Ideas

WILLIAM JAMES

"The moral equivalent of war," "stream of thought," "varieties of religious experience"—these and other well-worn phrases come from the work of Harvard's great philosopher-psychologist William James (1842–1910). He is more often quoted than understood. He wrote complicated, trenchant prose not unlike that of his brother Henry, the novelist. His work has never been easy to grasp. Assessing the links between his (difficult) life and his ideas, historian Jackson Lears here traces the larger design behind James's influential, wide-ranging reflections on consciousness, religion, and American society.

by T. J. Jackson Lears

William James may be the only philosopher in any danger of becoming an American cultural icon. Since his death in 1910, praise has hardened like a shell around the man. His ability to puncture bloated abstractions, his pragmatic stress on the need to test the "cash value" of ideas in actual experience—these Jamesian qualities have been ritually lauded. He was, we have been repeatedly told, the quintessentially American philosopher: impatient with European pessimism, filled with faith in the mind's capacity to shape a better world. In such an atmosphere, criticism bounces off James like BBs off a bronze statue.

But fallible mortals are always more interesting—and often more inspiring—than monuments of unaging intellect. James's ideas, like those of even the most abstruse philosophers, were rooted in the details of his personal life. Yet even the best recent studies of James focus either on the life or on the work: Gerald Myers's grand analysis of James's mature thought provides only a perfunctory biography; Howard Feinstein's psychobiography, *Becoming William James*, offers a wealth of insights but leaves young William teetering on the threshold of adult achievement.

"The problem with man," said William James in 1890, is "less what act he shall now choose to do, than what being he shall now resolve to become." This pencil self-portrait was drawn in 1866.

There is an irony here. The father of pragmatism, who insisted that all ideas be grounded in the messy actualities of experience, has never received the treatment his philosophy demands. A closer look at the connections between James's life and his work helps us to understand the sources of his enduring appeal.

For all its idiosyncrasies, the James family saga epitomized a pattern typical of the early Republic. William's grandfather, William James of Albany, was a Scotch-Irish immigrant who arrived penniless in New York in 1789. A rigid Calvinist, he embodied the commitment to disciplined achievement that we have long associated with the Protestant Ethic. Through unceasing labor and shrewd investment, he had amassed a fortune of nearly $3 million by the time of his death in 1832. Next to the fabled John Jacob Astor, he was the richest man in New York State.

But as the Puritans well knew, there was a fatal dialectic in the Protestant Ethic: Hard work might yield wealth, but wealth could undermine any incentive to further work and self-discipline—particularly in the next generation.

Certainly this was true for Henry James, Sr., William James's father and the second of 10 surviving children born to William of

Albany. Henry James, Sr., was a reckless and dissolute lad committed to flouting his father's will at every turn; he made it clear that he had no more respect for Calvinist ethics than he did for Calvinist theology. Having secured his inheritance, he embarked on a life of cultivated leisure and philosophical speculation.

As he mellowed with age, the elder Henry James became something of a sage, at least within his own family circle. His intellectual preoccupations reflected the ferment of American middle-class culture during the 1830s and '40s—the years when the older religious orthodoxies were waning and myriad messiahs arose to proclaim a new spiritual dispensation. The idioms varied, and Henry James, Sr.'s was no more eccentric than many. Melding the utopian socialism of Charles Fourier and the mysticism of Emanuel Swedenborg, he dismissed his father's God as a nasty projection of Calvinist anxieties and preached an uncompromising spiritualism. Evil, he claimed, came only from the assertion of individual selfhood; the source of moral character was the submersion of our will to God's.

No recluse, Henry James, Sr., was an effervescent and argumentative man, eager to thrust himself into the controversies of his times—eager to live well, too. In 1840 he married Mary Walsh, daughter of a substantial businessman, in her house on Washington Square. Their life was a succession of fashionable hotels and brownstones in lower Manhattan, rented apartments in Paris, and cottages in the English countryside.

William was their first child. He was born in 1842, in the midst of a prolonged economic depression, in the Astor House—the most expensive hotel in New York. William James later remembered his youthful education as a blur—a succession of tutors in New York, London, and Paris; a parade of notables passing through the house or hotel where the family happened to be residing. The guests tended to be philosophers and literati ranging from the hardheaded (William Makepeace Thackeray) to the woolly-minded (Bronson Alcott, Horace Greeley). The latter predominated, perhaps because their homegrown utopianism was more congenial to their host.

No doubt young William heard many mystical pronouncements over the dining room table, but the most by far must have come from his father. Determined to reject his own father's Calvinism, Henry

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James, Sr., maintained a faith in children's innate innocence and ostentatiously rejected discipline. His boys (though not his daughter, Alice) could go anywhere: Niblo's Garden, Barnum's museum, the Broadway theaters, even to church if they chose.

Yet this apparent liberality concealed some quirky and elusive paternal expectations, which first became apparent during the autumn of 1859. The family had moved to Newport, Rhode Island, and William was about to pursue his apparent aptitude for the visual arts by taking up the study of painting with the American portrait and landscape painter William Morris Hunt. At that point, Henry, Sr.'s spiritualism clicked into place: Art, he decided, was insignificant, earthbound, of the body rather than the mind, the heart rather than the head. The alternative to the "feminine" world of art was the "masculine" realm of science. William was whisked off to study science in Geneva. He returned briefly to Hunt's atelier in 1860–61, but abandoned art permanently when he entered the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard in 1861.

The decision was a bow to the paternal will and also, perhaps, an effort to pursue a more "manly" vocation at a time when civil war was breaking out. Henry, Sr.'s two younger sons had enlisted in the Union Army; the older two—Henry, Jr., and William—were too frail for service. Or so their father believed. This selective protectiveness must have done little to relieve William's suspicion that he was a malingering layabout. Struggling with his own inability to live up to conventional American notions of manliness, William James became a nervous invalid. For twelve years, from 1861 to 1873, he was trundled from one spa to another, plagued by psychosomatic ailments and by the treatments devised by his doctors.

This pattern of invalidism was hardly unique. During the second half of the 19th century, what many observers called an "epidemic of neurasthenia" swept through the upper classes in Western Europe and the United States. Neurasthenia was, literally, a lack of nerve force—an immobilizing depression, a loss of will. The most educated and self-conscious were among the most likely to succumb. Postponement of career choice became a common experience among these disabled sons of the bourgeoisie on both sides of the Atlantic.

To many young men of the mid-19th century, the issue of career choice carried all the emotional weight that earlier generations had attached to religious conversion. One's very identity seemed to depend on this single choice. In 1880, lecturing to Harvard undergraduates, James described the second thoughts a young man might feel after making his final decision: "At first, he may sometimes doubt whether the self he murdered in that decisive hour might not have

been the better of the two; but with the years such questions themselves expire, and the old alternative *ego*, once so vivid, fades into something less substantial than a dream."

For James, the problem of career choice was intensified by religious doubt. His father's precepts had left him filled with religious longings but distrustful of orthodox religion. Yet the spiritualism of the elder James was too vague to satisfy the critical intelligence of his son.

During the 1860s, the Cambridge intellectual milieu was undergoing profound transformation. Older religious ideas, even heterodox ones, were eroding. A skeptical, empirical outlook gained strength from the dissemination of Darwinian ideas. James's closest friends at Cambridge, men like Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., had developed their own stoic version of a materialistic world view.

There was more than adolescent posturing in all this: Positivistic science seemed to be the cutting edge of intellectual progress. James was attracted by such iconoclastic views but frightened by their implications. Like others, he began to suspect that free will was merely an illusion. Moreover, if the universe was a meaningless assemblage of atoms whirling blindly through space, then how, James worried, could he preserve some sense of divine purpose?

Even as he questioned the intellectual basis of the dominant success ethic—free will—James used the language of Victorian moralism to describe his own inner struggle. The attainment of manhood, he believed, required a rejection of the sensuous, cultivated ease he associated with the art world—the sexually ambiguous realm over which his brother, the novelist Henry, later presided. Yet the lure of that world was strong.

One temptation occurred in 1865, when James went to Brazil on a specimen-collecting expedition headed by the naturalist Louis Agassiz. In the intellectual wars at Harvard, Agassiz had been routed by the Darwinians; nevertheless he impressed James as a man of great courage and determination. James was 23, had entered medical school the previous year, and had quickly become bored with it. Agassiz's old-fashioned version of natural history appealed to James (even if he could not accept its theological underpinnings) because it seemed to combine the sensibilities of artist and scientist: a knack for patient and careful observation linked with an ability to see the world afresh every day.

In his reactions to Brazil, James the artist at first dominated James the scientist. Soon after the expedition arrived in Rio de Janeiro, James was waxing ecstatic over the lush mountains and the picturesque "Africans" in the streets. In the back country, he wrote

in a letter home, only "savage inarticulate cries" could express the primordial incandescence of the landscape. "The brilliancy of the sky and the clouds, the effect of the atmosphere, which gives their proportionate distance to the diverse planes of the landscape, make you admire the old gal Nature. I almost thought my enjoyment of nature had entirely departed, but here she strikes such massive and stunning blows as to overwhelm the coarsest apprehension." James's aesthetic impulses, up to this point at least, had survived the "coarsening" effects of medical school. He headed the letter "Original Seat of the Garden of Eden."

But the lure of Eden soon faded. Before long, James was reflecting on the "sadness and solemnity produced by the flood of sun and the inextricable variety of vegetable forms." The very brilliancy of the landscape, which had earlier excited James's admiration, now served only to highlight the "inextricable" vegetation. And while he had been at first enchanted by the lolling sensuality of the "Africans," whom he sketched obsessively, within a few weeks he was complaining, like any European tourist, about the lethargy of the natives.

Agassiz warned him that if he was not up and doing, someday people would say of him: "that James—Oh yes, I know him; he used to be a very bright young man!" The warning intensified James's desire to get back to bustling Boston. But after his return, though he finished medical school, he remained paralyzed by depression. During the winter of 1869–70 he touched bottom.

According to most accounts of this crisis, James's recovery began in 1870, when he read the French philosopher Charles Renouvier on free will. Renouvier had argued that the existence of free will could be demonstrated by "the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts." James then decided that "my first act of free will shall be to believe in free will," and the clouds of depression lifted.

This explanation is appealing but not accurate. There is no question that Renouvier's ideas provided important philosophical support for James's desire to believe in his own free will. But the central event in James's recovery was external to his consciousness. In 1874, his mother managed to obtain for him a temporary appointment teaching physiology at Harvard. Until that time, despite Renouvier, James had remained immobile. Hesitantly entering professional life, he soon found that he liked the feeling of engagement with the world. His privileged social position and family connections, rather than any lonely act of intellectual heroism, proved decisive in pulling him out of his invalid's bed and into the wider world.

Work became James's salvation, and he knew it. Much of the

rest of his career involved a strenuous intellectual effort to vindicate a morality of disciplined achievement. He wanted a scientific foundation for attributing causality to conscious human decisions rather than to the press of heredity or environment, or the bestial automatism of biological drives.

Aiming to beat materialistic science at its own game, James searched for the physical origins of mental life. Even the sacrosanct sense of individual selfhood, he believed, could be traced to homely origins in the bodily sensations accompanying effort—the "contractions of the jaw-muscles . . . added to those of the brow and glottis." The individual created a social self on physiological foundations. To upper-class males, the list of possible selves was bewilderingly varied—at least in theory. James warned that "the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully, and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation."

And the choosing was never complete. According to James's psychology, one chooses one's very being throughout conscious life, as the individual selects which sensations he will attend to and which he will ignore. "We may, if we like, by our reasonings unwind things back to that black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swarming atoms which science calls the only real world," James wrote. "But all the while the world *we* feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slow, cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff."

Against the traditional empirical notion of mind as passive receptor of data, James asserted that an individual consciousness selected its own reality even in the laboratory, where "we break the solid plenitude of fact into separate essences, conceive generally what only exists particularly, and by our classifications leave nothing in its natural neighborhood, but separate the contiguous, and join what the poles divorce." Anticipating 20th-century philosophers of science, James observed that scientific concepts originated as "'spontaneous variation' in someone's brain," akin to "flashes of poetry" except that scientists verified those flashes through experimentation. Despite his disdain for German academic idealism and his determination to ground knowledge in empirical evidence, James devalued the resistance posed by external reality to the sovereign powers of mind. This was the key to his "American" hope for an improvable world.

James's epistemology—his explanation of how we know what we know—shaped the therapeutic suggestions he scattered throughout his writings. Never particularly introspective with regard to the origins of his own psychic states, James recommended behavior modi-

fication rather than self-understanding as the best treatment for depression. As he told students in 1892, "to wrestle with a bad feeling only pins our attention on it, and keeps it still fastened in the mind; whereas if we act as if from some better feeling, the old bad feeling soon folds its tent like an Arab and silently steals away."

James was at his most "American" in his orientation toward the present and future; the pragmatic method offered no way to know the truth in the past. James's theory of memory was shallow by comparison to Sigmund Freud's. Anticipating the current fad for computer models of the mind, James tended to treat memory as a technique of information storage and retrieval. Though James admired Freud, the American considered the unconscious to be less a storehouse of repressed memories than a reservoir of vital energy that could be tapped in times of crisis—a source of "second wind."

If James insisted that consciousness was "a fighter for ends," he seemed reluctant to confront the ends themselves. In this respect, he resembled many intellectuals of his era and class, such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and John Dewey. These men helped dismantle the older, static moral universe; they promoted instead a faith in process as an end in itself. Their work focused on means rather than goals, procedures rather than ultimate results, becoming rather than being. In philosophy it led to the pragmatism of John Dewey as well as the existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre. At a more mundane level, the fascination with process formed the essence of bureaucratic liberalism in the 20th century, even as it also provided intellectual justification for the vigorous style of life epitomized by the antics of Theodore Roosevelt.

Yet James can hardly be dismissed as a court philosopher for Teddy Roosevelt. James's investigation of the mind-body split led him to subversive discoveries. Rejecting the notion that emotions and ideas were unrelated to physical causes, he linked "lower" and "higher" functions at every turn. It was only a short step from psychological to anthropological insight: James gradually came to the recognition that "lower" and "higher" civilizations were brothers under the skin. In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), for example, after a long quotation from anthropologist Lewis Taylor on fetishism among children and savages, James jumped to a discussion of the fetishlike photographs of "lost ones" to be found in Cambridge parlors. Harvard man and Hottentot had much more in common than they knew.

James's effort to reconceive conventional categories of thought led in profound philosophical directions. In his descriptions of mental life, the metaphors of strife and struggle were often submerged in

water imagery. His fluid language reflected a desire to dissolve the boundaries erected by traditional philosophy (whether empirical or idealistic): between one thought and the next, between percept and concept, between the knowing self and the known world. The brilliant "Stream of Thought" chapter in *The Principles of Psychology* challenged atomistic theories of consciousness by focusing on the relations or "fringes" between thoughts. Consciousness, "like a bird's life," was "an alternation of flights and perchings." James was more interested in the flights than the perchings. "We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*," he wrote. Consciousness was continuous: "In the feeling of each word there chimes an echo or foretaste of every other." All formed "an unbroken stream."

James's speculations on the stream of thought revealed his affinities with some of the boldest pioneers of literary modernism. James Joyce, like William James, wanted to retrieve the little words from obscurity, while he feared "those big words that make us so unhappy" with their sense of finality or closure.

Finnegans Wake concludes with what Joyce called "the most slippery, the least accented, the weakest word in English, a word which is not even a word, which is scarcely sounded between the teeth, a breath, a nothing, the article *the*." Joyce, like James, rejected any notion of human consciousness that failed to recognize its continuous flow.

The emphasis on the "fringe" also linked James and Freud. While James never accepted Freudian notions of the unconscious, he acknowledged the elusiveness of the forces shaping human motivation. "Individuality is founded in feeling," James wrote in 1902, "and the recesses of feeling, the darker, blinder strata of character, are the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making."

Despite his mistrust of the psychoanalytic emphasis on sexuality, James told Freud's disciple Ernest Jones in 1909 that "the future of psychology belongs to your work." The prediction was only partially accurate. As author and neurologist Oliver Sacks has recently suggested, the most promising path of development for the discipline of neuropsychiatry is a synthesis of neurological and psychoanalytic tradition—indeed, the melding of mind and body that James began promoting a century ago.

James's ultimate concerns, however, were less scientific than religious. The larger significance of the stream of thought was that it flowed toward a "mother-sea" of "cosmic consciousness." Even as he celebrated personal autonomy, James yearned to transcend it. The

desire for connectedness led James to hypothesize a realm of "pure experience." This hypothesis, in turn, formed the basis of his own "radical empiricism," which admitted even the "blooming, buzzing confusion" of the newborn babe into philosophical discourse.

"Pure experience" was James's term for the inchoate flux of images and sensations that formed the perceptual world of infants and adults on the boundaries of normal waking consciousness. As consciousness developed, pure experience was organized into categories and concepts. James assigned importance to states of mind that had been ignored or dismissed by traditional philosophy. He searched for pure experience in abnormal psychic states: dizzy spells, multiple personalities, hallucinations and revelations induced by drugs or religious ecstasy.

If the concept of pure experience satisfied James's cravings for connectedness, he neither formulated it carefully nor confronted all its epistemological difficulties. Rather than using scientific or philosophical formulations, James more commonly expressed his overarching vision in the language of mystical religion. "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," he wrote in "Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher" (1909). "Not only psychic research, but metaphysical philosophy and speculative biology are led in their own ways to look with favor on some such 'panpsychic' view of the universe as this." En route to panpsychism (the belief that the universe is psychic throughout) James explored the spiritualistic world of darkened parlors, table-rappings, and fainting matrons—a world that fascinated late 19th-century intellectuals even while it invited their scorn.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James revealed his ability to appreciate an enormous range of faiths without allowing his passion for the spiritual life to fade into mere tolerance. But his preoccupation with mysticism was the most revealing part of the book. In contemporary mind-cure cults as well as in Catholicism, Hinduism, and "ordinary neurological hygiene," James found a common emphasis on regeneration through letting go of "your little private convulsive self... an immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down."

Despite his desire for connectedness, James was unwilling to lose his identity by allowing it to merge with a cosmic consciousness. Mystical passivity (like his father's) implied what James called "self-surrender" in the fight against sin. The problem of evil prevented James from accepting the notion of an infinite God suffusing harmony throughout the cosmos. The pragmatic religious response to "real

wrongness" in the world was to believe in a finite God who needs our help. The test of faith was its capacity to stir us to act against evil.

James concluded *Varieties* with the hopeful question: "Who knows whether the faithfulness of individuals here below to their own poor over-beliefs may not actually help God in turn to be more effectively faithful to his own greater tasks?" Religion was to be judged above all by its ethical seriousness.

The profoundest expression of James's ethical views was his continuing search for a moral equivalent of war. The effort was rooted in his own need to view the world as an arena for purposeful struggle. An eloquent pacifist and anti-imperialist, James realized that the "whole atmosphere of present-day utopian literature tastes mawkish and dishwatery to people who still keep a sense for life's more bitter flavors."

A world without war lacked hardness or valor or heroic self-sacrifice; it promised only the gradual rising of a dead-level ocean of mediocrity. "Fie upon such a cattle yard of a planet!" The opponents of war had forgotten the persistence of atavistic instincts in civilized man: the love of pomp and pageantry, the lure of bodily testing in battle, the camaraderie of collective life *in extremis*.

What was needed, James thought, was to harness those instincts to pacific purposes. James proposed forming boy-battalions that could be sent off "to coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, . . . to get the childishness knocked out of them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas." The idea has survived to the present. It influenced the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps during the New Deal; it hovers over current discussions of mandatory national service for our (allegedly) gilded youth. Contemporary debate draws on some of the same sources that shaped James's polemic: the republican fears of youth emasculated by a soft commercial civilization, the desire to revive ideals of public service in a society given over to moneymaking.

But contemporary advocates of national service lack James's urgent moral passion. He delivered the "moral equivalent" address in 1910, the year of his death. The European empires were about to sink under the weight of their own weaponry; the United States was already jostling for position in what Conrad called "the dark places of the earth." James sensed the threat posed by the rise of modern militarism, and the need for more forceful alternatives than conventional pacifism.

James's greatness derived from manner as well as matter. Characteristically, he developed his ideas in public lectures to a wide audience. Even in his abstract philosophical essays, one can hear an

actual human voice turning problems over, trying to explain. Without Emerson's provincialism or orphic vagueness, James took the Emersonian message to the people—the message of mind in its largest sense, before psychology and philosophy were sundered into "departments," divorced from each other as well as from common speech.

This was James's "Americanism" at its finest. In lieu of Prussian professionalism or class-bound British amateurism, James held a democratic, publicly engaged ideal of intellectual life. "The Social Value of the College-Bred," he believed, was to promote the capacity for critical discrimination in the larger society. Educated people would then truly merit the title of *les intellectuels*—the label used ironically by the anti-Semitic Right in France during the Dreyfus Affair "to satirize the men in France who still retained some critical sense and judgment!" If American intellectuals failed to meet their responsibility, James predicted, some future historian of the United States would observe that during the 20th century, universities had yielded their influence over public opinion to the "ten-cent magazines."

By now, historians should have begun to make that observation. Our universities have become, at best, vocational training centers; the language spoken there is a mix of pedantry, social science jargon, and bureaucratese. The people who work there are, by and large, not intellectuals but "professionals." James's ideal of *les intellectuels* seems a lost illusion. He had begun to suspect it even as he spoke. By the turn of the century, American scholarship already was conforming to the Prussian model at every major university. James noticed the trend and wittily satirized it in "The Ph.D. Octopus" (1903). Nowadays, graduate students read that essay with delight, and wonder what it would have been like to be taught by Professor James. At once Victorian and modernist, he was the truest embodiment of that much-abused ideal, the American Scholar. Perhaps he deserves a monument after all.