode Island. William takes up sketching in William Hunt's studio.
- 1859 Family returns to Geneva. William studies science at Geneva Academy.
- 1860 Family returns to Newport in October. William studies painting with Hunt.
- 1861 Abandons painting to enter Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard in September. Studies chemistry with Charles W. Eliot. Meets Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and Charles S. Peirce.
- 1862 William at Scientific school, Henry at Harvard Law School. Wilky enlists in Forty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment.
- 1863 Wilky transfers to Fifty-fourth Massachusetts. Bob enlists, joins Fifty-fifth Massachusetts. Wilky badly wounded at Fort Wagner July 18. William returns to Scientific School, studies under Wyman.
- 1864 Enters Harvard Medical School. Family moves to Boston.