INTRODUCTION

"He was so commanding a presence, so curious and inquiring, so responsive and expansive, and so generous and reckless of himself and of his own, that every one said of him: ‘Here is no musty savant, but a man, a great man, a man on the heroic scale, not to serve whom is avarice and sin.’" So James speaks with affection of his own teacher Agassiz, and the words fitly describe the impression he himself made upon his students and associates. There was none who did not come under the spell of his personality, none who did not look forward eagerly to every fresh work from his pen. There was such a sense of life and reality in all that he wrote that reading his works had, in a peculiar sense, the charm of personal intercourse. It was like meeting the man himself and sharing in his faith, his enthusiasm, his vision.

One does not think of James as a man with a philosophy, but rather as one who cleared the decks for all future philosophising. Late in life, to be sure, he labelled his view "pragmatism," modestly declaring this to be a "new name for some old ways of thinking," and dedicating the book in which the view was presented to John Stuart Mill, from whom he first learned the "pragmatic openness of mind." But he is careful to explain that the word stands for a method, and for a theory of truth, rather than for a system of philosophy. And when the view was launched and began to have followers, instinctively he shrank from the use of the label. When a philosophy, even his own, had been ticketed and had become one among many philosophical isms, it began to lose some of its vitality.

At very rare intervals in the history of philosophy there have appeared thinkers who, like William James, are too real to be readily classified—thinkers who cut under the distinctions that divide men into schools. When they appear they always speak the language of the people for the simple reason that they are interpreting life as real men live it with a freshness of vision unknown in the schools. The influence of William James has probably travelled further and gone deeper than that of any other American scholar. Into the languages of all
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civilised peoples his works have been translated, and everywhere they have met with instant recognition. Honorary degrees, honorary memberships in learned societies and academies, all manner of scholarly distinctions poured in upon him from all quarters. And yet by far the larger part of his published works consists of essays and addresses first delivered to popular or semi-popular audiences; and even his most technical performance, his classic work in psychology, is singularly simple and direct and free from technicalities, and withal readable. The fact is significant, and explains in part the secret of his hold upon his contemporaries. For, though writing for the people, he was never a populariser. He did not have tucked away in his den some profound and recondite system clothed in the polysyllabic profundity which learning too often affects, which, on occasion, he condescended to translate, in diluted doses, for the benefit of laymen. His profoundest thought is in these pages. He could not help being simple and clear, for he lived close to reality in its concrete fulness; and he could not help writing for the people, and not for a special academic guild, because he believed in the people, and because, furthermore, he believed in the mission of philosophy to help the people to interpret life and to lay hold of life's ideals, and thus to "know a good man when they saw him."

James tells us that it was the hours he spent with Agassiz that "so taught him the difference between all possible abstractionists and all livers in the light of the world's concrete fulness" that he was never able to forget it. And the term which, by preference, he used to describe his position was "radical empiricism," a phrase which shows the importance he ascribed to method in philosophising. How far removed this method is from that which commonly passes for empiricism one can best find out by reading the last chapter in his larger Psychology. Without going into details, it is enough here to note that for him the method meant simply a recognition of the fact that "the truth of things is after all their living fulness." To lay hold of the facts in their living fulness was what he meant by being radically empirical. But the facts of human nature are so intimate and so familiar that they usually escape observation. Or if they chance to be called to our attention, they are apt to be summarily lumped together under some familiar caption, or forthwith named and classified in a
conventional way, and thus disposed of. James could always “see the familiar as if it were strange,” and was thus peculiarly fitted for the rôle of explorer and observer of the familiar, but little known, facts of the inner life. Moreover, he appreciated as few have done the extent to which words and phrases, dogmas and ready-made principles of classification, blind men’s vision and dull their senses. To the facts of experience with which psychology and ethics deal he brought the artist’s skill in pure appreciation of values, and he possessed a rare gift for describing what he saw. His special contributions to psychology, and his significance in philosophy, are alike due to this trait.

The first lesson of radical empiricism is that the mind never is merely a passive spectator, never is merely a receptacle for data supplied from without. Such a way of viewing experience is to mistake for the mind what a real mind never is, and for data what real data never are. In a striking passage James writes:

“The world’s contents are given to each of us in an order so foreign to our subjective interests that we can hardly by an effort of the imagination picture to ourselves what it is like. We have to break that order altogether—and by picking out from it the items which concern us, and connecting them with others far away, which we say ‘belong’ with them, we are able to make out definite threads of sequence and tendency; to foresee particular liabilities and get ready for them; and to enjoy simplicity and harmony in place of what was chaos.

. . . . Can we realise for an instant what a cross-section of all existence at a definite point of time would be? While I talk and the flies buzz, a sea-gull catches a fish at the mouth of the Amazon, a tree falls in the Adirondack wilderness, a man sneezes in Germany, a horse dies in Tartary, and twins are born in France. What does that mean? Does the contemporaneity of these events with one another and with a million others as disjointed, form a rational bond between them, and unite them into anything that means for us a world? Yet just such a collateral contemporaneity, and nothing else, is the real order of the world. It is an order with which we have nothing to do but to get away from it as fast as possible. As I said, we break it; we break it into histories, and we break it into arts, and we break it into sciences; and then we begin to feel at home. We make ten thousand separate serial orders of it, and
on any one of these we react as though the others did not exist."\textsuperscript{1}

Other philosophies had indeed noted this truth before. But hitherto philosophy has been too much influenced by the model of mathematics and physics, and has thus tended to think in terms of the contrast between form and matter. To-day biological sciences are in the ascendant, and they furnish a safer model for philosophy inasmuch as they bring us nearer to the facts in their concrete fulness. The contrast is between the living and the dead; and life means growth, development, progress, and time is of the essence of experience. The complexity of experience upon which James laid stress was that which it receives in its time dimension. The time quality of experience is its most significant trait. Everywhere we find fluency and continuity, and in all our interpretations, scientific as well as philosophical, the practical categories are dominant. Our philosophy is essentially forward-looking, and must measure values in results, truth values as well as moral values. Hence James was not interested in truth in the abstract, but rather in the actual process of truth-getting—in what happens when an idea is accepted as true; and he noted that ideas passed for true in proportion to their serviceableness in guiding us through the tangled complexity of experience, in making us at home in the world in which we daily live, and thus masters of it. Science itself was a human construction for human ends. And when it gave itself airs, became sacrosanct and absolute, as it did in the positivism of Herbert Spencer, and in the name of science proceeded to rule out of court all those facts and values of the spiritual life which do not admit of verification through the senses, it ceased to be science, and became a sheer philosophical dogmatism. It was in fact no better than those pretentious idealisms which in the name of abstract reason made all things parts of one inclusive whole, made the world a "block universe," fixed, eternal, perfect, and left no room for what makes life for the individual significant—freedom, choice, novelty, and progress.

Ideals again were not decorations of life in the abstract, highly polished moral ornaments; they were the practical tools of good living. They were not to be measured by the noble language in which they were expressed, nor yet by the subjective feelings or emotions they aroused, but by the way

\textsuperscript{1} "Reflex Action and Theism," \textit{The Will to Believe}, etc., pp. 118-9.
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they worked, by what they actually accomplished in the prosaic world of dust and dirt and brute fact, for the betterment of character and of the conditions of human life. The truth is that our life, intellectual and moral, is at every turn ruled by ideals, and back of all ideals lies faith—a faith involving a certain element of risk from which none can escape. And much of James’s work is spent in defending the faiths by which men actually live, by testing them in the only manner in which their truth can be tested, by the way in which they express themselves in life.

James also possessed in a wonderful degree what might be called sympathetic imagination—the ability to get as it were on the inside of the other fellow’s vision; and whenever he ran across, in the work of another thinker, however humble and obscure, evidence of some fresh and original interpretation of genuine experience, he heralded it as a veritable discovery. It was a new document to be reckoned with. He was, in fact, singularly free from what he has called “a certain blindness in human beings.” How free, a reading of the Varieties of Religious Experience will show. The essay in which he discusses this blindness is, as he says, more than the piece of sentimentalism that at first sight it might appear to be. “It connects itself with a definite view of the world and of our moral relations to it.” That view is the pluralistic or individualistic philosophy according to which “the truth is too great for any one actual mind, even though that mind be dubbed ‘the absolute,’” to know the whole of it. The facts and worths of life need many cognisers to take them in. There is no point of view absolutely public and universal.” The practical consequence of this philosophy is, he adds, the “well known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality.”

Perhaps the chief reason for the popularity of James’s philosophy is the sense of freedom it brings with it. It is the philosophy of open doors; the philosophy of a new world with a large frontier and, beyond, the enticing unexplored lands where one may still expect the unexpected; a philosophy of hope and promise, a philosophy that invites adventure, since it holds that the dice of experience are not loaded. The older monistic philosophies and religions present by contrast stuffy closed systems and an exhausted universe. They seem to pack the individual into a logical strait-jacket and to represent all history as simply the unfolding of a play that was written to its
very last line from the dawn of creation. These old absolutes go with the old order of things.

James is an interpreter of the new order of democracy. The most important and interesting thing about a nation, or an historic epoch, as about an individual, was, he held, its "ideals and over-beliefs." And if he is our representative philosopher of democracy, it is not because of his individualism, his appreciation of the unique, the uncommunicable, his hospitality of mind, his respect for humanity in its every honest manifestation, his support of the doctrine of live and let live, his tolerance of all that was not itself intolerant; it is not because of his insistence that professions be measured by their "cash value" in experience, and men by their ability to "make good"; but it is, above all, because of his skill in interpreting those ideals and over-beliefs of his nation and epoch. For these are the things that save democracy from vulgarity and commercialism, that preserve the higher human qualities, and insure for the citizens of a free land the fruits of civilisation—more air, more refinement, and a more liberal perspective.

James was a firm believer in democracy. But he held that democracy was still on trial, and that no one could tell how it would stand the ordeal. "Nothing future," he writes, "is quite secure; states enough have inwardly rotted; and democracy as a whole may undergo self-poisoning. But, on the other hand, democracy is a kind of religion, and we are bound not to admit its failure. Faiths and utopias are the noblest exercise of human reason, and no one with a spark of reason in him will sit down fatastically before the croaker's picture. The best of us are filled with the contrary vision of a democracy stumbling through every error till its institutions glow with justice and its customs shine with beauty. Our better men shall show the way and we shall follow them. . . . The ceaseless whisper of the more permanent ideals, the steady tug of truth and justice, give them but time, must warp the world in their direction." ¹

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¹ Memories and Studies, pp. 317 ff.
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