The Philosophy of William James

An Introduction

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Introduction

William James (1842–1910) had a peripatetic childhood in which his father, the theologian Henry James, Sr., hustled him and his four younger siblings, among whom was the novelist Henry James, Jr., from one European nation to another in search of an adequate education. After a brief stint as a painting student of William Morris Hunt he entered the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard in 1861. Upon graduation in 1864 he enrolled in the Harvard Medical School, completing the M.D. degree in 1869, with a year off to participate in Louis Agassiz’s research expedition to Brazil. After suffering serious ill health and depression from 1869 to 1872, he became an instructor in physiology at Harvard, where he spent his entire career until his retirement in 1907. He rapidly moved up the academic ladder, becoming instructor in anatomy and physiology in 1873, assistant professor of physiology in 1876, assistant professor of philosophy in 1880, full professor in 1885, and professor of psychology in 1889.

The best way to characterize James’s philosophy is that it is a passionate quest to have it all, to grab with all the gusto he can, which, for James, means achieving the maximum richness of experience. This requires having each of his many selves, which includes the scientist, moralist, and mystic, fully realize itself. Unfortunately, this grand quest is thwarted by the apparent tensions and conflicts between the perspectives of these different selves. The scientist accepts determinism and epiphenomenalism in a world that is stripped of everything that would give it human value and purpose. But for the moralist there
are undetermined acts of spiritual causation in a nonbifurcated world. The mystic, in opposition to both of these perspectives, eschews concepts completely so that it can achieve at least a partial unity with the conscious interiors of not only other persons, including supernatural ones, but nature at large. The clash between his mystical self and these other selves will turn out to be the deeper and more intractable division within James. For whereas his pragmatism could serve as a reconciler but not as a unifier between his scientific and moralistic selves by showing that they both employed concepts to gain a promethean power to control their environment, with truth being based on how successfully they did this, it is of no avail in resolving this clash. For the mystical stance requires overcoming this promethean self.

In giving dramatic voice to this clash James became the representative philosopher of New England culture in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, it is inspired by the Darwinian view of man as engaged in a never ending struggle to survive and, on the other, by the pioneer ideal of conquering a hostile environment so that it will bend to our purposes. It has unbridled optimism that science will be able to supply us with the needed technology to achieve this promethean goal of becoming the masters of nature. But coupled with this quest is a deep mystical strain that finds expression in Concord transcendentalism and the nature mysticism of writers like Emerson, Wordsworth, and Longfellow. Herein it is our active, promethean self that must be overcome so that we can enter into I–Thou type relations with reality through acts of conceptless sympathetic intuition. What follows is a brief overview of my book whose purpose is to supply the reader with a synoptic vision of how the different chapters hang together.

Chapter 1 shows how James’s Darwinian-based prometheanism gives rise to a type of utilitarian ethical theory that holds us to be morally obligated always to act so as to maximize desire–satisfaction over desire–dissatisfaction, that is, to act in a way that enables us, if not to have it all, to have as much of it as we can under the given circumstances. Because we are determined by our very biological nature to be always intent on satisfying some felt need or desire, it seems reasonable to make the attainment of this our moral ideal. The challenge of the deontologist, who holds there to be intrinsically valuable states, such as justice, will figure prominently in the discussion, the outcome of which will be that James must find some way to accommodate these
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deontological moral intuitions within his desire-maximizing ethical theory.

Chapter 2 shows that belief is an action for James in the sense that we can either believe at will (intentionally, voluntarily, on purpose) or at will do things, such as acting as if we believe, that shall self-induce belief. When this is combined with our moral obligation always to act so as to maximize desire-satisfaction, it follows that we are always morally obligated to believe in a manner that maximizes desire-satisfaction. This yields the following syllogism.

1. We are always morally obligated to act so as to maximize desire-satisfaction over desire-dissatisfaction.
2. Belief is an action.
3. Therefore, we are always morally obligated to believe in a manner that maximizes desire-satisfaction over desire-dissatisfaction.

Thus, from the moral duty to act so as to have it all, or as much of it as the circumstances permit, the moral duty to believe in a way that accomplishes this follows when it is added that belief is an action.

James, however, would not accept this syllogism unless it is added to premise 2 that belief is a free action, for James held that ought implies can in the full-blooded sense of freely can. If we have a moral duty to believe in a certain manner we must be free to do so. Chapter 3 presents James’s libertarian theory of free will and shows how he applied it to belief itself. Chapter 4 explores his famous doctrine of the will to believe that justifies our believing without adequate evidence when doing so will help to maximize desire-satisfaction. The evidentially nonwarranted proposition that we are free to believe becomes a prime candidate for a will-to-believe type option that justifies our believing that we can freely believe at will, thereby making our beliefs subject to the duty prescribed in premise 1 in the preceding syllogism.

Because the true is what we ought to believe, it follows that a proposition is true when believing it maximizes desire-satisfaction. This attempt to base epistemology on the moral duty to try to have it all is James’s boldest and most original contribution to philosophy and is the topic of Chapter 5, wherein it is shown how James’s highly revisionary analysis of truth and belief acceptance is motivated and justified by his promethean quest to have it all. James’s analysis of truth in terms of
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what maximizes desire–satisfaction for believers will be found to incorporate guiding principles or instrumental rules enjoining us to have beliefs that are both consistent and epistemically warranted, and to follow a conservative strategy when it becomes necessary to revise our web of belief; however, we are permitted to violate these rules when doing so on some occasion will maximize desire–satisfaction.

Chapter 6 explores his future-oriented pragmatic theory of meaning and reference, which also is fueled by his promethean quest to gain power to control our environment so as to realize our goals, and the theory of “truth” that falls out of it on the assumption that a theory of meaning gives truth conditions for the proposition expressed by a sentence. This theory is at odds with the one in Chapter 5 based on maximizing desire–satisfaction. The clash will be neutralized by having James reject this assumption, thereby interpreting the pragmatic theory of meaning as giving conditions for a proposition to be epistemically warranted, rather than true, thus the reason for the scare quotation marks around “truth” in the title of Chapter 6, “The Semantics of ‘Truth.’”

James appeals to his promethean ethical theory of belief formation and acceptance to legitimate letting each of his many selves take its turn at seeking self-realization, thereby enabling him to have it all. For whether we take the stance to the world of the scientist, moral agent, melioristic theist, or mystic we employ the same promethean pragmatic theory for determining the meaning, reference, and truth of whatever we might say from these different perspectives. Unfortunately, the magical elixir of methodological univocalism does not go far enough in enabling each of his many selves to see the light of day and flourish, for there are clashes between the claims and assumptions made by these different selves from their different perspectives – and the one thing that James personally could not abide was a contradiction.

The scientific self accepts universal determinism, epiphenomenalism, and the bifurcation between man and nature, while the moral agent self believes that there are undetermined acts of spiritual causation in a world that has human meaning. Furthermore, whereas both use concepts as teleological instruments for gaining power to control the world of changing objects, the mystical self eschews concepts altogether in order to penetrate to the inner conscious core of a
cotton-candyish reality through an act of sympathetic intuition. How are the clashes between the claims made from these different perspectives, each of which supposedly is a requirement for “having it all,” to be reconciled?

Chapter 7 examines a strategy that James had for neutralizing these seeming clashes. Let each of his many selves be directed to its own world with no world qualifying as the real world absolutely or simpliciter. The predicate “is real” or “is the actual world” is not the monadic predicate it grammatically appears to be, but instead is the disguised three place predicate “— is real for self — at time —.” When used by a person on some occasion this predicate gets filled out as “A certain world W is real for me now.” This doctrine, which aptly could be called ontological relativism, allows us, as our interests and purposes change, successively to take different worlds to be the real or actual world without inconsistency.

The seeming inconsistencies between the claims made by our different selves are neutralized by restricting them to a certain perspective or world. Qua the tough-minded scientist, James affirms determinism and that there is no psychosis without neurosis, but qua the tender-minded moral agent, he rejects both and instead accepts the reality of undetermined acts of spiritual causation. Qua promethean man of action, he carves reality up into a plurality of discrete individuals in terms of pragmatically based classificatory systems, but qua mystic, he eschews concepts altogether so as to achieve a deep unification between himself and a surrounding mother sea of consciousness. And so on, and so on. What is real depends upon the purposes and interests that are freely selected by a self. The doctrine of ontological relativism turns out to be an instrument forged by James’s promethean self that aids his endeavor to have it all.

James’s highly influential theory of Pure Experience, often called “neutral monism,” held that no individual is intrinsically physical or mental but becomes one or the other when we take it in a certain way by placing it in some temporal sequence of events. Whether a sequence is physical or mental depends on the manner in which its members function in relation to each other, in particular whether or not they stand in nomically based causal relations with each other in the manner described by Kant in his Second Analogy of Experience. I will argue that the theory of pure experience was implicitly restricted to the world
of sensible realities and had the reconciling function of neutralizing clashes that arose between the claims of realists and idealists as to the true nature of these realities and the manner in which “inner” states of consciousness are hooked up with “outer” physical states. Through the dissolution of this pseudoproblem our intelligence is freed from the coils of traditional epistemology so that it can more effectively perform its promethean function.

The Antipromethean Mystic

Prometheanism, however, is not the whole story about James’s philosophy, as many commentators would have it. For coexisting with his promethean self was a mystical self, and ultimately it was the mystical self that had its way, or at least the final word, quite literally since mysticism is the dominant theme of his final two books, *A Pluralistic Universe* and *Some Problems of Philosophy*. Whereas his promethean self wants to ride herd on objects so as to control them for his own ends, his mystical self wants to become intimate with them by entering into their inner conscious life so as to become unified with them, though not in a way that involves complete numerical identity, for James always favored pluralistic mysticism, such as is found within the Western theistic tradition, over its monistic Eastern version. But what James most craved was not unification with others but unification among his many selves that continually threatened to render him schizophrenic through disintegration into the sort of split personality that so fascinated him in the research of Janet.

This quest for intimacy, and ultimately union, between himself and others, as well as among his many selves, begins with his giving pride of place to introspection over objective causal analyses.

Chapter 8 shows how James’s analysis of personal identity over time is based exclusively on what is introspectively vouchsafed to each individual.

Chapter 9 explores James’s attempt to “I–Thou” other persons by projecting onto them what he finds when he introspects his own mind. By an act of empathetic intuition he enters into the inner conscious life of these Thous. By discovering this inner life, which is what bestows significance on their lives, they cease to be an *It* to be used by his promethean self and become something to be cherished and
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respected because each has its own special way of experiencing the world and finding some meaning in it. Whereas his promethean self accepts the ethical rule of maximizing desire–satisfaction, his mystical self enriches this with a democratic deontological principle that persons must, in virtue of their possessing a unique inner life that renders their life significant, be left free to flourish in the manner that they deem best, provided that they don’t interfere with the right of others to do likewise. This entails that they cannot be used as mere means to realize the maximization of desire–satisfaction. Thus, there is a clash between the maximizing ethics of prometheanism and the mystically based deontological ethics of reverence and respect for the autonomy of others. The I–Thou experiences between man and man get extended to I–Thou experiences between man and nature at large and, finally, to supernatural spirits, including God, also called the More and the surrounding mother-sea-of-consciousness.

But James’s quest for intimacy and union does not stop with I–Thou-ing other persons, both natural and supernatural. He wants to accomplish this for reality at large. To accomplish this, as Chapter 10 demonstrates, he must learn how to jettison all concepts so that he can have a pure intuition of the inner life of all these others. He is aided in this endeavor by a string of a priori arguments that show the impossibility of concepts being true of reality. These arguments play the same role in James’s quest for intimacy and union as do koans in Zen Buddhism: In both cases the subject is shocked into a new form of consciousness through the dialectical activity of immersing herself in the paradoxes, or koans. The mystical James must dispense with all concepts because they are the agents of his active, promethean self through their presenting this self with recipes for using objects.

To discover the true nature or essence of things he must begin by introspecting what goes on in his own consciousness and then project what he finds onto the world at large, as was the case with I–Thou-ing other persons. What he finds through introspection of what goes on when he endures over time and acts intentionally so as to bring something about is a fusing or melting together of neighboring conscious stages; he then assumes that there is a similar sort of mushing together between all spatial and temporal neighbors, the result of which is panpsychism because only in consciousness can such mushing
together occur. James’s quest for intimacy with the universe through projecting what is introspectively vouchsafed onto external reality, thus, is also a quest for unification between both the subject and objects, as well as between the objects themselves. Thus, the quest for intimacy and unification that begins with the sort of I-Thou experiences depicted in Chapter 9 reaches its full zenith in the mystical experiences of unification between man and nature that are the subject of Chapter 10. It is not only the full-blooded mystical experiences of absorption into a surrounding mother-sea-of-consciousness that are salvific but also the conceptless Bergsonian intuitions of the flowing into each other of spatial and temporal neighbors.

At the root of the clash between his promethean and mystical self is his ambiguous attitude toward evil, his both wanting and not wanting to believe that we have absolute assurance that we are safe because all evils are only illusory or ultimately conquered. When James was in his healthy promethean frame of mind he tingled all over at the thought that we are engaged in a Texas Death Match with evil, without any assurance of eventual victory, only the possibility of victory. This possibility forms the basis of his religion of meliorism. But there is a morbid side to James’s nature, a really morbid side, that “can’t get no satisfaction” in the sort of religion that his promethean pragmatism legitimates. In order to “help him make it through the night” he needs a mystically based religion that gives him a sense of absolute safety and peace that comes through union with an encompassing spiritual reality. The assurance that all is well comes not from philosophical theodicies, for James always charged them with being intellectually dishonest, but from what is vouchsafed by mystical experiences of unification.

The best way to bring out his ambivalent attitude toward evil is through an account of the two different attitudes he took toward his famous experience of existential angst in 1868, when he came upon a hideous epileptic youth in an insane asylum. He gave the following description of this experience.

That shape am I, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him. There was such a horror of him, and such a perception of my own merely momentary discrepancy from him, that it was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely, and I became a mass of quivering fear. (VRE 134)
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The sight of the idiot made James aware of the radical contingency of existence, that everything hangs by a very delicate thread that can snap at any moment, no matter what we might do, freely or otherwise.

In his 1884 introduction to *The Literary Remains of the Late Henry James*, James alludes impersonally to the existential angst experience when he says: “we are all potentially sick men. The sanest and best of us are of one clay with the lunatics and prison inmates” (*ERM* 62). Unlike his father, who must escape the existential angst that evil occasions by postulating some absolute being or God who gives assurance of salvation and safety, James’s response is to “turn a deaf ear to the thought of being” and instead to suck it up and courageously follow the melioristic route of living the morally strenuous life without any assurance of success. He concludes his introduction with one of the most tender and diplomatic, yet cutting, sentences ever written in which he contrasts himself with his beloved father.

Meanwhile, the battle is about us, and we are its combatants, steadfast or vacillating, as the case may be. It will be a hot fight indeed if the friends of philosophic moralism should bring to the service of their ideal, so different from that of my father, a spirit even remotely resembling the life-long devotion of his faithful heart. (*ERM* 63)

But, surprise of surprises, eighteen years later in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (45–6), immediately upon his anonymous description of his experience of existential angst, he draws an opposite conclusion from it. The message now is that our salvation must be found not in living the morally strenuous life but rather in finding an abiding sense of safety and peace through absorption into a higher surrounding spiritual reality. It is as if he is treading the same path as his former promethean self but now goes in a diametrically opposed direction when he gets to the crucial fork in the road at which sits the epileptic youth.

The theme of the insufficiency of meliorism and the healthy-minded outlook in general is repeated over and over again in this book. We are told that “the breath of the sepulchre surrounds” our natural happiness (*VRE* 118), that the advice to the morbid-minded person upon whom there falls “the joy-destroying chill” of “Cheer up, old fellow, you’ll be all right erelong, if you will only drop your morbid-ness!” is “the very consecration of forgetfulness and superficiality”
What we need is a "life not correlated with death, a health not liable to illness, a kind of good that will not perish, a good in fact that flies beyond the Goods of nature" (VRE 119). By experiencing absorption in a supernatural power, the "More" that surrounds our ordinary finite consciousness, we gain "an assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relations to others, a preponderance of loving affection" that cannot "fail to steady the nerves, to cool the fever, and appease the fret, if one be conscious that, no matter what one's difficulties for the moment may appear to be, one's life as a whole is in the keeping of a power whom one can absolutely trust" (VRE 230, 383). Armed with such mystically-based assurance, James might now be able to view the epileptic youth without having one of his father's Swedenborgian vastation experiences, but I wouldn't bet on it because he never completely shook off his morbid-minded self. The clashes between James's promethean and mystical selves are synchronic rather than diachronic, for he never succeeded in becoming a unified self.

So far it has been seen that James's mystical self, unlike his promethean pragmatic self, dispenses with all concepts so that it can assume a passive stance for the purpose of becoming unified, at least partially, with the inner consciousness of whatever it experiences. As a consequence of these unifying experiences the mystical self adopts a deontological ethical stance toward others, in contrast to the desire-satisfaction maximizing project of the active self, and furthermore views evils as only illusory or sure to be overcome, assurance of which is denied to his promethean melioristic self. There are, however, even deeper clashes between these two selves over meaning and truth.

Whereas the promethean self, in virtue of always running ahead of itself into the future for the purpose of satisfying desires, adopts an exclusively future-oriented theory of meaning that identifies a concept with a set of conditionalized predictions, the mystical self interprets the meaning of mystical claims in terms of the present content of mystical experiences. The pragmatic James reduced the whole meaning of claims about God and the absolute to our being licensed to take a moral holiday or feel safe and secure because all is well, but the mystical James finds their meaning in experiences of a unifying presence; the star performer finally gets into the act. Furthermore, because the meaningful content of the mystic's assertion that there exists a unification is based on the content of the mystical experience itself, the
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truth of the assertion will depend primarily on whether the experience is objective or cognitive. And among the most important tests for this is the immediate luminosity, the feeling of reality, supplied by the experience.

The most important clash between James’s pragmatic and mystical selves, however, does not emerge until Chapter 11. Herein the “Big Aporia” in James’s philosophy will be brought out, this consisting in a clash between his pragmatic self’s meta-doctrine of ontological relativism – that all reality claims must be relativized to a person at a time – and the absolute, nonrelativized reality claims he based on mystical experiences. An attempt will be made on his behalf to find a one world interpretation that will succeed in neutralizing this clash. If James is to succeed in having it all, some way must be found to unify his many selves so that they all inhabit one and the same world, rather than schizophrenically successively occupying different worlds. Only through a unification of the many worlds will James’s many selves get unified, for James’s intellectual scruples preclude a personal unification of his many selves that is not anchored in a metaphysical unification of the many worlds toward which their interests are directed. The latter task requires no less than a synthesizing of the outlooks of the East and the West, the masculine and the feminine, even that of time and eternity. Needless to say, there is a very good chance that this attempt will fail miserably, because things probably have been rigged so that we can’t have it all. Chapter 11 has the daunting task of attempting a well-nigh impossible task.