

# THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

## PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

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WILLIAM JAMES

IN responding to the request of the editors to write a few words regarding the late William James, I find myself without any of his books at hand. In any case, an adequate estimate of his philosophy could hardly be made at this time. Those who have been associated with him for many years can alone contribute to the story of his intellectual development—a fascinating topic, I imagine. Those who have studied under him will tell the tale of his teaching. While I have been honored with his friendship for many years, circumstances forbade intimacy, and I am not fitted to speak fitting words of his personality. Of William James neither as philosopher nor as man shall I, then, attempt to write, but will attempt some scattered and hurried impressions of what falls between.

The following bare facts, gleaned in part from the public press, are given as matter of record. He was born in New York City, January 11, 1842, being a little more than a year older than his brother, Henry. He must have come naturally by his psychological and metaphysical bent, for the writings of his father are acute and subtle. Many will recall the delightful introduction to some of them with which William James prefaced an edition of the "Literary Remains" of his father. In a daily paper, it is stated that James Russell Lowell called Henry James, Sr., the "best talker in America." The younger James's early education was somewhat scattering, a fact that perhaps had some bearing upon his freely expressed aversion to the over-regimentation of our American college education. Even Harvard he thought too conventional—especially in its unwillingness to make professors of men who would not work well in harness.

His special training was scientific, not literary, being had at the Lawrence Scientific School, upon an Agassiz expedition, and finally at the Harvard Medical School, where he graduated in 1870. Classicists can doubtless explain how it happened that a man of such exquisite literary sense was the product of a scientific training. The

student of his works notes both that his psychological career grew naturally out of his physiological interests (he was a teacher of physiology in the Harvard Medical School from 1872 to 1880), and that he was moved to strong reaction against the dogmatic attitude of many scientific men of that time. Chauncey Wright, I suppose, was one of the profoundest intellectual influences of his life—but in the reverse direction. In 1878 he married Miss Alice Gibbons, who, with four children, survives him. From 1880 till his retirement in 1907 he was on the Harvard staff as teacher of philosophy or psychology, one or both. That his work was recognized in Europe as well as in this country is witnessed in his honorary degrees from Italy, Switzerland, and England, and his membership in the academy of almost every European country. By common consent he was far and away the greatest of American psychologists—it was a case of James first and no second. Were it not for the unreasoned admiration of men and things German, there would be no question, I think, that he was the greatest psychologist of his time in any country—perhaps of any time. The division of philosophy into schools affects the judging of philosophers, but those of the most opposite schools will cordially acknowledge that Mr. James has been one of the few vital and fruitful factors in contemporary thought.

Every one, I suppose, would cite his sense of reality as Mr. James's foremost trait. I would not say that philosophers as a class are lacking in this trait, but the business of philosophy is to generalize and to systematize; and philosophers are under a greater temptation than others to follow the bent of their own leading principles, to fill in missing considerations and to overlook contrary indications. Mr. James was extraordinarily free from this defect. He saw things in the varied aspects which they have by nature, and was content to report them as he saw them.

The saying, commoner a few years ago than now, but still frequently heard, that Mr. James contradicted himself too much for a philosopher and that he lacked the power of systematic reflection, was in fact a tribute to the sincerity and scope of Mr. James's vision and reporting. As matter of fact, the various portions of Mr. James's "radical empiricism" hang together—in my judgment—in a way indicative of good technical workmanship, but he took things as he found them, and if things were not simple, or consistent, or systematized, his philosophy did not consist in forcing system upon them. In this sense only do I find his thought unsystematic.

In any case, Mr. James has added a precious gift to American philosophic thought. However much or however little it may follow in the path that Mr. James struck out, his influence has made it more hospitable to fact, more sensitive to the complex difficulties of

situations, less complacently content with merely schematic unities. One of the defects that troubled Mr. James in the writings of many of the younger philosophers in America, a certain crabbedness and obscurity of style, is, I think, in some degree traceable to this very influence. It is comparatively easy to appear clear when engaged in expounding second-hand ideas or expatiating upon some convention of literary tradition. Groping in unexplored fields after considerations that are themselves obscure lends itself to clear writing only when it coincides with such lucid vision and constructive artistry as Mr. James himself possessed.

This brings me to what I should name as the second of Mr. James's gifts—his power of literary expression. This power strikes both the layman and the professional philosopher, and strikes them at first glance. I shall not be so stupid as to enlarge upon it, and, not being a literary critic, I shall not attempt to describe it. But it is pertinent to remark that in Mr. James's case not only was the style very much of the man, but it was also of the essence of his vision and of his thought. The picturesqueness of reference, the brilliant accuracy of characterization, by which he has enriched philosophic literature, were a part of his sense for the concrete, and for the varied aspects of the world. He was not a philosopher who by taking pains acquired a literary gift; he was an artist who gave philosophic expression to the artist's sense of the unique, and to his love of the individual. It is no accident that the note which sounds through his last systematic work, "The Pluralistic Universe," is "vision." Akin to the objection that Mr. James was not systematic enough for a philosopher, was the remark that he was more of a literary man than a philosopher—a remark sometimes uttered by those who did not like Mr. James's unprofessional short-cuts to results. The late Dr. W. T. Harris, by temperament and training at the opposite pole of philosophy, did not share this superficial opinion. I recall hearing him say that Mr. James's artistic power was genuine evidence of the depth and reality of his philosophic quality—that only one who had both a direct consciousness of his subject-matter and a sympathetic consciousness of what was stirring, unexpressed, in the minds of other men, could attain Mr. James's artistic distinction.

Even this slight note of appreciation would be incomplete did I not speak of one of the most delightful traits of Mr. James's generous personality—his cordial attitude toward anything that struck him as genuine and individual in the efforts of any other writer, no matter how remote the thought from Mr. James's own. "Philosophy," Mr. James used to say, "is a lonely bug"; and the solitary reflections of many comparatively unknown men in America have

been relieved by a word of appreciative encouragement from Mr. James. At times, indeed, Mr. James's discovery of a Spinoza or a Hegel born out of due season, caused some embarrassment to those of us who were less generous. The same largeness of attitude Mr. James carried into discussion and controversy. It would be a nice matter to decide just how much of his reputation for inconsistency was due to his willingness to make concessions to his opponents in the hope of finding common ground beneath, and to his large-minded indifference to minor details of his own former writings.

It would not be fitting to close a notice in a journal read for the most part by professional philosophers without noting Mr. James's religious belief in the possibilities of philosophy. In spite of his not taking philosophic conventionalities at all seriously, he took philosophy itself very seriously. His popular hold is not at all due, I think, simply to his charm of style. His readers instinctively feel that here is a man who believes something and whose belief is not professional and acquired, but personal and native; a man who believes so deeply in the importance of what he sees and reports that he is not satisfied until his readers also see and have their tone of belief and life modified accordingly. He was, especially in his later writings, an apostle seeking the conversion of souls. Many a note or postal-card of his will be found, I imagine, which refers to the possibility of some discovery, by some one, perhaps to come soon, of a solving word by which light will be made to shine in darkness. When, in one of his recent writings, he refers to the "pragmatistic church," it is not a sectarian and exclusive spirit which animates the phrase, but a fervor of faith in the importance of genuine philosophy. It is a difficult thing for professional philosophers to retain this genuine faith in its simplicity. It gets lost in the mazes of scholarship; wrapped in the napkin of specialization and buried in the ground of professionalism; or it dissipates along with the disillusionizing of early ardent hopes. Our greatest act of piety to him to whom we owe so much is to accept from him some rekindling of a human faith in the human significance of philosophy.

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### TRUTH AND ITS OBJECT

**T**O avoid confusion, it is well to distinguish at the outset between reality as the object of our knowledge and as our object-construct. The real object is that which we must meet, to which we must adjust ourselves, in order to live to the fullest extent. The object-construct or the scientific object is the sum of our knowledge