JAMES, William (1842-1910)

William James was an American psychologist and philosopher who worked across those fields to investigate the nature of consciousness, experience, and free will. A founding figure in the study of modern psychology in the United States, James went on to establish what he described as “the method” of pragmatism and the philosophical orientation he called radical empiricism. Born in New York City, James was the son of Henry James Sr., a Swedenborgian theologian, the godson of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the brother of novelist Henry James. James’s writings and lectures on psychology, religion, metaphysics, epistemology, and education influenced a range of intellectuals and artists, including Bertrand Russell, W. E. B. Du Bois, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hilary Putnam, and Richard Rorty.

While studying medicine as a young man, James suffered from crippling depression. He credited the French philosopher Charles Renouvier with releasing him from a state of paralysis by catalyzing his commitment to free will. His “first act of free will,” he declared, “shall be to believe in free will.” With improved health and spirits, James began teaching at Harvard University in the early 1870s, where he taught courses in physiology, psychology, and eventually philosophy, until his retirement in 1907. In 1890, he published his foundational study of mind, *The Principles of Psychology*. This monumental work is best known for its groundbreaking insights around the physiology of emotion and the fluctuating fluidity of what James famously called “the stream of consciousness.” His chapters on Attention, Association, Habit, and Will raise metaphysically-minded questions regarding the exercise of volition, which he reframed as philosophical lines of inquiry in the studies that followed. The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (1897), The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), and Pragmatism (1907) take various approaches to exploring the role of the will and belief in constructions of truth and reality.

James’s lectures on pragmatism presented his contentious definition of truth as that which is useful to believe. He proposes that all ideas are hypotheses which are made true over the course of experience if their “working-value” stands up to ongoing testing—that is, if one benefits from acting upon them. James intends this action-oriented understanding of truth to reorient philosophy from first principles and absolutes towards the consequential effects of the beliefs we hold. The pragmatic method, James contends, can settle seemingly insoluble philosophical disputes with the following question: What practical difference does a given belief or proposition make in our daily life? He seeks to recover a classical model of philosophy that is coextensive with the practice of living. On these grounds, James claims that pragmatism is a new name for old ways of thinking.

James’s wide-ranging contributions share the common goal of grounding psychological insight and philosophical debate in an enriched conception of experience. His posthumously published *Essays on Radical Empiricism* (1912) hypothesize “a world of pure experience,” which dissolves any division between the mind and its material surrounds. Extending his theory of an immersive stream of thought, James posits “primal stuff” that is irreducible to the categories of mind and matter, subject and object. In place of these organizing dualisms, the radical empiricist reframes reality as an ongoing process of experience. Radical empiricism is distinguished from ordinary empiricism on the grounds that its investigations must exclude any phenomena that can’t be directly experienced, and in turn, must include and account for all elements of existence that can be directly experienced. James gives primacy to the weave of relations *between* experiences. Of particular importance are those relations that register as vague fringes, nebulous associations, or unexpected transitions, which are not readily articulable but nevertheless can be palpably *felt*. This tissue of connective relations provides James with evidence that the universe requires neither an extraneous support structure, nor an external organizing principle; we need look no further than the continuum of experience we are immersed in to perceive the nature of reality.

For James, radical empiricism entails a processual view of the self and a pluralistic view of the universe. He argues that subjective consciousness is not a discrete entity, but is rather a “function” enmeshed in a web of experiential relations. James’s pluralism is rooted in his contention that there is “no general stuff” out of which all things are made. Characterized instead by its endless variety, the universe he envisions is teeming with the multiplicity of life. James proposes that the universe may more accurately be described as a “pluriverse,” which is unified only by its lively diversity.

A staunch opponent of determinism, James located chance, uncertainty, and novelty at the heart of his “restless, pluralistic universe.” Ultimately, his embrace of a world without guarantees is rooted in the desire to lead a moral life. Only when we face an open and indeterminate future, James suggests, are our actions motivated by concern with the difference they might make. To believe in free will and an unfinished universe, James held from the start to the end of his career, is to be charged with the task of bringing about a better world.

James died of heart failure at the age of 68 and was buried in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Bibliography:

*The Cambridge Companion to William James.*Ed. Ruth Anna Putnam. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 385-398.

Kate Stanley

Western University