

ONE

William James

A Guide for the Perplexed



[T]he vividness and clarity of his style no less than the keenness of his analysis roused the imagination of a public in this country which had long been apathetic to the more abstract problems of technical philosophy. . . . [H]e produced a large number of writings which gave ample evidence of his amazing ability to cut through the cumbersome terminology . . . clearing such problems as that of the One and the Many from the dry rot of centuries, and in rendering such problems immediately relevant to practical and personal difficulties.

—*Dictionary of Philosophy* entry on William James

James's insights on the human mind have been rivaled only by Shakespeare's and Freud's.

—Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error*

The inner world of will, self, and time, or the phantoms posing as such, has been extensively traveled by William James, not only in his pioneering transpersonal research, but also in his more mainstream role as the “father of American psychology.” An anatomist, psychologist, and Harvard professor, James was one of the clearest and most accessible writers ever to be called a philosopher. Indeed, he defined philosophy as “the search for *clearness* where common people do not even suspect that there is any lack of it” (C3, 409).¹

Having first aspired to be a painter, James came to see philosophy as an “ugly study” that “de-realized” life (C9, 452). Throughout his professional career, he emphasized direct experience over abstract concepts. While James’s ideas have gone in and out of fashion, these renderings of direct experience (including vivid introspections unsurpassed even by his brother Henry) have always had a wide and devoted following among specialists and nonspecialists alike. According to *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*, James’s classic work, *The Principles of Psychology* (a virtual anthology of his and other’s direct experiences), is “the best-known book in all psychology.”² Moreover, with James as our guide, questions about free will, self, and time are not mere classroom exercises. As his primary biographer, Ralph Barton Perry, put it:

Philosophy was never, for James, a detached and dispassionate inquiry into truth; still less was it a form of amusement. It was a quest, the outcome of which was hopefully and fearfully apprehended by a soul on trial and awaiting its sentence.³

And his quest took place at the dawn of the era that is still unfolding, the era in which the arbitrator of ultimate insights and concerns is shifting. As James characterized this shift: “‘Science’ in many minds is genuinely taking the place of religion” (VRE, 58).⁴ Born just two years after the word *scientist* was first coined, science was still “contested territory” when James came of age.⁵ Darwin’s big idea was more gauntlet than dogma. James’s mystic-minded father, painfully aware that religion was being usurped, encouraged his son to put down his paintbrushes and train to become one of America’s first professional scientists. He looked to his son to guide science beyond its “puerile stage of progress” that sought to supplant the divine Absolute with the hypothetical “quasi-unity” of “Nature.”⁶ That James did in fact pioneer reconciliations between science and religion is one of the reasons he still speaks to us directly.

SONS OF EMERSON

It is not merely the usurping of religion by science that keeps this era open-ended, but how religion has reconfigured itself in response. In a movement that found its first American champion in James’s godfather Emerson, for

whom the reconciliation of science and religion was central to his calling,⁷ traditional Western dualistic modes (God and Man, Heaven and Earth) have been, and continue to be, challenged by Eastern nondual modes.⁸ James's insights and research supported this nondual reconfiguration, however much his sympathies did not.

According to the psychologist whom James recruited from Germany to run Harvard's psychology labs, the "fusion-repelling" individualism that informed James's sympathies was a national trait:

The American popular mind does not at all sympathize with the philosophical idea that individuality is only an appearance, and that we are all fundamentally one being. The American thinks pluralistically, and brings to his metaphysics a firm belief in the absolute significance of the individual.⁹

Such individualism, championed by America's preeminent psychologist, was indeed also championed by America's preeminent essayist, Emerson, and her preeminent poet, Emerson's disciple Whitman. That the same could be said for the era's preeminent philosopher, Nietzsche, just two years younger than James, may only be more confirmation of our national character, since Nietzsche was also a disciple of Emerson.¹⁰ But following the so-called American Century, the firm belief in the absolute significance of the individual—the belief that virtually defined James—is now surely a belief without borders. All the more reason that it is worthy of re-evaluation.

James was not alone in championing this belief while suspecting otherwise. Indeed, Emerson and his two disciples surpassed James himself in their exaltation of individualism, while also championing a nondual transcendence beyond it. All will play key roles here. Whitman's ongoing identification with the cosmic One particularly fascinated James, and he found numerous occasions to engage "the restorer of the eternal natural religion" for "many" (VRE, 83). Nietzsche, whom James also took a growing interest in, was a more complicated engagement. When ineptly lumped together with Schopenhauer, and identified with the madness of his later years, he was, to James, poor, pathetic Nietzsche, "with an occasional command of language" (VRE, 42; C8, 90); but as the author of nondual reconstructions of commonsense reality that James read, Nietzsche may well have influenced

James's similar reconstructions, no less than Emerson who influenced them both. Moreover, at the very end of his life, James became much more sympathetic to Nietzsche, recognizing their shared primal concern, the same concern that his father had tasked him with addressing, and his godfather had already fully addressed: religion's traditional role as our center of gravity could not have its place genuinely taken by evolution and scientific materialism.¹¹

In addition to the era's most renowned psychologist, essayist, poet, and philosopher, one of its most renowned novelists will also play a key role. An acquaintance of James, who died in the same year, Mark Twain read *The Principles of Psychology*, as well as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, championing the investigations of consciousness beyond the margin "made by our professor William James."¹² Most significantly, a powerful experience corroborating the mystical suggestion of "consciousness already there waiting to be uncovered," led Twain to not only join James's American Society for Psychical Research, but to actively participate in it.

While most of what follows will be a direct engagement with James, it is thereby also an engagement with some of the other most insightful minds of his day—his friends and colleagues. For whether relating lab experiments, introspection upon his own mundane experience, or what he deemed the "wild beasts of the philosophic desert"—"religious experiences" and "psychical research"—James was seldom a solo voice (*PU*, 149). And in keeping with James's explicit call to future generations to test the "veridical reality" of what he most daringly proposed, we will also look at the relevant research in neuroscience, physics, psychology, and parapsychology in the century that succeeded him. All of these fields are combined in the vibrant new interdisciplinary field that James as much as anyone helped to establish: consciousness studies. Finally, in the spirit and sometimes the letter of James's most widely read book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the illusion of will, self, and time will be woven into the varieties of spiritual and mystical experience they manifest as.

RADICAL EMPIRICIST

[W]e have in James's radical empiricism a position that goes right to the heart of the Western viewpoint, exposing its limits. In this he resembles

. . . the metaphysics of Far Eastern psychology: the Upanishadic *tat* of the Hindu texts; the Theravada Buddhist image of moment consciousness as a string of pearls; the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of co-dependent origination (*pratityasammutpada*); or Zen suchness (*tathata*).¹³

—Eugene Taylor and Robert Wozniak,
Pure Experience, The Response to William James

In 1903, while lecturing at Harvard on psychology, James spotted a Buddhist monk in his audience.¹⁴ “Take my chair,” said James, “you are better equipped to lecture on psychology than I.” The monk obliged, and afterward James turned to his students and said: “This is the psychology everybody will be studying twenty-five years from now.”¹⁵ The following year James himself helped pave the way toward such a psychology with his doctrine of “radical empiricism”—the construction of reality through direct experience only: nothing experienced left out; nothing not experienced let in (*AWPE*, 1160). This emphasis on direct experience, with a fundamental focus on “plain, unqualified actuality,” what James called “pure experience,” is the foundation of Buddhist meditation practice, in which each arising moment is not enabled to be more or less than what it is (*ibid.*, 1175).

Evident, as we shall see, in his investigations of self and time, direct experience was James’s indispensable starting point in his probing the foundation of them both—the belief in free will, which has no existence, nor can be depicted, outside its confines. “It was . . . through meditating on the phenomenon [of willing] in my own person that I first became convinced of the truth of the doctrine which these pages present,” James wrote in *The Principles of Psychology* (*PP2*, 525). Much of this masterpiece is comprised of his personal introspections, but only when he came to the experience of will did he use the more intensified word *meditating* to describe the process. His account of this meditation is among the most significant passages in all Western writing about free will. James himself considered it “to contain in miniature form the data for an entire psychology of volition” (*ibid.*).

Yet curiously, even as James’s popularity continues to grow, this description has been largely ignored or, even worse, casually dismissed. Rollo May, after quoting it in its entirety in his 1969 bestseller, *Love and Will*, rejects it as “unfinished”; but he does so without reflecting upon the basic, irreducible nature of James’s subjective account.¹⁶ Biographer Gerald Myers complains that the conclusion James drew from his meditation conflicted with

his “typical common-sense defenses of free will,” as if challenging common sense were not as essential a duty of a philosopher as defending it.¹⁷ As James himself proclaimed in the *Principles*: to “traverse common sense . . . in philosophy is no insuperable objection” (*PP1*, 304).¹⁸

And certainly James’s conclusion *did* challenge common sense, at least the sense common to mainstream Western thought. To a Zen Buddhist, or even a Christian Quietist, on the other hand, James’s conclusion follows naturally from the method he used to reach it. Indeed, given that the form of his meditation, an exercise in direct experience, was similar to the “bare attention” of Buddhist meditation, it is hardly surprising that the key insight he derived from it would be the same that Buddhist practitioners derive from theirs.

Yet it came as a surprise to him. For so radical was James’s insight, undermining the very belief in free will he was seeking to uphold, that he himself recoiled from it. Despite openly supporting the Buddhist conception of the nonreality of self, and covertly supporting a radical Buddhist notion of timelessness,¹⁹ James never accepted the nonreality of will that his meditation revealed, and he never integrated it with his other radical insights on the nature of self and time. It was as if the “soul on trial” denied access to a key witness.

But it is only by integrating James’s radical insights on will and self—in support of them as phantoms of the inner world—that James’s most radical insight can be accessed: time itself is a phantom. The belief in self, as Nietzsche clearly saw, is based on the belief in will. So, too, time, or what James’s colleague Dewey called “genuine time,” requires a self:

Genuine time, if it exists as anything else except the measure of motions in space, is all one with the existence of individuals as individuals, with the creative, with the occurrence of unpredictable novelties.²⁰

James agreed, and exactly in this all-American language of individuality, creativity, and “unpredictable novelties.” But he also, as one James scholar duly noted, remained “too honestly alert to contradictory evidence and desires to fit his texts neatly into any one systematic explanation,”²¹ let alone

a commonsense one. Will, self, and genuine time were James's desires. But his honest alertness to contradictory evidence pointed him elsewhere.

How experience can be accounted for without will, self, and time is, I argue, James's most significant legacy, however reluctantly, or even obstructively, bequeathed. But the legacy can only be realized by distinguishing what James wanted to believe (based on common sense) from what his deepest insights and researches led him to believe. This discrepancy is most conspicuous in his defense of free will, the foundation of "the absolute significance of the individual." Why James clung to a belief in free will that he as much as anyone helped expose as an illusion begins our journey.

"SOMETHING HITHERTO SOLID WITHIN
MY BREAST GAVE WAY ENTIRELY . . . "

Despite his championing of free will, James's own belief was not, as he once declared, "instinctive" (*P*, 537). The summer following his graduation from Harvard Medical School, in fact, he spent in a hammock at his parent's home, swaying to this tune: "I'm swamped in an empirical philosophy. I feel that we are Nature through and through, that we are *wholly* conditioned, that not a wiggle of our will happens save as the result of physical laws" (*C1*, 370). By next year even the swaying almost stopped:

Whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects . . . there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves, against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them inclosing his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. *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. After this the universe was changed for me altogether. (VRE, 149–150)²²

Having dressed himself in the fashionable mechanistic determinism of his day, James looked in the mirror and saw only his clothes. His belief in a determinism devoid of any spiritual influence implied that we are “*wholly conditioned*,” like material objects, completely at the mercy of “physical laws.” But it took an image of a human-being-*as-object* before James confronted the full implication of his belief. The “quivering fear” that arose from that confrontation was more than momentary:

I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation; and although the immediate feelings passed away, the experience has made me sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others ever since. It gradually faded, but for months I was unable to go into the dark alone. (Ibid.)

Fear of the dark is not fear of any particular encounter, but rather fear of being surprised by *every* encounter; it is not fear of the unknown so much as fear of one’s inadequacy to respond to whatever danger may arise. With this experience, James’s belief that “not a wiggle of our will happens save as the result of physical laws” had grown into a feeling: “a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach.” This feeling, “like a revelation,” gave James “a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before,” and made for an altogether “changed universe.” Then, a few weeks later, a “decisive impression” made on him by the French philosopher Charles Renouvier “freed” him:²³

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier’s second “Essais” and see no reason why his definition of Free Will—“the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to*

when I might have other thoughts”—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will. (*L1*, 147)

Rollo May makes much of James’s declaration in that last sentence: “He *willed* freedom, made it his fiat.”²⁴ By May’s reading of the paragraph, however timid James’s first affirmations were, his last one had the “Ta da-da da da da da” triumph of Popeye downing spinach. Such a reading, suggesting that James fashioned his own imperative out of Renouvier’s philosophy, would be more convincing if James had formulated that last sentence himself. But it, too, was a direct quote from Renouvier; it was Renouvier who said, “My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.” By “assum[ing] for the present” the belief that free will was not an illusion, and repeating Renouvier’s words, was James issuing himself a “fiat,” or testing out another man’s belief?

Many years later, when James formally addressed the arguments for and against free will, he apparently recalled his own personal struggle:

When a dreadful object is presented, or when life as a whole turns up its dark abysses to our view, then the worthless ones among us lose their hold on the situation altogether, and either escape from its difficulties by averting their attention, or if they cannot do that, collapse into yielding masses of plaintiveness and fear. (*PP2*, 578)

To a “worthless one,” whom he had been in peril of becoming, James contrasts the “heroic mind” of “pure inward willingness.” But then, evoking his own “heroic” moment that had lifted *him* from worthlessness, he writes: “[J]ust as our courage is so often a reflex of another’s courage, so our faith is apt to be . . . a faith in someone else’s faith” (*ibid.*, 579).

Without question, James’s born-again affirmation of free will was a decisive, defining moment in his life.²⁵ But was that affirmation itself an act of willpower, or a reflexive endorsement of a belief he was now, in his changed universe, ready to receive? At the very least, the question this affirmative “decision” begs is this: How much was it a *response* that *came* to James in his altered state, just as the response of helplessness had come to him in

his prior state? That a surge of rescuing, purposeful energy attended this thought, and sustained James throughout the rest of his life, is not questioned. What is questioned is the source of this and all such surges. It was a question James came to ask himself. And the answer surprised him.

JAMES'S MEDITATION ON FREE WILL

When I ask people what difference it would make in their life if they didn't believe in free will, most reply that they wouldn't get out of bed. This tells us something right away: people are tired (especially Americans, whose "doing, doing, doing" James, along with his student Theodore Roosevelt, saw as one of the hallmarks of their greatness [C1, 123]).²⁶ But how in fact *do* we get out of bed? Twenty years after James declared his belief in free will he asked himself this very question. He could, of course, have used any act of deliberation that culminates in an apparent triumph of will. What is especially apt about this example, however, is that it is usually our first deliberate act of the day, following, as it does, a long period of passivity.

Often, to be sure, getting out of bed does not feel mediated by will. It feels, rather, like an automatic response—we are *jolted* upwards—whether this jolt is prompted by the sound of an alarm clock, or the feeling of pressure in our bladder, or the flash of the image of our bus pulling out without us. At other times, however, our movement does indeed seem to resolve a deliberation on whether or not to abandon the cozy environment in which we lie; we have looked at two alternatives and feel we have *chosen* one of them. *There is no feeling of will (let alone verification of its ultimate reality) without such a feeling of having chosen.*

James's meditation served as his paradigm of the feeling of having chosen, of having made a decision and acted upon it—in a word: of having willed. The solid pragmatic philosopher had finally come to test by experience what the shaky youth had accepted on faith:

We know what it is to get out of bed on a freezing morning in a room without a fire, and how the very vital principle within us protests against the ordeal. Probably most persons have lain on certain mornings for an hour at a time unable to brace themselves to the

resolve. We think how late we shall be, how the duties of the day will suffer; we say, "I *must* get up, this is ignominious," etc.; but still the warm couch feels too delicious, the cold outside too cruel, and resolution faints away and postpones itself again and again just as it seemed on the verge of bursting the resistance and passing over into the decisive act. Now how do we *ever* get up under such circumstances? If I may generalize from my own experience, we more often than not get up without any struggle or decision at all. We suddenly find that we *have* got up. A fortunate lapse of consciousness occurs; we forget both the warmth and the cold; we fall into some reverie connected with the day's life, in the course of which the idea flashes across us, "Hollo! I must lie here no longer"—an idea which at that lucky instant awakens no contradictory or paralyzing suggestions, and consequently produces immediately its appropriate motor effects. It was our acute consciousness of both the warmth and the cold during the period of struggle, which paralyzed our activity then and kept our idea of rising in the condition of *wish* and not of *will*. The moment these inhibitory ideas ceased, the original idea exerted its effects. (PP2, 524-525)

As we said, James considered his example to "contain in miniature form the data for an entire psychology of volition." The data can be broken down into three parts. First, thoughts arise. Second, insofar as thoughts have an impulsive power, that power is directly linked to our motor operations. And third, the feeling of will and effort is derivable from the interplay between opposing thoughts.