AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Kevin R. Stoller for the degree of Master of Arts in History of Science presented on July 24, 2002.
Title: On His Own Terms: William James, Identity, and the Development of American Psychology.

Abstract Approved: __________

William James came of age at a time of great social and intellectual change in the United States. During this period, new professional identities proliferated, and a new culture of professionalization developed with important ramifications for conceptions of individual and social identity. Professionalization was also closely related to key intellectual developments of the time, such as the application of scientific methods to social and human questions and the consolidation of intellectual work within the university. This thesis chronicles James's struggle to find a place within this society that both satisfied his personal desire for individual growth and freedom and established him within the context of professional academia, arguing that James's difficulties in finding a professional identity were inseparable from his development of a unique intellectual voice. The thesis then explores how James expressed his personal identity and insights in his work as professional academic and psychologist.
On His Own Terms: William James, Identity, and the Development of American Psychology

by

Kevin R. Stoller

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented July 24, 2002
Commencement June 2003

APPROVED:

Redacted for privacy

Redacted for privacy

Redacted for privacy

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes the release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Redacted for privacy

Kevin R. Stoller, Author
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people contributed some portion of their hearts and minds to this thesis, and I would have struggled to complete the project without their help. My advisor, Bob Nye, has been both a true mentor and friend. His encouragement, humor, and intelligence—not to mention his cooking—have been a constant source of personal and intellectual inspiration for me. It is Bob, more than anyone else, who led me to pursue graduate work in history and shaped my scholarly growth. Jeff Sklansky and Paul Farber, my other committee members, have been models of patience and acumen. Their careful readings and sharp insights helped keep this thesis—and its author—grounded through the long and difficult writing process. Mark Largent invested as much time in my work as any committee member; his friendship and counsel proved to be invaluable as he saw me through multiple drafts and revisions.

My friends and family deserve particular thanks. My parents and sister have supported me through many times, both good and bad, and I could never have accomplished what I have without their love and support. My friend Adam Farley read drafts of several chapters and provided a writer's eye, as well as a sympathetic, non-academic ear. My fellow graduate students, Erik Ellis, Kristin Johnson, and Chris Jolly, have been wonderful companions throughout my education. Above all, I owe more than I can express to Katherine Hubler. She lived through this with me, and only she knows how much that meant.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Transition and its Consequences: William James's</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perilous Search for a Calling, 1842-1873</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: Toward Psychology: Solving the Riddle of Ambivalence,</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1865-1874</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Translating the Lessons of Experience: James as</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologist, Teacher, and Icon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

William James, America's greatest philosopher of moral freedom, felt the touch of destiny early in life. Shortly after his birth on January eleventh in 1842, the infant James received the blessing of Ralph Waldo Emerson as Henry James Senior, a father for the first time, looked on. For historians the scene has become symbolic of a continuity in the American intellectual tradition and the portent of James's arrival in the history of ideas. In this metaphor, Emerson, the nation's most celebrated intellectual for much of his life, imparts in his blessing his legacy to the child who would become his intellectual heir, a tableau made more poignant by the fact that six weeks earlier—days after James's birth—Emerson's own first son, the five-year-old Waldo, had died. For his part, Henry may not have even been aware of the Emersons' recent loss, and the James household was accustomed to hosting Northeastern social and intellectual elites; nevertheless, this particular meeting remained one of the family's favorite anecdotes for many years and was imbued with unusual significance by Henry Sr. and, later, by James himself.¹

Henry hoped each of his four male children might achieve great things in life, but his expectations rested most weightily on his William.² James felt dearly the

² Henry and his wife, Mary Robertson Walsh James, had five children, the boys William, Henry Jr., Garth Wilkinson, and Robertson and one daughter, the youngest child, Alice.
burden of his father’s hopes and assumptions, in turn absorbing them himself, albeit in a translated form. The aspiration to greatness was not easy for James to achieve or relinquish, and it continued to shadow his personal and professional choices throughout his formative years.¹

James, of course, did ultimately become a great man by almost any standard, and his difficult ascent, overcoming mental and physical crises, to professional and individual success only lends his triumphs greater heroic luster. As an historical figure, he has entered the pantheon of American icons; like Franklin or Lincoln or Emerson, the name of William James is imbued with a cultural significance transcending his specific accomplishments. His is a legacy worth claiming for contemporary intellectuals, even more so today as thinkers like Richard Rorty have championed James’s pragmatism as not only the original

---

¹ From a young age, James considered an ordinary life without any particular distinction to be unacceptable, a failure nearly as shattering as true failure. Like many men in the nineteenth century, James was convinced of the importance of great individuals in the shaping of history, and he understood his own life and achievements within the language of heroism. James eventually expressed his views on great men in his essays “Great Men and Their Environment” (1880) and “The Importance of Individuals” (1881), both published in The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (1896) (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956). For more on the heroic element in James’s life and thought, see George Cotkin, William James, Public Philosopher (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) and Kim Townsend, Manhood at Harvard: William James and Others (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996). The cult of heroism and greatness was central to nineteenth-century Western culture. Expressed in, among others, the works of Goethe, Emerson, Thomas Carlyle—another James family friend, and Nietzsche, and satirized by Leo Tolstoy in War and Peace, the heroic ideal was unconsciously absorbed by the majority of Americans and Europeans of James’s generation (James, ironically, loved War and Peace). See also Janet Browne, Charles Darwin: Voyaging, A Biography (New York: Knopf, 1995), p. xi and David Levering Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), pp. 74-75, 115-116 for two additional examples, from near contemporaries of James’s, of what was a nearly universal belief in the importance of individuals in history.
American philosophy but the philosophy of the future, the solution to the postmodern skeptical crisis. James's importance in U.S. history, as a link between the thought of the young agrarian republic of the ante-bellum years and the scientific philosophy of the modern industrial nation, often tends to eclipse his actual historical existence. James many times seems to tower over history in scholarly work, existing within boundaries defined only by his genius and his individual psychological world. This tendency is accentuated by the larger-than-life nature of James's personality. One senses today, reading his private journals and correspondence, that James always felt the gaze of history upon him and lived self-aware of future scrutiny and judgment. What comes across in his large body of published and personal writings is an extremely charismatic individual voice. James's ability to translate his individual problems into fundamental, philosophical questions continues to resonate with readers today, who find in his life an appealing parable of the triumph of will and intelligence over disability and depression. Furthermore, his success, dictated apparently on his own terms, speaks to an underlying American myth of individuality, freedom, and self-creation.

This thesis contributes to the repositioning of James within his time and place. It is, essentially, an historical biography of James during the crucial years of his intellectual development, culminating in the publication of his *Principles of Psychology* in 1890, based upon a close reading of his correspondence, his publications, and secondary literature. Although I attempt to do justice to the

---

4 The diary of Alice James seems similarly theatrical and self-assured of a future audience.
complex, historically contingent nature of James’s personality and biography, at the heart of this story is his attempt to craft a unique personal and professional identity balancing the expectations inherited from his father and the demands of a changing American culture and society. It is his struggle to establish an identity within a society sometimes out of step with his own goals and desires that unites James’s biography and intellectual work. James’s private dilemmas and professional statements were all instantiations of his attempt to find his own voice. In this study, I attempt to portray James’s creation of a public self and indicate the relationship between this public self and his private, individual identity. Unlike previous biographical studies, however, I hope to demonstrate how James drew upon a cultural reservoir of identities, ideas, and possibilities as he came to define himself. I do not intend to reduce James’s individuality or his brilliance; indeed, his interpretations of ideas—such as Darwinian evolution—were often uniquely expressed, even as they drew upon the work and thought of others. Rather, I hope to cast James’s identity, particularly as expressed in his work as a psychologist, against its proper historical backdrop and place his intellectual development within a social and cultural dialectic. In the process, I will place James’s deterministic crisis and pluralistic resolution, his position within the emergent profession and discipline of the new psychology, his evolutionary views, and his work as teacher and writer within the framework of career and identity.\footnote{What was new about the new psychology is explored in greater depth in Chapter Two. In brief, advocates of the new psychology sought to distinguish their discipline from philosophy and root it in the methods and language of the sciences.}
James grew into adulthood in a rapidly evolving social and economic landscape. After the Civil War, the nation expanded geographically and underwent dramatic demographic and economic changes spurred by western migration, the spread of an industrial economy throughout the country, and the fresh influx of thousands of immigrants hungry for employment, including, for the first time, a considerable number from Southern and Eastern Europe. Nowhere was the nation untouched by the modernizing process, but in the Northeast, America’s industrial center, these changes were especially advanced, characterized by increased ethnic diversity and urbanization, growing class stratifications, and the ascendancy to prominence of a professional middle class.\(^6\) It was this latter development—one that might be called social professionalization—that had the most direct impact on James’s life and career. For the purposes of this thesis, professionalization will be used to describe two processes, one general and one specific. As a general social process, professionalization refers to the proliferation of specialized occupations requiring trained expertise, usually populated by an educated elite middle or upper class, and the concomitant development of an economic society dependent upon

these experts. Indeed, within a professional society, the traditional distinctions between the middle and upper classes erode; professional society is, above all, a bourgeois society in which Victorian, middle class values—stereotypically hard work, a highly developed moral and mannered sensibility, and practicality—come to be viewed as culturally normative. Knowledge and professional status, based upon utility or education, come, in general, to replace property ownership as the primary badges of social distinction in professionalized societies, and individual esteem within society is often based upon professional and material success.7

Professionalization as a specific process describes the attempt of a field of skill or expertise to establish itself within the framework of professional society. This is usually accomplished through the development of an orthodox education and training, the creation of symbols of sanctioned expertise, the consolidation of disciplinary power by these trained professionals, and the social justification of the profession's value and prestige. In the late nineteenth century, as academic and intellectual fields began to professionalize within the American university, a primary tactic in the establishment of authority and prestige was to claim

---

7 This should be taken with a grain of salt. An American gentry of the super-rich continued to exist into the professional age, as Thorstein Veblen memorably chronicled in The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899) (New York: Penguin Books, 1967). Many members of this class, though, maintained their social status through the exploitation of greater access to education and the assumption of professional guises, for instance, as industry leaders or attorneys. The development of a culture of consumption is another important aspect of industrial modernism and its relationship to professionalization is not straightforward. See William Leach, Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) for an analysis of changing conceptions of American success after the industrial economy had reached its post-1890 bloom. See also Sven Beckert, New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). The growth of consumer culture is not particularly relevant to James's early biography.
objectivity, often substantiated by alliance to scientific and numerical methodology.

Professionalization in general is now recognized by the majority of historians to be amongst the most important developments in modern industrial culture and society and an especially defining aspect of the development of most contemporary academic disciplines.8

---

8 Many books and articles have been devoted to the topic of professionalization. The following books are particularly enlightening accounts of the socio-economic process of professionalization: Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976) continues to be a useful source, despite its age and flaws, connecting professionalization to broad trends in American culture; the "Introduction" to Gerald L. Geison, ed., *Professions and Professional Ideologies in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983) is a good historiographical primer; Samuel Haber, *The Quest for Authority and Honor in the American Professions, 1750-1900* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), is an excellent account of professional development in American history, pointing out the ways in which the professions came to occupy positions within the social hierarchy which in many respects recapitulated traditional class structures; and Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), provides a classic analysis of the professionalization process.

The effect of these social and economic changes on individual and public identities for people like James was fundamental in several respects. During this period, identity grew more intimately associated with occupation. What a person did reflected his or her (usually his in this period) social status, and success in life was increasingly synonymous with success in career; occupational success was seen by many middle class Americans to reflect character, individual worth, and virtue. For many Americans who had grown up in this culture or in earlier middle class households, this did not necessarily present any problem. Career choices proliferated during this period, and, to some degree, the possibilities for self-determining a social identity grew as well. Others did not fare as well, and James was one of those who found the demands of career choice overwhelming and, in some sense, antithetical to their individual identity. He did not find the choices of

---

Press, 1987) and Biologists and the Promise of American Life: From Meriwether Lewis to Alfred Kinsey (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000) introduce some of the professionalism questions in late-nineteenth-century life sciences, explicitly linking, in the case of Pauly's work, professionalism with changing conceptions of American progress and society. No comparably comprehensive attempt has been made to chronicle the professionalization of American psychology, although professional interests have been an important analytical trope and sub-theme in historical discussions of behaviorism and the relationship of academic psychology with marketing and consumer psychology.

9 The emphasis on work in Northeastern United States culture was not necessarily a new development: European visitors to the country in the early nineteenth century often commented on the breakneck speed of American life and the industrious nature of American citizens. But in the culture of late-nineteenth-century capitalism, the idea of work changed as industrial realities altered the nature of labor. See Rodgers, The Work Ethic in Industrial America.

10 One of James's teachers and his eventual employer, Charles William Eliot, relished his opportunities, writing to a friend when he was twenty, “What a tremendous question it is—what shall I be? When a man answers that question he not only determines his sphere of usefulness in this world, he also decides in what direction his own mind shall be developed. The different professions are not different roads converging to the same end; they are different roads, which starting from the same point diverge forever, for all we know.” Quoted in Bledstein, The Culture of Professionalism, p. 159.
professional society liberating; quite the contrary. For James, the professional
world stifled his freedom to develop as an individual.

In Chapter One, I attempt to explain the young James’s early relationship to
professional society and examine his lack of early success in that world. I
chronicle his difficulties in finding a career and establishing a professional identity,
connecting his anxieties about his mental and physical fitness with this struggle to
find a path in life. Chronicling his early education, his years as an undergraduate
and medical student at Harvard University, and his period of intense physical and
mental depression in the late sixties and early seventies, I suggest that James found
it difficult to happily settle upon a particular field of study or career path because of
the discrepancy between the expectations for life fostered by his upbringing and the
expectations of professional society. The Jameses were not a middle class family;
Henry Sr. was an independently wealthy gentleman scholar, and he instilled in his
children the values appropriate of such a station. James was, therefore, not well
prepared for entry into professional America. However as he entered bourgeois
culture he absorbed many of that culture’s values. His near-invalidism at the end of
the decade was marked by his fear that he was physically and mentally unsuited for
any productive role in modern society, and he only began to recover from his
depression after finding his first professional appointment, as an instructor at
Harvard. James understood his flirtation with invalidism—an identity with
particular significance in late-nineteenth-century America—as the consequence,
and cause, of his failures to establish a career for himself. In the first chapter, I
attempt to explain what James was looking for from a career and examine why he associated his inability to settle upon a field with sickness and weakness.

The individual and his or her relationship to society also came to be viewed differently from a theoretical perspective during this period. This was a product of two related developments: the attempt to understand social and personal individuals as scientific phenomena by social scientists and scientific psychologists, and the earnest struggle by intellectuals disillusioned with inherited conceptions of American identity and progress by the Civil War to understand their complex, modernizing society and place it within an ordered theoretical framework.\textsuperscript{11} Chapter Two discusses James's attempts to understand the nature of individuality and agency and places his intellectual development within the constellation of ideas about the human mind and free will current during the sixties and seventies. I focus particularly upon the ideas of the British polymath Herbert Spencer, one of the most widely admired and read intellectuals of the era and a man James came to view as his primary intellectual antagonist. In this chapter, James's intellectual growth is explicitly related to his attempts to navigate between the two monistic alternatives represented by his father and Spencer and find a unique individual identity. Ultimately, this leads him to pluralism and the new psychology, an

\textsuperscript{11} Many writers attested to the intellectual shock of the war years, and although the onset of sustained fighting in '61 spawned little or no public debate in fervently pro-Union New England, it seems safe to assume that the crisis of civil war generated an atmosphere of soul-searching and genuine inquiry into previously assumed ideals. See Louis Menand, \textit{The Metaphysical Club} (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001). Menand argues that the Civil War was the defining intellectual event of the nineteenth century, and every intellectual development in the wake of the war was, in part, an attempt to understand it and its consequences.
interest I connect to his search for a professional middle path, that is, a route to professional identity and establishment that he felt responded to his personal aims. James’s pluralism was inspired by his reading of the German Romantics—particularly Goethe—to a degree previously unappreciated in the James literature.

The final chapter looks at James in the flower of success. I hope to show how James translated the personal and intellectual struggles chronicled in the first two chapters into a valid professional identity as one of America’s first psychologists, greatest public intellectuals, and most celebrated teachers. Chapter Three demonstrates how James’s ambivalence toward professional society led, in part, to his professional and public success but also resulted in his eventual distance from the mainstream of professional psychology. James’s psychology and his vision for the discipline of psychology reflected his struggles and his continuing ambivalences. Although this meant that James’s importance to the profession of psychology was, in fact, somewhat limited and primarily symbolic, it also found him a wide audience and a lasting position within the canon of modernism and American thought. James presented an essentially heroic conception of the individual, one born from his own experience, and one that resonated with his audiences then and now. Thus James was a success as a professional, but a unique success. As his colleague George Herbert Palmer said, James achieved the “common and delusive dream that the professional man’s output is but the completed expression of his private life....Professionalism has its own exactions which often run quite outside the personal element [but for James the personal and
professional were largely united and the big man expanded undistorted into the solid professional..." In Chapter Three, I attempt to explain how James achieved that balance and how it was manifested in his work.

A great deal has been written about William James, much of it worthwhile. Inevitably, newcomers to this crowded field must justify their contributions, particularly when they add, as I have here, yet another biographical analysis. Broadly speaking, scholarship on James falls into three categories: biography; positioning of James's thought within intellectual, social, or cultural history; and analysis or clarification of his ideas. This third category, sometimes combined with biography, is by far the largest. James's work has remained current within both psychology and philosophy, and many books and articles continue to be published about his writings. This is an indispensable body of literature for all James scholars, but often exhibits little or no historical analysis and must be read with a


critical eye. Because James is an almost universally admired cultural icon, much of
the work on him has a polemical agenda, revealing as much about the author as
about James himself. The fact that until recently most work on James was written
by psychologists and philosophers has exacerbated ideological debates and
considerations not always germane to historical discussions of James’s life and
work. James’s legacy is one, for better or worse, worth laying claim to, and since
John Dewey’s day, many psychologists and philosophers have attempted to link
their work and ideas to James.\textsuperscript{14}

Mercurial, effusive, and bubbling with personality, James has been a
particularly rewarding biographical subject. He left ample documentation of his
life in journals and correspondence, but his literate and profound mental struggles
beg biographical interpretation. The first great biography, Ralph Barton Perry’s

\textsuperscript{14} For a recent example of this sort of overtly non-historical work, see George S. Howard, “Why
William James Might Be Considered the Founder of the Scientist-Practitioner Model,” \textit{The Counseling
Psychologist} 21, #1 (1993): 118; however, psychologists today are recognizing the need
to reexamine old assumptions about James’s ideas. See, for instance, Phoebe C. Ellsworth,
“William James and Emotion: Is a Century of Fame Worth a Century of Misunderstanding?”
which made of James a consummate scientist, has been one of the most persistent idiosyncratic
readings of James. This has been effectively reexamined and critiqued in Richard M. Gale, “John
Anna Putnam, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 49-68 and Gale’s \textit{The Divided
Self of William James} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Equally persistent is the
view made canonical by Ralph Barton Perry of James the always-philosopher. The above-
mentioned works by Gale and Eugene Taylor, \textit{William James on Consciousness Beyond the Margin}
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) have begun to recognize a far more complicated
James, one who is not easily reduced to identities as either philosopher or scientist. Indeed, such
dichotomies are somewhat anachronistic when applied to James, as modern disciplinary distinctions
were still in the formative process. James perceived a unity in his own work, but it was a unity that
is not captured by contemporary definitions; it was, in many respects, a unity professionalization
undermined. This thesis hopes to contribute to this project by making more explicit the links
between James’s disciplinary, epistemological, and intellectual pluralism and situating James within
emergent professional communities.
two-volume *The Thought and Character of William James*, has remained a classic reference point. Perry's personal association with James and privileged access to the James papers continues to render this portrayal relevant—it has, itself, become an historical document—even as Perry's methodology and analysis have been updated and superseded. Perry's all-inclusive portrayal of James's growth and development depicted James as a genius philosopher, struggling through his early years to come into his true calling. The discovery of the true, over-riding motif of James's life and work has been a common goal of biographical work, even to the present day. Daniel W. Bjork's *William James: The Center of His Vision* provides many useful insights into James's life and work but is too enthralled with its subject's genius. Bjork's assumption that James always was a genius does not do justice to his genuine struggle to create an identity and tends to remove him from his historical context.¹⁵ Howard M. Feinstein's *Becoming William James* is another classic biographical reference point, subjecting James to a Freudian analysis. Feinstein, too, looks for an irreducible James, and finds it in the artist stifled by his father's expectations. It is a brilliant and insightful text, but feels, ultimately, contrived.¹⁶ Gay Wilson Allen's *William James, A Biography* is a more traditional text, making it, in many ways, the most satisfactory. Allen focuses on family relationships, relays the significant events in James's life, and restrains from much

¹⁵ See Daniel W. Bjork, *William James: The Center of His Vision* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). Bjork argues that at the center of James's vision was an occupation with relationships, particularly the relationship between consciousness, experience, and world.

analysis or historicization. The biographical treatment presented in this thesis, incomplete as it is, attempts to treat James's development as a genuine work in process, giving fair treatment to his struggles. I have not attempted to find a single overarching theme in James's life, although several candidates inevitably emerge, particularly ambivalence in life, work, and thought. Finally, unlike previous biographies, which have, as mentioned above, generally presented a James abstracted from his social context, I have attempted to place his biography firmly within a particular time and place. Such is the brilliance of James's friends and family—not to mention James himself—some degree of insularity is unavoidable, but I have tried to resist this temptation as much as possible.

In intent, my work has most in common with recent historical literature on James. Traditionally, historians have analyzed James's significance and influences from the perspective of an old intellectual history, placing his ideas within the history of thought with little attention to his social context. In recent years, a new generation of historians has taken upon a historicizing project that situates James

---

17 See Allen, *William James.*


within his specific intellectual and cultural milieux. Some of this work is deeply flawed, but most of it has been useful. Robert J. Richards's landmark *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior* is a case in point. This study was one of the first systematic attempts to depict the development of a new science of psychology in the late nineteenth century, but Richards does not conceal the fact that his account is also an attempted demonstration of his historical philosophy of evolutionary development. He wants the new psychology to be unified by its commitment to evolutionary theory. Although his book is often interesting, he dramatically overstates his evolutionary case in his chapter on James, over-emphasizing the importance of evolution to James's personal and intellectual growth without providing convincing substantiation for many of his claims. Richards obviously entered the work convinced of the importance of evolution to all of his subjects, and he twists what data he has to support this presupposition.20 Daniel Bjork's *The Compromised Scientist: William James in the Development of American Psychology* is also useful while being, despite its promising title, incomplete and lacking in coherent argument.21 George Cotkin's *William James, Public Philosopher*, Paul Jerome Croce's *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, and Kim Townsend's *Manhood at Harvard: William


James and Others have contributed to the periodization of James. Cotkin’s book attempts to reveal how James interacted with important themes of his day in his life and his work. The goals of his analysis are similar to mine, but Cotkin, for his many insights, Romanticizes James’s life. He recapitulates the heroic image of James presented in traditional biographies and expounded in James’s own work. While he considers James’s engagement with social trends of the day, he does not sufficiently measure the influence of those trends on James.\(^{22}\) It is this oversight I hope to remedy. Croce’s *Science and Religion...* places James’s views on science, philosophy, and religion within the context of increased securalism and philosophical agnosticism. He points out the heretofore under-appreciated importance of ideas of chance and probability in James’s work and in his interpretation of Darwin. Townsend’s work considers James’s role as a teacher at Harvard and places this within contemporary ideals of masculine identity. Both of these studies have proven useful in this history, and I hope only to complement their projects and occasionally critique or add nuance to their conclusions.\(^{23}\)

\(^{22}\) See Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher.*

James wrote his brother in 1895, the author Henry Jr., "...the only terms on which modern life offers a man anything are those of all or none."\(^{24}\) This thesis explains how James proved himself wrong and found a middle path in modern life. Using methods drawn from history of science, history of ideas, social and cultural history, history of identity, and history of the professions, I hope to give a biography of James that is inclusive and historical. While this work is about James, I hope to also suggest insights into other topics, particularly the development of psychology in America. James was and is popular because he expressed more clearly than others common concerns and provided welcome answers. Understanding James, then, can illuminate his time, and the effect ideas and social changes had on living individuals. I would feel remiss without admitting that I, like so many other James scholars, wanted to see myself in James and often found what I was looking for. This speaks to the continuing relevance of James’s life and thought. Even today, he feels like a fellow traveler through modern life. My primary goal with this work is to convey the complexity of James, the richness of his life and work. Setting him within his time, I hope, only renders him more compelling and more familiar.

CHAPTER ONE
TRANSITION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES: WILLIAM JAMES'S PERILOUS SEARCH FOR A CALLING, 1842-1873

Henry James Senior was proud of the fact that he pursued no profession—almost as proud as he was of his refusal to support any organized religion. “Say I’m a philosopher,” he advised his young children when they asked how they should respond to questions from their friends; “say I’m a seeker for truth, say I’m a lover of my kind, say I’m an author of books if you like; or best of all, just say I’m a Student.” To the James children, this was a thoroughly unsatisfactory statement, nearly as inexplicable as their father’s claim that the family’s non-membership in any church allowed them to “plead nothing less than the whole privilege of Christendom.”\(^1\) Henry, though, was entirely satisfied with his lifestyle. He could afford to be so having inherited a substantial fortune from his father, an Irish immigrant who had amassed three million dollars through business ventures in upstate New York by his 1832 death.\(^2\) This freed Henry from financial concerns, allowing him to cultivate his personal spirituality and to nurture intellectual relationships with local luminaries like Emerson. Henry, though, lavished the largest part of his energies on raising his children according to his idiosyncratic religious and pedagogical principles. He disliked institutional education, never

\(^1\) Garth Wilkinson, one of the younger James brothers, told his siblings that he envied a friend whose father was a “stevedore,” because, although he did not know what a “stevedore” was (it was a person who unloaded ships), it at least sounded concrete. Allen, *William James*, p. 27.  

\(^2\) Henry had to break his father’s will in order to inherit his proportional share of the estate; the first William James felt his ne’er-do-well son would only squander his legacy on drink and debauchery.
keeping his children in any particular school—if they went to any school at all—for more than a few years. No single school was able to completely satisfy Henry’s educational requirements. This constant movement was not only institutional; James also shuttled his family back and forth across the Atlantic. By William James’s twenty-first birthday, the family had moved to Europe three times, in each case remaining for over a year before returning to the United States.

The James patriarch hoped, through this unusual upbringing, to inculcate in all of his children a philosophy of personal spiritual growth and perpetual education. "The parent," he wrote, "should be the... medium of the Divine communion with the child." The education he provided was designed to midwife his boys’ personal religious becoming. For Henry, becoming a man meant remaining in touch with a youthful vitality while seriously grappling with a world brimming with latent spiritual meaning. By immersing his children in ideas and encouraging them to pursue their own intellectual inclinations, Henry felt he could facilitate his boys’ self-discovery of the truths in which he believed. In one respect, at least, Henry’s education was a great success; he choreographed the early development of two of late-nineteenth-century America’s most distinctive and psychologically sensitive voices, William and Henry Jr. However, the freedom

---

3 Henry James, *The Literary Remains of the Late Henry James*, William James, ed. (1884) quoted in Matthiesen, *The James Family* p. 24. “I desire my child to become an upright man,” he wrote in *The Nature of Evil*, “a man in whom goodness shall be induced not by mercenary motives as brute goodness is induced, but by love for it or a sympathetic delight in it. And inasmuch as I know that this character or disposition cannot be forcible imposed upon him, but must be freely assumed, I surround him as far as possible with an atmosphere of freedom.” Quoted in Lewis, *The Jameses*, p. 80. Alice James’s educational needs were generally overlooked or disregarded by Henry Sr. See Jean Strouse, *Alice James, A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980).
Henry offered his children was not without a price, perpetuating and multiplying the choices and demands of mature independence. The Jameses' early education prepared them for no occupation, and their father's masculine ideal of reflection and religious self-awareness was not in step with the virtues of decisiveness, utility, hard work, and muscular determination more common to the industrial age.4

The James household produced men ideally suited to follow in the footsteps of Henry Sr. as intellectuals of gentlemanly leisure. But this was not an option for William and his siblings. By the age of fifteen or sixteen, William recognized that he would not inherit a sustaining income and would have to find some form of employment. In letters from 1857 and 1858, he expressed recurrent concerns about his purpose in life and the approaching need to settle upon a particular career path. This was not a particularly alarming prospect for the young James; he expected to find a career that would combine the values of his upbringing with the values of the nascent professional world. More than simply a job, William sought a calling in life that would allow him the freedom to continue to explore his individual engagement with nature, ideas, and God and develop his unique intellectual identity while assuring him financial comfort and a respectable position within society. James, though, had an exalted view of what a respectable position might be. He had been raised as the favorite son in one of New England's elite families. This fact, reinforced by Henry Sr.'s individualistic philosophical views, had instilled in

4 "Households like the Jameses' produced a battery of well-educated, inquisitive young adults who had no clear idea of what to do with their training and intellect." Croce, Science and Religion in the Era of William James, p. 47.
the young James a sense of special destiny; if he had to take a career, he wanted it to be personally and socially ennobling. This made the traditional professions—law, commerce, and medicine—unattractive. None of these careers satisfied William’s sense of purpose. Commerce struck him as coarse and distasteful, while medicine, in many respects an appealing option, required an immediate interaction with human bodies that made William uncomfortable. William embarked on a search for a profession with the nagging suspicion that work was, in some sense, beneath him. His struggle in the ensuing years to settle upon a career reflected this underlying tension between the expectations he developed as a youth and the demands of life in professional society.

The young James did have a couple of interests he hoped might translate into a career: painting and science. Henry Sr. had attempted to foster his children’s innocence and spontaneity, but only up to a point. He did, in fact, have ambitions for his children, but they were refracted through his individualistic spiritualist project. He harbored hopes that William would select a scientific career and attempted to guide his education along naturalist lines, encouraging his eldest son’s interest in nature with gifts like a microscope and a chemistry set. Henry’s conception of the value of science was an expressly Romantic one, deeply involved with his spiritualist philosophy. To an even greater extent than his friend Emerson,

---

5 The Jameses’ opposition to organized religion ensured that a religious career was never a viable option.

6 From Myers, William James, p. 20. James never considered a career in law.
Henry believed that the study of nature reinforced awareness of the divine.

Inspired by the views of the eighteenth-century natural philosopher and visionary Emanuel Swedenborg and the Sandemanianism of Michael Faraday, Henry sought to establish an exact correspondence between the facts of science and the facts of religion, grounding spirituality in the certainty of scientific law. While he was occasionally enthusiastic about the application of science to social problems, Henry was consistently wary of positivism and materialism. Science was useful, he felt, only insofar as it allowed for an essentially spiritual understanding of the natural world. In stark contrast to the Comtian philosophical vision in which positive, scientific knowledge would eventually replace religion and myth, Henry looked toward a new era of religious certainty in which the core of divine truth would shine with the expressiveness of scientific fact. Henry hoped his eldest son would be an apostle of this era of unified truth—his scientific education would give him the credibility to achieve the naturalist-spiritualist synthesis Henry envisioned, a credibility Henry lacked. Nurtured in this idiosyncratic context, William’s early understanding of science was diffuse, imprecise, and firmly rooted in naturalist, not experimentalist, soil; Henry wished William to experience nature grandly,

---

7 Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, pp. 56-57. Emanuel Swedenborg was a scientist, philosopher, and mystic in eighteenth century Sweden. He believed that he had witnessed the last judgment in 1757 and that the New Jerusalem foretold in “Revelations” was to be embodied in a new church. Swedenborg maintained that the reality of the natural world was only assured by the existence of God, and the study of nature, properly directed, furthered understanding of the divine. Sandemanianism, following the teachings of the Scot Robert Sandeman, who brought the teachings of his father-in-law John Glas to England, held that faith was a simple assent to God’s truth. Belief in the divine was no different than trust in the everyday facts of human experience.

grappling with its sublime connotations. Science, naively comprehended, was at the center of an incomplete life project William inherited from his father, a psychological pressure further burdening his professional uncertainty.

It was unsettling for Henry, then, when in 1859 it became apparent that William was growing more inclined toward art as a vocation. Henry had encouraged his children to visit museums and take artistic training, but this was not the path he had envisioned for his firstborn. He felt that the aesthetic life could carry an individual into a world of self-created artifice, away from the certainty of God's truth and into spiritual bankruptcy and immorality. In the summer of 1858, after the family had settled in Newport, Rhode Island, William had been attracted to the studio of William Morris Hunt, an American painter trained in Europe. By October of 1859 Henry decided to relocate the family to Switzerland in part to stifle William's relationship with Hunt and steer his son back toward the sciences. William remained insistent about his excitement for the artistic life, and a debate ensued. Henry argued that artists were prone to immorality and spiritual narrowness, concerns William took seriously even though he was never able to fully grasp his father's view. In the end, William's determination won out; in the

---

9 The exchange was apparently amicable and forthright. William asked his father to write out, clearly and directly, his "reasons why I should not be an 'artist.'" All he could make out from Henry's response was "the spiritual danger in which a man is if he allows the bent of his aesthetic nature (supposed strong) to direct his activity." William wrote back, "I do not see why a man's spiritual culture should not go on independently of his aesthetic activity, why the power which an artist feels in himself should tempt him to forget what he is, any more than the power felt by a Cuvier or Fourier would tempt them to do the same..." This last statement suggests Henry's belief that science, unlike art, was not a detriment to spirituality. Letter from August, 1860, quoted in Allen, William James, pp. 62-63. Henry James Sr.'s concerns about the artistic lifestyle and his attempts to steer William away from that path are well documented in most biographical sources,
fall of 1860, Henry brought the family back to Newport in order for William to begin serious instruction under Hunt.

Six months later, William suddenly abandoned his painting lessons, signaling the end of his ambitions to become an artist. As the union prepared for civil war, William decided to satisfy his father's wishes and enrolled in Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School. The rapidity with which William made this crucial decision and the lack of clear motivation has inspired considerable speculation amongst James biographers. Most agree that both the encouragement William received from Hunt and the rapid progress he made in his half-year of lessons point to a considerable talent, making it difficult to give much credence to Ralph Barton but historians have fared little better than William in sorting out the precise nature of Henry's arguments.

The proximate concurrence of the taking of Fort Sumter and James's sudden change in plans has been suggestive for some biographers. Perry's view, accepted for many years, was that William did not express much interest in the war at the time (Perry, TCWJBV, p. 63), but recently scholars, like R. W. B. Lewis, Linda Simon, and Louis Menand, have given the war and James's lack of participation greater significance. Henry Sr. prevented his older sons from enlisting during the initial wave of union patriotism rushing through New England in the spring of 1861. Henry Jr.'s biographer Leon Edel has argued that Henry felt consistently guilty about his failure to serve and clouded the issue by melding the outbreak of war with the emergence of his famous "obscure hurt." Leon Edel, Henry James, A Life (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), pp. 57-58. Although rarely outspoken in regret, William's feelings were similar to those of his brother. Many years later, he recalled watching an 1863 parade through Boston: "I looked back and saw their faces and figures against the evening sky, and they looked so young and victorious, that I, much gnawed by questions as to my own duty of enlisting or not, shrank back—they had not seen me—from being recognized. I shall never forget the impression they made." Quoted in Menand, The Metaphysical Club, p. 74. Besides being the great political and moral event of the time, the war was also seen afterward, especially by those who did not go, as the defining masculine experience of the day; going to war taught a boy to be a man or a man to be a distinguished man. William often seemed self-conscious and self-effacing of his worth as a citizen and as a man in letters to Civil War veterans of his age like Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and his two youngest brothers, Robertson and Garth Wilkinson, all of whom were wounded during the war. "Wilky" had been an adjutant under Colonel Robert Gould Shaw when he commanded the famous "Negro regiment," the 54th Massachusetts, and William gave the oration at the unveiling of the Augustus Saint-Gaudens's famous Shaw monument in 1897. It is perhaps significant that this is widely recognized as one of William's greatest speeches. William's failure to participate in the defining event of his generation took on a new light when, in the depths of depression, he questioned his worth as a man.
Perry’s suggestion that James abandoned painting because of a lack of commitment and lingering uncertainty about his talent. The once popular Oedipal interpretation—William sacrificing his artistic self to his father’s ambitions—is still conveniently symbolic of intergenerational struggle but is of somewhat dubious historical usefulness. In one of his few recollections about his decision, William emphasized a different aspect of his choice. At one point during his lessons, a discouraged Hunt told James that he could not advise anyone to devote his life to painting because America placed such little value on art. The artistic profession had a shaky, uncertain future, Hunt warned his student. By 1861, already nineteen, William was increasingly concerned about selecting a career with promising financial and professional prospects, and, still raw and uncertain about his own

11 Perry, a student of James’s and his first biographer, states, “William learned by living with art that he could live without it. That he had talent and interest in unquestionable; but he found the interest to be less compelling than he had thought, and he judged the talent to be less distinguished than his standards required.” Ralph Barton Perry, TCW;JBV, pp. 61-62. It is not at all clear how Perry arrives at this conclusion. More recently, Linda Simon has also described James’s self-doubt with an equal lack of specificity and considerably less authority. Linda Simon, Genuine Reality, p. 86.

12 Howard Feinstein gave this interpretation its most famous statement in Becoming William James. In this work, he expanded on an earlier Oedipal analysis of James’s psychological distress in Cushing Strout, “William James and the Twice-Born Sick Soul,” Daedalus (1968), 97: 1062-1082, reprinted in Strout, The Veracious Imagination: Essays on American History, Literature, and Biography, pp. 199-222 (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981). Feinstein, a psychoanalyst, produced a brilliant portrait of intergenerational conflict in the James family through close analysis of William James’s sketches and writings. Feinstein’s work placed the sublimated artist at the core of both James’s psychological problems and early intellectual originality. The neurasthenia that would plague James throughout his life seems to have first emerged in 1861 after his decision to quite painting, Feinstein observes, and he correlates the psycho-physical distress with the sacrifice of the artistic self. Yet it seems the emergence of eye problems, physical and mental weakness, and headaches might also have been a cause—not a result—of James’s decision to abandon painting; it is difficult to establish the chronology with certainty. There is some evidence that psychological distress ran in his family; the connection of the emergence of illness with 1861, though, is tantalizing. Feinstein’s view has become a canonical reference point, at the center of debates about Henry Sr.’s influence on his son, endorsed in Daniel W. Bjork, The Compromised Scientist and in Linda Simon, Genuine Reality, but downplayed in Bjork’s later book, William James, The Center of His Vision and in Myers, William James.
potentials, William was a receptive audience to this advice. He was affected enough by this episode to recount it to his own son, also a painter, years later.\textsuperscript{13} Even if the veracity of the memory is uncertain, it is striking that James framed his recollection in these terms, particularly within the context of his continuing doubts about his calling.\textsuperscript{14}

Science was an appealing alternative for William. A genuine interest in science extended throughout his teenage years, even if he was not always certain what to do with it. In a letter to a friend from 1858, William dreamily stated, “If I follow my taste and did what was most agreeable to me, I’ll tell you what I would do. I would get a microscope and go out into the country, into the dear old woods and fields and ponds. There I would try to make as many discoveries as possible....”\textsuperscript{15} It is not clear what was preventing the sixteen year-old William from “following his tastes,” aside from his age; his father undoubtedly would have endorsed these activities. William seems to have viewed natural history as an attractive pastime, but he was not certain how to shape his interests into a viable career. A recollection of his brother’s early interest in science from Henry Jr.’s

\textsuperscript{13} Allen, \textit{William James}, p. 70.

\textsuperscript{14} William’s mind-set is particularly difficult to characterize during the spring of ‘61 because, as he was living with his family during this period, there is no correspondence to document his decision. William’s family expected sudden changes like this from him. “Nothing...could have been less logical, yet at the same time more natural, than that William’s interest in the practice of painting should have suddenly and abruptly ceased,” remarked Henry James, Jr. in his autobiography, Henry James, Jr. \textit{Notes of a Son and Brother} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), p. 62. “He’s just like a blob of mercury,” Alice wrote of her brother; “you cannot put a mental finger upon him.” Alice James, \textit{The Diary of Alice James}, Leon Edel, ed. (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1965), p. 57.

\textsuperscript{15} Quoted in Myers, \textit{William James}, p. 4.
autobiography, demonstrates the somewhat incoherent nature of William’s enthusiasm for science:

As certain as that he had been all the while “artistic” did it thus appear that he had been at the same time quite otherwise inquiring too—addicted to “experiments” and the consumption of chemicals, the transfusion of mysterious liquids from glass to glass under exposure to lambent flame, the cultivation of stained fingers, the establishment and the transport, in our wanderings, of galvanic batteries, the administration to all he could persuade of electric shocks, the maintenance of marine animals in splashy aquaria….Then there had been also the constant, as I fearfully felt it, the finely speculative and boldly disinterested absorption of curious drugs.  

This was the excitement of a dilettante and pointed to the problems William would later have adopting a scientific career. Throughout his life, James remained drawn to the purely empirical aspects of science—science as a way of directing hands-on interaction with the natural world. Rigorous lab work did not appeal to the young or adult James. He never grew beyond his youthful, amateurish enthusiasms and lacked patience for any sort of slow, detailed, and methodological work. In his sense that science was most appropriately useful as an aspect of a broader philosophical project of individual growth and comprehensive understanding, William was entirely his father’s child. It was in the philosophical details of that project that they came to differ.

William arrived in Cambridge in September of 1861 and began chemistry studies in Charles William Eliot’s laboratory. He was not very well prepared for serious scientific work, a fact that undoubtedly accounts for his decision to remain

16 Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, pp. 122-123.
in the United States when he could have had a superior science education in Europe. Although he was already virtually fluent in both French and German, William lacked both the background and the inclination to begin a truly rigorous study. Lawrence was a perfect fit for young men like James. Established only fourteen years before James’s arrival, the school lacked any entrance requirements, save a reference and some indication of good intentions, and had no required curriculum. The university assigned students to faculty members in their area of interest, and instructors taught their students individually until the student’s interests changed. Still skeptical of the disciplinary sciences, Harvard maintained only a loose affiliation with the scientific school. The system allowed William the intellectual flexibility and imprecision he had grown accustomed to in his youth. He had, after all, nominally chosen to study “science” without any certainty where that study would lead him, and he was not yet prepared to make the concerted commitment education abroad demanded. Furthermore, Cambridge was a familiar environment for James, close to friends and family, no small attraction for the still immature nineteen year old. Up to that time, William had never been apart from his parents for more than a couple of weeks, and then only once. Education at Lawrence effectively prolonged James’s unfocused, impractical education and did little to reconcile him to a professional life.

17 By disciplinary, I do not mean professional. Rather, the term suggests science as it slowly splintered into sciences—specialized categories of study like chemistry, natural philosophy, or physics oriented toward specific disciplinary goals. Discipline building was an important aspect of scientific professionalization and vice versa, but as processes, these need to be distinguished.
Although Lawrence offered a second-rate scientific education by German standards, the Cambridge atmosphere of the 1860s, swirling with new ideas and personalities, was undeniably heady for a smart young man. William’s Lawrence years may have stunted his growth in some respects, but intellectually, he was constantly stimulated to explore new ideas and perspectives. Among James’s peers and friends through the decade were some of mid- and late-nineteenth-century America’s greatest intellectual figures, including Alexander Agassiz, son of the great naturalist and co-founder of Harvard’s Museum of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy; Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, future geologist; Charles S. Peirce; Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.; the Emersons; and the erratic Chauncey Wright. The faculty included Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., Charles William Eliot, Jeffries Wyman, Asa Gray, Benjamin Peirce, and Louis Agassiz. Two great topics—Darwinian evolution and the Civil War—dominated conversation and debate. Even the goals of the university and its future role in society were being reappraised and imagined afresh by reformers like Eliot, landmark president of Harvard’s great period of reform and growth from 1869 to 1909, and Asa Gray. Borrowing from the German model, these changes incorporated a more rigorous and diverse system of majors into the university education, focusing especially on the sciences, that gave students a concentrated understanding of narrower fields. These reforms were intimately linked to the development of a professional society in the Northeast: University administrators self-consciously attempted to design an education that would craft a class of socially useful men to lead the worlds of business, science, and politics,
while establishing a properly accredited college degree as the de facto claim to professional authority in fields like law and medicine.\textsuperscript{18} William James, later one of Eliot's first new hires as Harvard president, was in one of the last classes to graduate under the old system. For William, the traditional Harvard education was more amenable to his temperament, but he, like Eliot and the reformers, grew increasingly aware that the training offered at Harvard was not suited to meet new social realities.

Many of William's classmates did find professional success with relative ease. The depth of James's struggles to find a career and develop a satisfying social self was, in its quality, unique to him. This was likely due to the unusual nature of his upbringing and his peculiar aims and expectations in life. At Lawrence, William was not pushed to settle upon a path, allowing him to continue to postpone any serious decisions about his life and fall into his insular, individual world. The personal consequences of this delay would eventually be severe, but during this time, William also began to establish some of the hallmarks of his mature style and thought, particularly his ability to connect ideas with identities or particular personality traits and habits. His interaction with the important themes of

the day was rarely purely theoretical; he almost invariably understood ideas through the lens of personality and experience. Figures like Agassiz—then waging an almost single-handed battle against evolutionary theory—who combined great personal charm and intellect captured William's admiration and fascination. The intellectual merits of the people he encountered struck him less than his sense of their character or personal quality. After attending one of Agassiz's frequent public lectures, he reported home, “He is evidently a great favorite with his audience and feels so himself. But he is an admirable, earnest lecturer, clear as day, and his accent is most fascinating.” Without mentioning the content of Agassiz's lecture—likely an anti-Darwin theme—or whether he agreed with it, James concluded, “I should like to study under him.” At the time of the letter, mid-September, James had yet to see much of Eliot, his major instructor, but he had already concluded, “I don’t believe he is a very accomplished chemist.” His grounds for making this judgment are dubious at best, for, not surprisingly, William found his own chemical studies totally “bewildering.” James may have been at Lawrence to train for a career, but he continued to approach his education from the perspective of a gentleman. He sought out instructors primarily based upon their character, not their knowledge or ability. William hoped, vaguely, that by nurturing his individual character, as his father had taught, he would be somehow moved to a specific calling.

In other respects, the nineteen-year-old freshman was finding that life on his own agreed with him. Whatever his past and future promise, James was in most
ways a typical college man, his facile self-assurance and self-deprecatory humor masking real doubts and homesickness. He declared his independence in letters home while sounding cautionary notes to his parents and himself. "I know...that the 'native hue of resolution' has never been of very great shade in me hitherto. But I am sure that that feeling is a right one, and I mean to live accordingly to it if I can. If I do, I think I shall turn out all right."19 James was beginning to feel the first twinges of anxiety over his inability to settle upon a career, and this letter is one of the first times he expressed doubt about his inherent fitness for professional life. Looking back on the rapid cooling of his fervor for both art and the Union cause, James hoped to convince his family and himself that this time would be different. His confidence in his capacities waning, William found it difficult to make his reassurances convincing.

James was working, but his interests were still unfocused. He was consistently unsatisfied, quickly losing his enthusiasm for specific topics and fields. He read a great deal at Lawrence, scrambling to catch up on his chemistry while still making time for philosophy and literature, but it is not easy to establish what ideas most captured his interest and fascination. James's library included a sparsely annotated copy of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and allusions from the late 1860s indicate that he was familiar with the book and the argument, but he never mentions evolutionary theory in his letters home, except in connection to Agassiz's

---


James also claimed to have read Herbert Spencer's *First Principles* "as a youth when it was still appearing in numbers," which would have been immediately around these first years at Lawrence. During his initiation with Spencer, James recalled being "carried away with enthusiasm by the intellectual perspectives which [the work] seemed to open." Coming from an article written over forty years after his first reading of Spencer, there is still no reason to doubt this memory. William would eventually see Spencer as his intellectual antithesis, but in the sixties, Spencer's attempt to create a philosophical system unifying all aspects of reality under evolution and science appealed to James. The "synthetic philosophy" developed by Spencer resonated with William's ambitions and the holism he had inherited from his father, but the evolutionary cosmology Spencer expounded seemed more contemporary than Henry Sr.'s religious zeal. Still, James did not speak or act much like an evolutionary enthusiast. His letters home did not carry the debate to his father, but then this may have been due to William's reticence and his unwillingness to upset Henry Sr. As a student, James never seems to have sought out the principal protagonist for the Darwinian cause in America, Asa Gray, and his attachment to Chauncey Wright and John Fiske, two other supporters of evolutionary thought, deepened only toward the end of the decade, by which time James was reconsidering Spencer with a far more critical
eye. Even more revealing, any partisanship William felt in the ongoing debates between Gray and Agassiz about evolution (or about the future of the Harvard science education) did not prevent William from cultivating close personal and intellectual relationships with Agassiz as well as with Eliot, an ally of Gray’s, and the cautious evolutionist Jeffries Wyman.

The young William James was simply not a serious student in the modern sense of the word. Personalities and experiences excited him more than abstract ideas or his laboratory research. His commitment to chemistry, and science in general for that matter, was not especially strong. It was his pupil’s lack of dedication that Eliot found most striking; in a recollection of his first contact with James, he wrote:

James was a very interesting and agreeable pupil, but was not wholly devoted to the study of Chemistry. During the two years in which he was registered as a student in Chemistry, his work was much interfered with by ill-health, or rather by something which I imagined to be a delicacy of nervous constitution. His excursions into other sciences and realms of thought were not infrequent; his mind was excursive...I received a distinct impression that he possessed unusual mental powers, remarkable spirituality, and great personal charm.22

This “delicacy,” scarcely apparent in William’s youth, became an increasingly dominant attribute of his sense of identity toward the end of the 1860s, but letters from the time William studied with Eliot make no mention of health problems. William’s lack of dedication had other motivations; it was emblematic of his

22 Quoted in Allen, *William James*, pp. 76-77. The context of this memorandum—sent to William’s son Henry as the latter prepared a posthumous collection of his father’s letters—should be taken into account.
approach to education. He was still largely following the pedagogical plan set by Henry Sr., nurturing his freedom and individuality and resisting specialization. He learned a great deal, but his education was primarily designed to help him learn about himself. The traditional Harvard education, designed to develop character in Back Bay elites, encouraged William's self-occupation with his personal identity. Although he was dimly aware of an approaching need to have skills of some sort, he did not want to be bothered with acquiring the expertise of a particular profession. His resistance to a more professional training was active; throughout the sixties, whenever James approached a point in his studies when he could no longer avoid making some level of commitment, he left off and did something else.

Of all sciences, physiology and anatomy most appealed to James. These disciplines were still closely linked to traditions of amateur naturalism, and they appealed to both William's background and his distaste for experimental labor. Thus, after nearly two years of work in chemistry, he shifted focus to anatomy under Jeffries Wyman. Wyman became James's model for the ideal scientist, a

---


24 Further in Eliot's memorandum previously quoted, he remarked, "His tendency to the subject of physiology had appeared clearly during his two years in the Department of Chemistry....The two interesting points about his education are: first, its irregularity—it did not conform to the Boston and Cambridge traditional method; and secondly, it was in large proportion observational, and particularly in the biological sciences." Quoted in Perry, *TCWJBV*, pp. 66-67.

view echoed by many of the anatomist’s students and peers. Characteristically, though, James’s opinion was not based on Wyman’s work, but on his person and self-presentation. “His extraordinary effect on all who knew him is to be accounted for by the one word, character,” James wrote in an 1873 eulogy for his former teacher; “Never was a man so completely without detractors. The quality which every one first thinks of in him is his extraordinary modesty…. Next were his integrity, and his complete and simple devotion to truth…. we prefer to think of him forever as the paragon that he was of goodness, disinterestedness, and single-minded love of the truth.”

A consumptive, Wyman’s ability to maintain an active scholarly life, an occupation doctors considered especially insalubrious for the chronically ill, further testified to his strong character. In scientific approach Wyman prefigured the professional scientist of the late nineteenth century. He conceived of science as an insular practice, in which a closed community debated and settled controversies with a minimum of outside involvement. In stark contrast to Agassiz, Wyman eschewed the public stage. When Agassiz could not find

---

26 Eliot remembered that his students “took him as the type of scientific zeal, disinterestedness and candor,” and Nathaniel Southgate Shaler said of Wyman in his autobiography, “In some ways he was the most perfect naturalist I have ever known…within the limits of his powers he had the best-balanced mind it has been my good fortune to come into contact with….Though he published but little, his store of knowledge of the whole field of natural history was surprisingly great, and, as I came to find, it greatly exceeded that of my master Agassiz in its range and accuracy.” Quoted in Henry James, ed., The Collected Letters of William James, in Two Volumes (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), p. 48.

sympathetic ears for his ideas within the scientific community, he had no qualms in taking his case to another audience, but Wyman directed his research and publications primarily to other scientists, granting his peers exclusive authority in weighing the merits of his work. Wyman had slowly become convinced that Darwin’s theory offered the best explanation for the facts of natural history, but he elected not to participate in the very public controversy over the merits of the new theory between Agassiz and Gray. Like Gray, Wyman was a theistic evolutionist and was not troubled by any opposition between his religious and scientific views; this made his presentation of evolution more palatable to religiously-minded intellectuals than the thunderously agnostic version of evolution presented by T. H. Huxley in England. He may have given his students some instruction in the evolutionary theory, although James makes no mention of any. Wyman’s influence on James was primarily personal. Not only did he guide William towards a career in medicine, he established a model of scientific pursuit in many ways antithetical to the impossibly grand, occasionally ridiculous Agassiz. Here was

28 Wyman did not conceal his view, however, stating in an 1863 review of the British antievolutionist Richard Owen, “The practical study of the history of the earth and the changes which it had undergone, of the development of individual animals and plants points in one direction, viz.: to the process of differentiation.” Quoted in A. Hunter Dupree, “Jeffries Wyman’s View on Evolution,” Isis 44, p. 243.

29 Personal notebooks from 1862-1863 remain. They do not mention Darwin but chart some of James’s other readings during and his general curiosity during this period. Along with extracts from lectures by Agassiz on “Geology and the Structure and Classification of the Animal Kingdom” and Joseph Lovering on “Electrostatics, Electrodynamics and Acoustics,” there are sketches, chronologies, sayings of Charles Peirce, and abstracts of Büchner’s Kraft und Stoff, Max Müller’s History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature, Farrar’s Origins of Language, and Jonathan Edward’s Original Sin. Perry, TCWJBY, p. 71.
another example to strive for, a character to emulate, both scientifically up-to-date and genteel, who had apparently achieved the synthesis of professional success and personal growth James sought. Hopeful after two weeks of work, James wrote his sister, “I have a filial feeling towards Wyman already.”

At the time of the move to Wyman’s lab, James was finding it difficult to further postpone the question of career. His comparative anatomy coursework was generally considered to prepare students for entrance into the medical school, a path endorsed by Wyman. A few years earlier, he had wondered whether he could stand the gruesome details of medical life, but after plentiful dissections, this was presumably no longer an impediment. Nevertheless, other objections remained, and James did not seem pleased with his options. Pressured by his mother about his expenditures and his apparent lack of direction, William grew urgent in letters to his family about his professional prospects. “I am obliged before the 15th of January to make finally and irrevocably ‘the choice of a profession,’” James wrote his cousin Katharine with customary gravitas and hyperbole:

30 W.J. to A. J., September 13, 1863, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 83.

31 Why did James not consider entering another profession, such as publishing, the law, or, even, writing like his brother? As suggested above, he may have considered legal or publishing professions too worldly, too much like business. But James had also been prepared since an early age to be both creative and distinctive; most professions did not seem to offer him opportunities to distinguish himself in an intellectual sense. There were, at least, famous American doctors who had contributed to scientific knowledge. William never thought of writing as a particular talent; he was uncomfortable about his abilities throughout the sixties, so the idea of making a career of writing did not occur to him. Finally, the allure of science for James should not be underestimated. Besides the influence of his father, he was genuinely excited by the prospects of modern science. He believed that science was the best method of understanding and describing the world, and he viewed the scientific life as heroic in its pursuit of truth. After the turn away from art in 1861, James outwardly expressed dedication to pursuing some sort of scientific career, despite his continuing inability to focus.
I suppose your sex, which has, or should have, its bread brought to it, instead of having to go in search of it, has no ideas of the awful responsibility of such a choice. I have four alternatives: Natural History, Medicine, Printing, Beggary. Much may be said in favor of each. I have named them in the ascending order of their pecuniary invitingness. After all, the great problem of life seems to be how to keep body and soul together, and I have to consider lucre. To study natural science, I know I should like, but the prospect of supporting a family on $600 a year is not one of those rosy dreams of the future with which the young are said to be haunted. Medicine would pay, and I should still be dealing with subjects which interest me—but how much drudgery and of what an unpleasant kind is there! Of all departments of Medicine, that to which Dr. Prince devotes himself is, I should think, the most interesting. And I should like to see him and his patients at Northampton very much before coming to a decision.

The worst of the matter is that everyone must more or less act with insufficient knowledge—“go it blind,” as they say. Few can afford the time to try what suits them. However, a few months will show.32

Dr. Prince—Katharine’s husband—was an alienist at an asylum for the insane. James had loaded his choice of career with enormous importance. The prospect of poverty in any degree was absolutely indigestible; poverty would reflect poorly on his class and manhood. Yet all routes to financial security seemed to demand the sacrifice of some ineffable higher nature. In a letter to his mother from November, when the situation was no clearer, William was explicit about his fears. “I feel very much the importance of making soon a final choice of my business in life,” he wrote. “One branch leads to material comfort, the flesh-pots; but it seems a selling of one’s soul. The other to mental dignity and independence; combined, however, with physical penury.” He could see no middle-path. If he selected a profession

32 W. J. to Katharine James Prince, September 12, 1863, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, pp. 81-82.
assuring a comfortable income, he feared, “there might be some anguish in looking back from the pinnacle of prosperity (necessarily reached, if not by eating dirt, at least by renouncing some divine ambrosia) over the life you might have led in the pure pursuit of truth. It seems as if one could not afford to give that up for any bribe, however great.”

Laced in religious language and metaphor, this letter pitted Henry Sr.’s values—associated with spiritualistic science in this case—against the demands of his modernity—linked to “the flesh-pots.” Not only did this conflict depress him, he openly resented all expected sacrifices. These were not the problems he was raised to confront. William had absorbed his father’s lessons of personal spirituality and childlike ingenuousness, and the need he felt for a vague but total integrity of purpose and action consistently sapped his resolve when life decisions confronted him. Petulantly joking, he concluded his letter, “I shall confer with Wyman about the prospects of a naturalist and finally decide. I want you to become familiar with the notion that I may stick to science, however, and drain away at your property for a few years more.”

James felt that his ability to independently select a career and do so wisely was a defining moment in his maturation as both a spiritual being and a man. For his father, the two had been explicitly linked—one became a man by finding a

---

33 One must take James’s words with a grain of salt. The scientific life was not implausible; this was the career his father had hoped he would follow, and, indeed, this was the course he would eventually pursue. James was unwilling to make any career choice at this point in his life, and his financial worries, while genuine, were the first of a series of excuses delaying his decision and masking a more fundamental ambivalence.

34 W. J. to his mother, November 2, 1863, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, pp. 85-86.
native spiritual voice. Clearly James still believed this to some degree, but he was increasingly aware of other pressures. His concerns about money were almost always bound to thoughts of a future wife and family. In the letter to cousin Katharine, he characterized his professional crisis as an especially masculine moment, one in which he had to weigh his own pleasures with the comforts of his future dependents. To his mother, he wrote, “But it seems hard on Mrs. W. J., ‘that not impossible she,’ to ask her to share an empty purse and a cold hearth.” Coming at a time when he had yet to have a strong relationship with any women outside of the family, William conflates the sexual anxiety of a twenty-one year-old with the need to find a lucrative and fulfilling profession, the former feeding the urgency of the latter.35 William seemed to view his professional, domestic coming-of-age as antithetical to his father’s chaste spiritual maturity, and he responded with indecision.

In January, 1864, James reluctantly entered the Harvard Medical School. “I embraced the medical profession a couple of months ago,” he wrote in February. “My first impressions are that there is much humbug therein, and that, with the exception of surgery, in which something positive is sometimes accomplished, a doctor does more by the moral effect of his presence on the patient and family, than

35 In his Oedipal analysis, Feinstein argues that James’s mother consistently harassed William about his expenditures and urged him to the medical profession—James’s “flesh pots.” Feinstein, Becoming William James, pp. 155-163. In this analysis, “that not impossible she” limiting James’s options would also be a stand-in for his mother.
by anything else. He also extracts money from them."³⁶ Although Harvard ranked among the best medical schools in the country, the education offered there was neither rigorous nor comprehensive. Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., dean of the school until 1853 and still an instructor in anatomy and physiology when William matriculated, liked to joke, "If the whole material medica (excepting only opium and ether), as now used, could be sunk to the bottom of the sea, it would be all the better for mankind—and all the worse for the fishes."³⁷ Work in medicine did nothing to assuage the concerns William had expressed in the fall of 1863. Indeed, the "humbug" he noted in medicine seemed to convince him he had made a mistake. After another year of unsatisfying work without much increase in either knowledge or excitement, William found a compelling excuse to delay his medical studies by returning to science and giving the naturalist's life a serious try. Louis Agassiz, one of James's first fascinations at Cambridge, was organizing an expedition to Brazil sponsored by the wealthy Boston industrialist Nathaniel Thayer, and William volunteered as a collecting assistant.

Agassiz and Thayer intended for the voyage to accumulate evidence disproving the evolutionary theory, and Agassiz at least was satisfied with its outcome. But, then, he had made up his mind what he would find well in advance

³⁶ W. J. to his cousin Jeannette Barber Gourlay, February 21, 1864, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 90.

of the trip. It was precisely this sort of dogmatism that damaged his reputation among his scientific colleagues at Harvard, even as he continued to be the most publicly visible voice of science in America. The Swiss born naturalist had arrived in the U.S. in 1846; only thirty-nine, most of his best work was already behind him. His landmark anatomical studies of fish and the success of his theory of glacial agency in geological formation had garnered him an international reputation. But after failed business ventures and the collapse of his marriage, Agassiz was happy to leave Europe for a new life in America, and he eagerly accepted the first chair at the newly formed Lawrence Scientific School. By the time of William’s arrival in Cambridge, Agassiz had cemented his position in American high society. In 1850, he married the wealthy Boston socialite Elizabeth Cary, and in 1854, he was endowed with a lifetime salary in the will of Abbott Lawrence, the founder of the Lawrence school. Agassiz’s energetic lectures, patriotic Union fervor, conciliatory views about science and religion, and dedication to the natural history of his adopted country made him a great favorite with the public, his students, and intellectuals like Henry James Sr. and Emerson. The son of a pastor, Agassiz thrived on the public stage. He continued to work on his beautifully engraved, multi-volume *Contributions to the Natural History of the United States* and performed the minor miracle of raising funds to establish the Museum of Comparative Zoology in 1861, but Agassiz became most well known in the sixties

---

for his inveterate opposition to Darwinian evolution, a position that placed him in opposition to most of his scientific colleagues and many of his students.\(^{39}\)

Although it was hardly a secret, the scientific mission of the Thayer Expedition did not much interest James. He had no qualms about directly contributing to an enterprise aimed at discrediting a theory he presumably believed; William had not reached the age of partisanship. This was to be a personal voyage, a safer, Humboldtian substitute for the Civil War.\(^{40}\) William's youngest brothers, Wilky and Bob, had both served in the war with distinction, and, while recuperating from vague psychosomatic ailments, William had visited with Wilky in Newport, who was also recuperating—from near fatal battle wounds received in the charge on Fort Wagner. James must have been struck by the change in his brother: He had entered the war a privileged teenager and was now, after only a year, a battle-tested man. On the other hand, William had made little progress

---

\(^{39}\) Allen, *William James*, p. 74 and Lurie, *Louis Agassiz*, pp. 266-302. Agassiz's own son, Alexander, would become one of the leading Darwinists of late-nineteenth-century America. Agassiz was also a vocal advocate of the polygenetic theories associated with Samuel Morton and Josiah Nott, contributing to Nott's *Types of Mankind* (1854), a monumental exposition of polygenetic theories. Used by some Southerners as scientific validation for slavery—though this was not Agassiz’s intent—the work was roundly criticized by most European and Northern American scientists for its spotty methods and obvious racist agenda. Josiah Clark Nott, et. al., *Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott & Co., 1865).

\(^{40}\) Alexander von Humboldt was one of the most internationally famous scientists and explorers of the early nineteenth century. He spent the years 1799-1804 exploring South and Central America and produced a thirty-volume account of his findings. Humboldt's careful geological, geographical, and environmental measurements and observations were methodologically path breaking. Humboldt, himself, was influenced by Romanticism in his understanding of nature; he believed, like Henry Sr., that scientific study could unite the human mind with the sublime, spiritual dimension of Nature. Perhaps Humboldt's most enduring work was his *Personal Narrative* of his voyages, which captured his sense of discovery and adventure, and inspired countless young naturalists—like Darwin and James—to undertake collecting voyages of their own.
toward maturity in his years at Lawrence. The Brazilian adventure offered him another chance to experience the trope of coming-of-age narratives, the voyage of discovery. When he returned, he hoped his doubts and dilemmas would be resolved; he would finally see himself clearly and would be pleased with the image.

After convincing his family to finance his experiment in field science, James boarded the steamer *Colorado* with Agassiz's party. The ship embarked from New York harbor on March 31, 1865. As they sailed past South Carolina, the passengers could see a smoky haze obscuring the mainland. The Civil War had come to a close.

William's high hopes for the trip were quickly disappointed. Like many travelers, he found the month long passage physically and mentally grueling, though this merely conformed to the nineteenth-century voyage narrative. His report home is rife with grandiloquent contrivance: “O the vile Sea! The damned Deep! No one has a right to write about the ‘nature of Evil,’ or to have any opinion about evil, who has not been at sea. The awful slough of despond into which you are there plunged furnishes too profound an experience not to be a fruitful one….The trade winds, which I thought were gentle zephyrs, are hideous moist gales that whiten all the waves with foam…."\(^{41}\) This, like the initial exhilaration James felt at landfall, suited his expectations—an edifying descent through a “slough of despond” preparing the traveler for a transforming arrival. But the

\(^{41}\) W. J. to his parents, April 21, 1865, Berkeley, *Correspondence* 4, pp. 100-101. The reference to the “nature of Evil” is to his father’s book *The Nature of Evil*. 
excitement inspired by the tropical surroundings of Brazil was soon tempered by William’s realization that his work would offer little in the way of adventure. Agassiz planned for him to stay in Rio to help set-up a makeshift marine laboratory to collect and classify jellyfish. When he suddenly became violently ill, stricken by a disease the Brazilian doctors diagnosed as smallpox, the situation took a far more dire turn.\footnote{Agassiz later described William’s sickness as varioloid, an illness less severe than smallpox.}

James recovered, but only after a month of invalidism during which he feared he would permanently lose his sight. Although he had resumed normal activities by June, he felt the sickness, combined with the disagreeable work, had rendered the adventure disastrous. He had learned about himself, but what he discovered did not please him. “I am now certain that my forte is not to go on exploring expeditions… I am convinced now, for good, I am cut out for a speculative rather than an active life,—I speak now only of my quality, as for my quantity, I became convinced some time ago and reconciled to the notion, that I was one of the very lightest of lightweights.”\footnote{W. J. to H. J. Sr., June 3, 1865, Berkeley, \textit{Correspondence 4}, p. 107.} James was more like his father than like Wyman or Agassiz: He was constitutionally unsuited to the active life but lacked Henry Sr.’s private resources. He now knew, he said, that he was not by nature one of those men whose “grit and energy…are called forth by the resistance of the world,” such as Humboldt, whose work he had perused on the trip from New York, or even his Lawrence teachers. “These lines seem to satisfy me, although to
many they would appear the height of indolence and contemptibleness: ‘Ne forçons
point notre talent,--Nous ne ferions rien avec grace,--Jamais un loudard, quoqu’il
fasse,--Ne deciendra un gallant.’44 James fooled no one, least of all himself. In
Brazil, James regularly remarked on what he saw as the listless inanity of the
natives, projecting fears about his own activities and character onto the people
around him. A sinking into genuinely degenerate sloth seemed a real possibility, a
fate even more upsetting than the sacrifices demanded by medical or business
professions. His failure to prove himself a “gentleman” struck at his masculine,
class, and racial identities, but he still clearly felt that the compromise of medicine,
awaiting him at home, was somehow too dear. The idea of embracing his
contemplative nature, perhaps teaching philosophy, never seems to have occurred
to James at this time, at least not in a tantalizing form. It was science, embodied in
the persons of Humboldt, Agassiz, and Wyman, that offered the social prestige and
values of the gentlemanly lifestyle to which James felt entitled. Science, and as far
as he could see, only science, looked toward both the past and the future. Yet, let
down by constitutional weakness, William felt the naturalist’s life slipping out of
reach.

James would regularly slide back into pits of self-doubt and depression
through the next ten years, but these periods would often be followed by bursts of
renewed energy and faith. This was the case in Brazil. He stayed on for another

One can’t push oneself with good effect. A clod, no matter how hard he tries, cannot turn himself
into a gentleman.”
six months, accompanying Agassiz and his wife into the Amazon basin, where he hoped to finally experience some of the adventures he had imagined. Conditions were hot and cramped—hardships James never understated in his letters home—but he was glad he had chosen to stay. His health held out, and although he hated mosquitoes, he began to wonder if he was cut out for the exploratory life after all; "As I begin to use my eyes a little every day I feel like an entirely new being."45

He also recaptured some of the enthusiasm for Agassiz he had felt in his first months at Cambridge. Then, Agassiz had offered the promise of transforming William into a naturalist.46 In Brazil, James hoped "the Professor" could teach him how to be a gentleman.47 "I have profited a great deal by hearing Agassiz talk," he wrote, "not so much by what he says, for never did a man utter a greater amount of humbug, but by learning the way of feeling of such a vast practical engine as he is.... I am convinced that he is the man to do me good."48

45 W. J. to H. J. Sr., September 12, 1865, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 122.

46 In 1861, he wrote home, "[Cambridge] improves as I go on living here, & if I study with Agassiz 4 or 5 years I should like to have you all here, with me, comfortable. I had a long talk with one of his students the other night and saw for the first time how a naturalist could feel about his trade in the same way that an artist does about his. For instance, Agassiz would rather take wholly uninstructed people 'for he has to unteach them all that they have learnt.' He does not let them look into a book for a long while, what they learn they must learn for themselves, and be masters of it all. The consequence is he makes naturalists of them, he does not merely cram them, and this student... said he felt ready to go anywhere in the world now with nothing but his note book and study out anything quite alone. He must be a great teacher." W. J. to his parents, December 25, 1861, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 63.

47 Agassiz certainly knew James was most sensitive. "James," he supposedly said to his pupil, "some people perhaps consider you a bright young man; but when you are fifty years old, if they ever speak of you then, what they will say will be this: That James—oh, yes, I know him; he used to be a very bright young man!" James, Letters, p. 56.

48 W. J. to H. J. Sr., September 12, 1865, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 122.
James soon lost his enthusiasm, and he was again anxious to return home by the end of December, the scheduled conclusion of the expedition. Shortly after Christmas, 1865, he left for New York with his friend Tom Ward, having more or less permanently lost any interest in pursuing the life of a field naturalist. He had scarcely any future contact with Agassiz, downplaying his affinity for "the Professor" in later correspondence.\(^{49}\) Compared to the experiences of the many war veterans also restarting their lives in 1866—like his brothers and his friend Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.—James's adventures and hardships in Brazil seemed almost trivial. William returned from the voyage no closer to professional maturity. He was still financially dependent on his parents, still resisting commitment to medical school. His experience in Brazil had left him convinced of his "feeble energies," and he hoped to make more palpable progress in some intellectual arena by limiting his field of activity, feeling alternately dedicated to and depressed by the task.\(^{50}\) His attitude toward medicine had not changed. He held the profession in scorn but now believed a concentrated pursuit of an M.D.

\(^{49}\) A year after his return, in a letter to a college friend, he wrote, "I think [the Amazon trip] a very profitably [sic] 10 months, more profitable in the way of general experience than of Science.—For the manual labor of collection and packing took so much time and energy that little was left for dissecting and studying specimens and ‘the principal light of modern science’ is not exceedingly communicative of his learning except in the way of damning the Darwinians, wh. though instructive is open to the charge of being monotonous." W. J. to Frederick George Bromberg, September 30, 1866, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 142.

\(^{50}\) Shortly after his return, he wrote Tom Ward, "I have been studying now for about two weeks, and think I shall be much more interested in it than before....I am conscious of a desire I never had before so strongly or so permanently, of narrowing and deepening the channel of my intellectual activity, of economizing my feeble energies & consequently treating with more respect the few things I shall devote them to." W. J. to T. W., March 27, 1866, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, pp. 136-137.
was the only route open to him. Being a doctor would, at least, be doing
something, and something socially useful for that matter, a fact that did not escape
James. He wrote Ward, “I have come to feel lately more & more like paying my
footing in the world in a very humble way, (driving my physicking trade like any
other tenth rate man) and then living my free life in my leisure hours entirely within
my own breast as a thing the world has nothing to do with….”51 The message was
clear, though—the medical profession was the “humble” work of “tenth rate” men.
He kept up his medical studies for a year, but throughout that time, he was at pains
in his correspondence to distinguish himself from the other medical students.52 He
attended the commencement ceremony in 1867 as a spectator, reporting to Wilky
and Bob, “Agassiz was there & ‘made a few neat & appropriate remarks,’ as usual,
about the transmutation question. 6 of the theses of the graduaters were read
publicly—on what principal they had been selected fm. the whole lot by the faculty
I cannot tell, but the look of mingled wonder, pain, and disgust at their flimsy
badness on Agassiz’s face was very amusing to observe.”53 James saw his
prospective future reflected in Agassiz’s grimaces. One of the men he most
identified with science, vitality, and gentility was offended by the medical

51 W. J. to T. W., June 8, 1866, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 141.

52 “The present time is a very exciting one for ambitious young men at the medical school who are
anxious to get into the hospital. Their toadying the physicians, asking them intelligent questions
after lectures, offering to run errands for them &c, this week reaches its climax…. I have little fears,
with my talent for flattery & fawning, of a failure,” he sarcastically wrote Alice on December 12,
1866. Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 148.

53 W. J. to G. W. J. & R. J., March 13, 1867, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 153.
graduates and their work, holding them scarcely above his contempt. William’s “amusement” was bitter. Whatever the social standing of doctors, they could not rise above their middle-class, professional status and earn the respect of men of intelligence.54

James became ill in the fall of 1866, offering him a convenient excuse for further putting off the completion of his medical studies.55 He began to suffer from

---

54 The early nineteenth century had been a tempestuous time for the medical profession. Not only had medical schools proliferated across the growing nation, many Americans had turned to homeopathic and Thomsonian treatments. This was, in part, an aspect of the broader revolt against the monopoly of practice and knowledge, but also an expression of a general decline in the prestige of the medical profession. Among doctors, there was a wide range of therapeutic theories and practices; the profession lacked cohesion, contributing to the public mistrust of doctors and their claims. It was not until after the Civil War, during the period of general reform in American higher education, that medical schools made successful moves towards consolidation of the power to license and train doctors, increasing the profession’s prestige by incorporating a more rigorous scientific underpinning. Although the field still appealed to well-bred men, its disorganized state might account for William’s unhappiness with his prospects as a doctor. See Henry K. Beecher and Mark D. Altschule, Medicine at Harvard, The First Three Hundred Years (Hanover: The University Press of New England, 1977) for a by-the-numbers account of the Harvard Medical School. James H. Cassidy, Medicine in America, A Short History (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), John Duffy, From Humors to Medical Science, A History of American Medicine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), John S. Haller, Jr., American Medicine in Transition, 1840-1910 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), and William G. Rothstein’s American Physicians in the Nineteenth Century, From Sects to Science (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972) and American Medical Schools and the Practice of Medicine, A History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); all offer straightforward accounts of the theoretical underpinnings behind medical practice in the nineteenth century, albeit from a predominantly Whiggish perspective. See Judith Walzer Leavitt and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., Sickness and Health in America, Readings in the History of Medicine and Public Health (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997) and John Harley Warner, The Therapeutic Perspective, Medical Practice, Knowledge, and Identity in America, 1820-1885 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) for more theoretically sophisticated accounts of changes within medical theory and practice in the American nineteenth century. James remained watchful for ways in which sciences like physiology could be incorporated into the medical education thereby increasing the field’s credibility. His sensitivity to this element of professional consolidation—increased intellectual abstraction—was born out of a very personal desire for prestige in the event that he did follow a medical career.

55 Placing the first onset of James’s famous medical ailments has proven difficult for biographers. Charles Eliot recalled William as a sickly pupil from the start of his education, and there is some evidence that he had eye and digestive problems as early as the spring of 1861. In 1863, he left school for a term because of vague physical problems. None of these ailments was either serious or
rather amorphous physical and mental symptoms, usually described as back pains brought on by too much time spent in the lab.\textsuperscript{56} He was almost certainly depressed as well, even more so than usual. He wrote Tom Ward a year later that he had been “on the continual verge of suicide” throughout the winter of ’66-'67; the rumor around Cambridge was that he was unhappy living in such close proximity to his parents, who had finally moved to the city upon William’s return from Brazil, taking a house just across from the university.\textsuperscript{57} Although his letters to his sister Alice—then in New York attempting to recover from her own, more severe, physical collapse, make hardly any mention of affliction and indicate a full schedule of social engagements—at the end of March, 1867, James began to make arrangements to travel to Europe with the full support of his parents.\textsuperscript{58} He

long-lasting enough to cause him to reconsider his future path or participation in the Brazilian expedition—although he hoped the trip would shake off any physical weakness. The dating of James’s first symptoms is central to Feinstein’s psychohistorical argument; he places their onset at the same time William gave up art, his stunted artistic development manifested physically. Recently, historians have challenged the psychoanalytical interpretation of James’s ailments. See Myers, \textit{William James} and Marian C. Madden and Edward H. Madden, “The Psychosomatic Illnesses of William James,” \textit{Thought} 54, #215 (December, 1979): 376-392. James’s medical and psychological problems have traditionally been considered of central importance to his intellectual development and output, but this interpretation has been questioned in recent work by Myers, Bjork, Croce, and others.

\textsuperscript{56} “Back pains” were also the label generally applied to Henry Jr.’s “obscure hurt.” William considered back pains to be a family weakness.

\textsuperscript{57} Berkeley, \textit{Correspondence} 4, p. 248. This rumor, which dearly upset William’s mother Mary, is reported in Feinstein, \textit{Becoming William James}, p. 207.

\textsuperscript{58} William, like his father, tended to try and protect Alice from any news that might cause her to worry or become overly excited, so his silence is not indicative of much. More revealing, these letters point toward an increasing sexual desperation on William’s part. Not only did he regularly write, in highly romanticized and euphemistic terms, about his need to find a woman and settle down, the correspondence with Alice is rife with striking sexual tensions, and James’s letters were written in a highly flirtatious tone.
withdrew his application for an internship at the Massachusetts General Hospital and booked passage on the steamship Great Eastern. Although it was not unusual for American men to travel to Europe to either work in one of the great teaching laboratories of Germany, study medical technique in France, or simply recapture flagging health and energy, William made his plans with the utmost secrecy. He discussed his plans with only his parents and his brother Henry until he was on the very brink of departure. After he had already arrived in Europe, he wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., “I left home without telling anyone about it because, hoping I might get well I wanted to keep it a secret from Alice and the boys till [the back pain] was over. I thought of telling you, ‘in confidence,’ but refrained partly because walls have ears, partly from a morbid pride, mostly because of the habit of secrecy that has grown on me in six months.” James was careful to not upset Alice, but the concern he expresses here seems excessive, even absurd, and the similarities between this justification—if it can even be called that—and the one he wrote in a letter to Tom Ward indicate that this excuse was contrived and scripted.


60 W. J. to O. W. H., September 17, 1867, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 200.

61 “I was strongly tempted to tell you,” he wrote Ward, “but was held back partly from fear it might leak out, partly from a foolish grief and shame, but mostly from the habit of keeping it secret which had grown on me in the past 6 months.” W. J. to T. W., September 10, 1867, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 197.
Today, it is difficult to gauge the magnitude of James’s ailment or even define its precise nature. At the end of the nineteenth century, James would have been diagnosed as a neurasthenic or male hysteric. These categories were invented to describe people similar to James in class and disposition, and he expressed many of the characteristics that became associated with neurasthenic American men—depression, weakness, eye strain, exhaustion, and back trouble; today, in fact, it has become common to group James and his brother Henry with other late-century neurasthenic American, male intellectuals. Although William may have eventually come to view his affliction in these terms as well, the fact that this nosological system did not exist for him in the 1860s left him free to interpret his symptoms in ways that often made explicit his anxieties about his constitution, masculinity, and intellectual capabilities. The lack of such an all-encompassing diagnosis as neurasthenia helps explain his secrecy about his breakdown; William

---

62 See George Miller Beard, *A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia), its Symptoms, Nature, Sequences, Treatment* (1905), A. D. Rockwell, ed. (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1971) for Beard’s landmark formulation of the symptoms of neurasthenia. Howard Feinstein’s chapter “The Use and Abuse of Illness,” *Becoming William James*, pp. 182-205 positions James within the framework of neurasthenia, arguing that illness protected leisure in a work-oriented society by allowing young American men to pursue the occupation of getting better when no other course was particularly attractive. In this setting, psychosomatic breakdowns and the experience of recovery were almost a rite of passage for young American men. Although anachronistic when applied to the young James, Feinstein’s argument has been generally accepted. See, Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). There have been many attempts to characterize neurasthenia from a psychological perspective, and some of these analyses fit well with the anxiety and angst James expressed in his letters. Studying British male hysterics, Janet Oppenheim has positioned the Victorian nervous male amidst the stresses of changing conceptions of masculinity, Janet Oppenheim, ‘Shattered Nerves’: *Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), chap. 5. Applied to James, this opens some interesting interpretive windows into the causes of his illness; William was self-conscious about his conformity to cultural conceptions of masculinity throughout his life, and was in many respects a man caught in the transitions, actively promulgating a masculine ideal at first foreign to his education and inclinations. See also Kim Townsend, *Manhood at Harvard.*
did not have the ready-made excuse a diagnosis would have provided. Crucially, the young James did not view himself as a member of an identifiable, by-and-large respectable, community of sufferers. In this, as in everything else, he believed he was alone, a unique specimen of constitutional weakness.

In his first letters from Europe to Holmes and Ward, William reveals that he kept his illness and planned voyage of recovery a secret because of his “pride” and a “foolish grief and shame.” He seemed to understand that there was something suspicious about his physical collapse, something that reflected poorly upon him. The fact that he could keep it a secret from his closest friends, one of whom lived in Cambridge, for months is itself revealing. He seemed to feel he was pushing the boundaries of respectable ill-health and was either shirking or barely navigating between the perpetual invalidism of his sister and emergent convalescence. Although William, consciously or unconsciously, used the threat of imminent physical collapse to continuously delay professional commitments and further prolong his dependence and immaturity throughout the sixties, he was also anxious about time passing him by. While he was ‘recovering’ in Germany, his three younger brothers were moving ahead with their lives. Henry Jr. was publishing short stories, and Bob and Wilky were running a Florida plantation, a project

---

63 Rest cures and travel cures were not uncommon at this period, but they were usually prescribed to consumptives. The use of these treatments for shell-shock victims after the Civil War was the start of a broadening of the categories of male mental illness and its remedies.
doomed to fail.64 "I feel rather ashamed at my age to stand in the presence of you and Wilky without having earned a cent," he wrote Bob from Germany. He characteristically then added, "But I have not been quite idle notwithstanding, and will if health only returns, make my living yet."65

He was not living up to his father's ambitions but seemed cut out only for his father's leisurely lifestyle, a condition he now interpreted as unfit, as potentially even degenerate.66 Aggravated by his prolonged bachelorhood, James's fear that he would spiral into degenerate madness intensified toward the end of the decade, after his return from Germany.67 Earlier, he had expressed interest in his cousin's work at an asylum. In 1869 and 1870, he was again curious about the insane.

64 William was not bashful about offering all of his brothers, and his friends for that matter, advice, compensating for their reversal of statures. Henry, in particular, never ceased to be the recipient of critiques—which he dutifully ignored. See Elizabeth M. Berkeley and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds., The Correspondence of William James Vol. 1: William and Henry, 1861-188. (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), pp. 30-37. Tensions between the eldest James brothers were aggravated in the late sixties because William was already enjoying his second trip abroad while Henry anxiously awaited his first. Both complained of similar physical ailments and subtly competed with one another for their family's attention and financial resources.

65 W. J. to R. J., January 27, 1868, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 262.

66 Degeneration was one of the most popular themes of nineteenth-century scientific work on madness and hereditary disease. The theory of degeneration was Lamarckian, maintaining that families could experience a gradual process of mental and physical decay over several generations. Individual weakness could lead to poor choices, which, in turn, would result in even more degenerate offspring. Degeneracy theory explicitly linked character to constitution. See Ian R. Dowbiggin, Inheriting Madness: Professionalization and Psychiatric Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century France (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) and Daniel Pick, Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

67 There is no evidence to definitively state that James had any sexual encounters or masturbated before he was married. Masturbation was commonly linked with mental, physical, and moral degeneration in the nineteenth century. A bachelor well into his twenties, it seems fair to assume that he did. If so, it would help explain his morbid fascination with insanity and with degeneration.
Early in 1869, he proposed to his friend Henry Bowditch, "The older I grow the more important does it seem to me for the interest of science and of the sick...that you should take charge of a big state lunatic asylum.... And if you once took firm root, say at Somerville, I should feel assured of a refuge in my old and destitute days, for you certainly would not be treacherous enough to spurn me from the door when I presented myself,—on the pretext that I was only shamming dementia."68

The half-joke points to two of William's fears: one, that he was, in fact, a degenerate, or two, that he was—or would be seen as—a fraud, crassly manufacturing excuses to account for his failure to be a man. At the time, he was in the depths of some of his worst depression and claimed to believe in complete physical determinacy, i.e, that his character and future were constitutionally determined.69 William wrote in his journal on December 21, 1869, that he was convinced that "Nature & life have unfitted me for any affectionate relations with other individuals," indicating that he may have been particularly concerned about

68 W. J. to Henry Bowditch, January 24 1869, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 362.

69 "I'm swamped in an empirical philosophy—," he wrote Ward in March, 1869, "I feel that we are Nature through and through, that we are wholly conditioned, that not a wiggle of our will happens save as a result of physical laws...." W. J. to T. W., March, 1869, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 370. This belief was probably more an expression of frustration with his "palsied" will than actual philosophical commitment to materialism. From James's Diary, entry prior to December 21, 1869, quoted in Robert J. Richards, DEETMB, p. 417.
passing on his constitutional weaknesses. More vivid is a story from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, attributed to an anonymous Frenchman but revealed by William’s son to be an account of his own state of mind in 1869-70:

Whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously 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.

---

70 Quoted in Feinstein, *Becoming William James*, pp. 305-306. This point is cemented in a letter William wrote to his brother Bob from a month earlier. Bob had announced his engagement with a first cousin, a match everyone in the family disapproved of. William added his voice to the chorus, warning, “what results from every marriage is a part of the next generation, and feeling as strongly as I do that the greater part of the whole evil of this wicked world is the result of infirm health, I account it as a true crime against humanity for anyone to run the probable risk of generating unhealthy offspring. For myself I have long since fully determined never to marry with anyone, were she as healthy as the Venus of Milo, for this dorsal trouble is evidently s’thing in the blood.” W. J. to R. J., November 14, 1869, Berkeley, *Correspondence 4*, p. 389.

Here, emblazoned by the chiaroscuro of reflective hindsight, James conjoined his fears of degeneration, physical determinacy, madness, idleness, and emasculation in a horrifying tableau worthy of one of his brother’s stories.

It was during the winter of ’69-’70 that James felt he, as he wrote in his journal, “about touched bottom.” He understood his crisis as physical and philosophical; he continued to have back pains and was “swamped” in a physical determinist philosophy. This abstracted a more mundane, but far more pressing, problem: William had reached a point of decision in his life; he could no longer put off choosing a career without publicly casting his lot with lifelong invalidism. He had returned from the disappointing German trip in October of 1868 feeling no better. His back still troubled him, and an apparently unavoidable fate in medicine still beckoned, awaiting completion. Seeing no other option, William set about preparing for his medical school examination in early 1869. After completing a routine thesis on the effects of “cold” on the human body, he took his exams on June 21. He was anxious about his preparedness, no doubt recalling the farcical graduation scene he had witnessed two years previously. There was little reason

---

72 The journal entry from February 1, 1870 reads: “a great dorsal collapse about the 10th or 12th of last month has lasted with a slight interruption till now, carrying with it a moral one. To day, I about touched bottom, and perceive plainly that I must face the choice with open eyes: Shall I frankly throw the moral business overboard, as one unsuited to my innate aptitudes, or shall I follow it, and it alone, making everything else merely stuff for it?” Quoted in Allen, William James, p. 164. By “the moral business,” James seems to have been referring to free will.

73 William downplayed his anxiety by making light of the medical field in general. “Next friday my clinical examination at the dispensary (wh. I tried to get exempted from but failed) takes place and the following monday the big examination,” he wrote Henry Jr., then, at last, in Europe. “The tho’t becomes more grisly every day, and I wish the thing were over. My thesis was decent, and I suppose Dr. Holmes will veto my being plucked no matter how bad my examination may be, but the
for anxiety as it turned out. The exams were embarrassingly easy; after asking him a single obscure question, which James answered correctly, Holmes said, “If you know *that*, you know everything; now tell me about your family and the news at home.”

James found the final completion of his near decade of work at Harvard hardly worth mentioning, noting in his journal simply, “June 21, ’69 M.D.,” between lists of non-medical books he had been reading and stating several pages into a letter to his friend Henry Bowditch, “I am forgetting all this while to tell you that I passed my examination with no difficulty and am entitled to write myself M.D., if I choose.”

While some of this was probably self-conscious distancing from a profession he shunned, James certainly expressed no interest after receiving his degree in actually practicing, and his successful achievement of the M. D. did nothing to relieve his physical or mental complaints.

If anything, his outlook grew more pessimistic. He was idle, living with his parents like his invalid sister, and left otherwise unoccupied, turned his attention to reading and bouts of self-pity and chastisement. Without an occupation or any
clear hope of one, his back troubles and fears of degeneracy mounted, looming like
the impenetrable walls of an isolated cell. In March his beloved cousin Minny
Temple died, underlining William’s loneliness and squandered existence.\(^78\) Then, a
month later, James penned his most famous journal entry. “I think that yesterday
was a crisis in my life,” he wrote on April 30.

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. For the remainder of the year, I will
abstain from the mere speculation & contemplative Grübelei in
which my nature takes most delight, and voluntarily cultivate the
feeling of moral freedom, by reading books favorable to it, as well
as by acting. After the first of January, my callow skin being
somewhat fledged, I may perhaps return to metaphysic study &
skepticism without danger to my powers of action. For the present,
then, remember: Care little for speculation/ Much for the *form* of
action/ [.]\(^79\)

---

Spencer’s *Principles of Biology* (1863 and 1867), Gustav Theodor Fechner’s *Elementa der
Psychophysik* (1860) and *Über die Seelenfrage* (1861). These books, all at least in part concerned
with the *Seelenfrage*—questions about the nature of the mind and its relationship to body, seemed to

\(^78\) In his journal on March 22, he wrote about his cousin, “By that big part of me that’s in the tomb
with you, may I realize and believe in the immediacy of death! May I feel that every torment
suffered here passes and is as a breath of wind—every pleasure too. Acts & examples stay. Time is
long. One human life is an instant. Is our patience so short-winded, our curiosity so dead or our grit
so loose, that that one instant snatched out of the endless age should not be cheerfully say out[?]" Minny, your death makes me feel the nothingness of all our egotistic fury. The inevitable release is
sure; wherefore take our turn kindly whatever it contain. Ascend to some sort of partnership with
fate, & since tragedy is at the heart of us, go to meet it, work it in to our ends, instead of dodging it
all our days, and being run down by it at last. Use your death (or your life, it’s all one meaning)....”

The passage is more important as a symbol of James’s struggles than as an actual watershed in his life. It was the ideological shadow of his struggle to shrug off his various ailments and hesitations and act, somehow, in life instead of observing. He had expressed very similar sentiments two years previously while still in Germany without the assistance of Renouvier.\textsuperscript{80} In fact, just as in Germany, this “crisis” led to no substantive changes in outlook or activity.\textsuperscript{81} After his brother returned from Europe, William stopped writing so many letters and his journal entries also grew less regular, indicating that he was, at least, not dwelling so morbidly upon his condition. But he still complained about his failure to recover promptly and expressed shame over his intellectual deadness.\textsuperscript{82}

A true turning point came two years later when, sometime in the spring of 1872, Charles William Eliot, William’s former teacher and now president of Harvard, offered him a one-year instructorship to teach a course in “Comparative Anatomy and Physiology.” In August, he reported something of an improvement

\textsuperscript{80} In May of 1868, after listening to a neurotic young American woman play piano sublimely, he wrote in his diary, “while listening to Miss H’s magic playing & the Dr. and the Italian lady sing my feelings came to a sort of crisis.... [The intensity and the perfection of the music gave me] an unspeakable disgust for the dead drifting of my own life for some time past.... It ought to have a practical effect on my own will—a horror of a waste life since life can be such—and oh god! an end to the idle, idiotic sinking into Vorstellungen disproportionate to the object.” Quoted in Allen, \textit{William James}, p. 149. Here he also felt his morbid melancholic musings paled in the light of action, suffering translated into beautiful production.

\textsuperscript{81} A week after the journal entry, he wrote to Henry, “I feel melancholy as a whip-poor-will and took up pen and paper to sigh melodiously to you.” W. J. to H. J. Jr., May 7, 1970, Berkeley, \textit{Correspondence 1}, p. 158.

\textsuperscript{82} In a letter to Bowditch from December 29, 1870, he wrote, “J. Wyman I have not seen since his return. Such is the state of brutal social isolation which characterizes this community. Partly sickness partly a morbid shrinking from the society of anyone who is alive intellectually are to blame however in my case.” Berkeley, \textit{Correspondence 4}, p. 411.
in his health to Henry Jr., and stated, "The appointment to teach physiology is a
perfect godsend to me just now. An external motive to work, which yet does not
strain me—a dealing with men instead of my own mind, & a diversion from those
introspective studies which had bred a sort of philosophical hypochondria in me of
late & which it will certainly do me good to drop for a year." That Eliot had
selected James—along with Henry Adams, John Fiske, and Oliver Wendell Holmes
Jr., all men for whom James bore deep respect—as one of his first hires in his
reconfiguration of the Harvard curriculum must have surely given William
confidence in his social identity. During the course of the year, his father noted
rapid improvement in his outlook and energy. Henry Sr. wrote Henry Jr. on March
18, 1873 about the dramatic change in William: "He came in here the other
afternoon when I was sitting alone, and after walking the floor in an animated way
for a moment, exclaimed 'Dear me! What a difference there is between me now
and me last spring this time: then so hypochondriacal' (he used the word, though
perhaps in substantive form) 'and now feeling my mind so cleared up and restored
to sanity. It is the difference between death and life.'" Although William stated
that the change was largely due to his readings of Renouvier and Wordsworth and
his abandonment of "the notion that all mental disorder is required to have a
physical basis," it seems hardly insignificant that a more permanent change in
perspective had only come with the belated—William turned thirty-one in 1873—

83 W. J. to H. J. Jr., August 24, 1872, Berkeley, Correspondence 1, p. 167.
84 Quoted in Allen, William James, pp. 179-180.
launch of a career.\textsuperscript{85} His recovery was furthered by his courtship and eventual marriage to Alice Howe Gibbens. Their 1878 wedding finally silenced many of James’s doubts about his fitness and his abilities to provide as man.

Whatever the precise physical or psychological roots of his afflictions, William’s oscillation between recovery and relapse expressed the tensions underlying his education and search for a career. His inability to find a calling or settle upon a social, professional self that satisfied his desires for personal growth and social status was probably not the cause of his illness, but it magnified the significance and effects of his afflictions. James interpreted his physical weakness as a sign that he was not fit for active participation in modern life. His indecision, then, was an expression of deficiencies in his constitution and character. This belief led James down a deterministic path; he was doomed to fail in modern life by body and mind. This became a self-fulfilling destiny until James was offered a job and found, much to his surprise, that he could succeed in a professional environment. His teaching post was not the calling he had sought—nothing could

\textsuperscript{85} In reality, the story was not quite this straightforward. There was one further wrinkle in the road to established security at Harvard. In early April, 1873, Eliot offered James increased teaching responsibilities for the next year, a position leading to a chair. After considerable vacillation, James elected to pass up on the job for one year, complaining that he was unsure about both his desire to commit to physiology and, of course, his health. He spent the better part of the next academic year with his brother in Europe, ‘recovering’ again, before, in the fall of 1874, taking the position at Harvard once and for all. Throughout the year, William continued to groan about his potential invalidism, and his mother continued to lament his “morbid” frame of mind; but this was almost a caricature of his earlier struggles, a final gasp of the old impulse to thrust his sickness in his own path. This pantomime of invalidity seemed to expiate some specter of doubt, fear, or pure sloth, convincing William that he really did not prefer the life of the perpetually sick—he did not enjoy Europe—and that Eliot really did want him to teach. Indeed, Eliot’s patience with James was remarkable and must have stroked William’s sense of his own importance and ability. See Allen, \textit{William James}, pp. 181-191.
have been—but the university was in many respects an ideal place for James. Within the academy he could continue to explore his diverse interests while enjoying professional esteem and social status. Furthermore, professional academia was still in the process of defining its character and attributes; professional and disciplinary distinctions remained fluid and opportunities for individual expression abounded. In the next decades, James attempted to carve for himself a professional identity within the university that preserved those values of his upbringing he still held dear. James expressed through his career his personal and spiritual growth and his intimate engagement with ideas. He created a professional world for himself and, in the process, an intellectual world for all people who shared his fears and concerns.
By the time James assumed a permanent teaching position he had already framed most of the questions and arrived at many of the intellectual positions that would define his career. He was determined by 1874 to be a champion for free will and a defender of pluralism from monistic assertions. These were hard won conclusions born from his personal encounters with physical and mental affliction, but these views and the weight he gave them also exemplified a seriousness of intellectual purpose lacking in James’s earlier education. This earnest engagement with ideas first became manifest in 1867-68, when James was recuperating in Germany, alone, an ocean away from the several father figures, such as Agassiz, Wyman, and Henry Sr., who had previously dominated his intellectual life. There, he began to cast his personal concerns about physical determinacy into the universal terms of mind-body relation, and he found in the new physiological psychology an exciting medium within which this theme could be explored. At the same time he became increasingly sensitive to the emerging tensions between mechanistic science and a philosophy of individual autonomy in act and belief. After returning to Cambridge and coming under the tutelage of a new set of mentors and peers, the broad, general concerns of James’s youth began to crystallize as a core set of values and commitments around which his mature work took shape. As one of America’s first advocates of the new psychology James
attempted to infuse the new discipline with these personal hopes and beliefs. James's development of a professional identity gradually became entwined with his vision for the new discipline of psychology.

James had been personally invested in the free will question for most of his adult life. He had worried that his periods of invalidism represented an inherent physical and mental unfitness for life in modern society. This was complemented by a social fatalism: James had felt unavoidably driven toward certain career choices he found personally unattractive. His interest in pluralism emerged more gradually as a response to the often paralytic ambivalence that had dominated much of his education.¹ Near his death, James recalled spending his youth in the thrall of the "monistic superstition."² Although he was referring specifically to the philosophy of Spencer, James seemed trapped during the sixties by the general belief that there was only one truth underlying all of reality or only one method for arriving at truth. This was the intellectual counterpart to his belief that he would either find a perfect career and succeed brilliantly or fail absolutely. His father had taught that religious revelation was at the heart of all knowledge, and though he

¹ In this context pluralism refers to "a philosophical perspective on the world that emphasizes diversity rather than homogeneity, multiplicity rather than unity, difference rather than sameness," a definition that aptly suits James, even though he approached the topic obliquely without philosophical rigor. As a way of understanding the world, pluralism traditionally represented an alternative to monism and dualism, but for James pluralism had even more important ramifications as an epistemological position in opposition to epistemological monism. For further definition and a brief history, see Calvin O. Schrag’s entry on "pluralism" in the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Second Edition, Robert Audi, general editor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 714-715.

² William James, Some Problems of Philosophy (1911), quoted in Perry, TCWJBV, p. 153.
respected and admired science, it was as the servant of spiritual exploration. But much of the science James learned at Harvard had nothing to do with God or the human soul; it focused, rather, on the physical processes of life to the exclusion of all else.\(^3\) In the works of Spencer, which James read enthusiastically, science and evolution were elevated to the status of universal truth and the immaterial spirit or soul vanquished. James magnified the competing views of his father and Spencer, erecting two mutually exclusive monisms, and he encumbered each with far-reaching philosophical and career implications.\(^4\) He associated aesthetics, wonder, and his father’s pre-professional gentility with the former, spiritualist course and science, materialism, determinacy, and his professional future with the path of Spencer. James cast his intellectual and career options as an absolute choice between the two; he felt driven by the demands of career and social identity toward the professions he associated with Spencerian thought, and he interpreted this as a corresponding abandonment of all those elements of the past he still valued.

Framing his education within the tensions he had marked out between past and

---

\(^3\) Asa Gray and James’s teacher Jeffries Wyman were religious men who believed their scientific work did not contradict their faith, but they also maintained that science needed to follow its own objective path toward truth without reliance upon religious explanations.

\(^4\) It is difficult to explain James’s tendency to view ideas monolithically, as inflexible universalities, without indulging in some speculation. Perhaps his belief that ideas were inseparable from the individual character of their exponents contributed to his unwillingness to make intellectual compromises; such pliancy might indicate a fundamental weakness of character. Also, it was idiomatic for James to approach his education dialectically, defining two apparently opposing positions and then attempting, usually without much success, to achieve a synthesis that made no essential sacrifices. Certainly an influence was James’s reliance upon intellectual models during his youth. Moving from his father, to Spencer, to Agassiz, James searched for an appealing union of character and conviction, and these thinkers tended to think in a relatively inflexible way James may have identified as strength—at least at this point in his life. Wyman was different, but, then, in his single-minded devotion to his laboratory, he presented James with a relatively limited future.
future, James often expressed overwhelming ambivalence toward new ideas and his scientific education. This was originally yet another manifestation of his doubts about his identity and calling, but ultimately his perpetual ambivalence became a philosophical problem he needed to resolve before moving ahead in his life and career. James's ability to come to terms with the all-important question of free will came to hinge upon his successful navigation of an individual course around or between the epistemological monisms he felt driven to embrace.

The strong connections James drew between Spencer's philosophy, evolution, and professional science were exaggerated by James's unwillingness to make compromises, but this grouping did have relatively wide currency in American society during the sixties and seventies. Herbert Spencer's philosophy appealed to many educated Northeastern Americans trying to understand the social and cultural changes brought on by industrialization, immigration, and class stratification. Spencer naturalized the process of industrialization, fitting it within a progressive, evolutionary scheme encompassing both the natural and human worlds. His "Synthetic Philosophy," though draped in the rhetoric of scientific law and deductive certainty, was an expository defense of his liberal political and economic allegiances. Competition in nature and in capitalist societies resulted in progress because the "fittest," in Spencer's term, survived or prospered under the

---

5 Spencer received his greatest acclaim in the United States, for a time surpassing the other great evolutionist, Darwin, in influence and fame. Indeed, many contemporaries viewed Spencer as the "Victorian Aristotle," the greatest intellect since Newton. Hofstadter, Social Darwinism in American Thought, Revised, pp. 31-50; Cynthia Eagle Russett, Darwin in America: The Intellectual Response, 1865-1912 (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1976), pp. 16-18. See also Bannister, Social Darwinism for an alternative interpretation.
stress while the weaker community members were forced to improve or die.

Increased complexity and diversification of function within an organism or a society of organisms were aspects of this progressive evolution.\(^6\) This reassured many intellectuals, especially those of the middle class, of the social beneficence of industrialization, laissez-faire economic policies, and increased specialization in labor and expertise. Even the war, so obviously destructive, might provide an impetus for national progress. This solace was not without some cost and some sacrifice of older beliefs and values. The Spencerian legacy begat a pervasive methodological monism—taking science as the model for all forms of knowledge—that many thinkers, including James, came to find stifling. Spencer’s assumption that human societies followed natural laws provided a template for studying and directing social organization based on a scientific methodology.\(^7\)

\(^6\) In Spencer’s own words, evolution was “an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion, during which the matter passes from an indefinite incoherent homogeneity to a definite coherent heterogeneity; and during which the retained motion undergoes a parallel transformation.” From First Principles, quoted in Russett, Darwin in America, p. 14.

\(^7\) The appeal of this sociological approach was an aspect of increased intellectual secularism in America. Although secularism continues to be a problematic theme within Victorian history, difficult to define or characterize, it is still a useful term, suggestive of one aspect of the broad, fundamental shift in Western intellectual history away from metaphysics and toward the sciences. This led, in historian David Hollinger’s words, to “the growth in size and in cultural authority of de-Christianized academic elites, and to the corresponding decline in the role played by churches in public life.” Not necessarily opposed, religion and science were increasingly separate, with science becoming the methodology preferred by most intellectuals for understanding and expressing truths about every aspect of experience, including religion. Even deeply religious scientists, such as Asa Gray, who went to some lengths to demonstrate that their work was not in disagreement with faith, were concerned to separate their science from their beliefs. One of the most appealing attributes of Darwinian evolution—and presumably Spencer’s universal evolution—for many thinkers was that it required no God, no \textit{deus ex machina}, to set the tables straight. Closely bound to the legitimization of many new professions, this shift was the most fundamental aspect of intellectual secularism, having as a consequence the crisis in religious certainty noted by many historians. See Croce, Science and Religion in the Era of William James, pp. 10-17, pp. 88-99; Gillis J. Harp, Positivist Republic: Auguste Comte and the Reconstruction of Victorian Liberalism, 1865-1920 (University
Spencer’s teleological evolution struck many readers as inherently deterministic, and the new social sciences, by attempting to reduce human behavior to predictable laws and analyze societies as objects in themselves, not as mere collections of individuals, presented an additional challenge to traditional conceptions of freedom and will. In principle, a science of society assumed that people as groups behaved in predictable ways that could ultimately be translated into the language of science and mathematics. Just as new economic realities changed the futures that Americans envisioned for themselves and their families, sociological models redefined intellectual conceptions of the relationship between the individual and his or her society within the modern community.

It was not easy for many educated Americans to delineate sharp boundaries between the evolution of Spencer and that described by Darwin, particularly in the 1860s immediately after the publication of the *Origin of Species*. Spencer and his exponents took Darwin’s work to elucidate one aspect of cosmic evolution, seeing

---

8 On the growth of social sciences, see Bannister, *Social Darwinism*; Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*; and Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science*. Ross, framing American social thought within a continuing dialectic of exceptionalism versus globalism, traces the fate of exceptionalism within the new social sciences.

9 This was not an uncontested transition. See Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism*. See also Leach, *Land of Desire* and R. Jackson Wilson’s *In Quest of a Community: Social Philosophy in the United States, 1860-1920* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1968), which looks at ideas about the nature of the social bond during this dynamic, often alienating, time.
in his arguments empirical validation for the evolutionary theory Spencer had previously devised. Darwin himself did little to dispel this view; although he did not apparently read Spencer while he developed his theory of natural selection, afterward he read Spencer’s *Principles of Biology* and was duly impressed, subscribing to the multi-volume Synthetic Philosophy and claiming that Spencer was “a dozen times my superior.”

When Darwin turned to the evolution of instinct and human consciousness in *The Descent of Man* (1871) and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), he displayed the influence of Spencer in many fundamental points. Both presented materialistic accounts of mind in the mainstream tradition of British empirical psychology, and Darwin followed Spencer in giving considerable significance to the Lamarckian inheritance of habits and other acquired traits of perception and behavior. Spencer’s teleological, Lamarckian evolution was in many respects less shocking than

---

10 Quoted in Richards, *DEETMB*, p. 245. The relationship between Spencer’s evolutionary philosophy and Darwin’s theory of natural selection is contested. Richards argues for a strong relationship between the two, while other historians, such as Paul Farber, are not convinced that Darwin looked at all favorably upon Spencer’s theories. See Paul Lawrence Farber, *The Temptations of Evolutionary Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). The reality probably falls somewhere between the two positions.

11 This may have been due to the fact that Darwin and Spencer both relied upon the work of the British empirical psychologist Alexander Bain when developing their psychologies.

12 This is not to suggest that there were no important differences between Spencer’s and Darwin’s views on human psychology and emotion. Darwin used a more rigorous method of argumentation, supplying amply comparative arguments between human and animal behavior. He also continued to give a primary role to natural selection as the agent of evolution and therefore attempted to give a more functionalist account of instincts, emotions, physiognomy, etc. Finally, Darwin never entirely approved of Spencer’s grand deductive method and sweeping conclusion, likely finding much truth in T. H. Huxley’s joke that, “Spencer’s idea of a tragedy is a deduction killed by a fact.” See Richards, *DEETMB*, pp. 185-330 and Robert Boakes, *From Darwin to Behaviourism, Psychology and the Minds of Animals*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 1-23 for a greater examination of Darwin’s originality and debts to Spencer.
Darwin’s theory, which was unadorned with any sense of directed development in nature. The Spencerian scheme echoed older, familiar evolutionary ideas and continued to leave room for design, albeit a design according to natural law and inevitability, not divine guidance. The Synthetic Philosophy appealed to many young scientifically-minded intellectuals as a philosophy and sociology perfectly suited to a scientific age, and for a time at least, the fates of Spencer and Darwin seemed entwined, rising together in popularity and acceptance.

James was among the enthusiasts for Spencer’s philosophy in the sixties, finding in it the antithesis of many of his father’s beliefs about nature and the values and goals of science. This was several years before James exhibited any real interest in the controversy surrounding Darwin’s theory. At Cambridge, James was at the nexus of the American debate over biological evolution, and in the

---


14 Spencer’s evolution was more widely popularized than Darwin’s in the 1860s, routinely receiving detailed treatments in magazines such as Popular Science. The Synthetic Philosophy seemed to appeal to people who lacked philosophical training. William James described Spencer as, “the philosopher whom those who have no other philosopher can appreciate.” William James, “Herbert Spencer,” Atlantic Monthly 94 (1904), pp. 99-108.

15 James, “Herbert Spencer,” p. 104. The generational aspect of James’s Spencerianism seems important. His embrace of a mechanistic and deterministic philosophy was a rejection of his father’s views and the values of his own education, sharpening the dichotomy between the two monisms.
Thayer Expedition with Agassiz, he indirectly participated in the anti-Darwinian cause. In spite of the spirited resistance offered by Agassiz, the spokesman for the relatively large number of American naturalists committed to pre-Darwinian models, a majority of scientists in the United States accepted the common descent and gradual evolution of species faster than in any other nation, save Germany. By the mid-sixties evolution had crept into the Harvard curriculum, and few prominent scientists continued to argue against the theory, at least publicly, by the middle of the 1870s. James, however, seemed uninspired by these debates, making hardly any serious remark on the topic until penning two anonymous reviews in 1865, his first publications. In notices of T. H. Huxley’s *Lectures on Elements of Comparative Anatomy* and Alfred Russell Wallace’s *Origin of the Human Races*, James displayed a clear familiarity with Darwin’s work, but he was cagey about his own views; he tentatively supported his subjects’ arguments but already seemed hesitant about the importance of evolution in understanding the human mind and

---

16 Numbers, *Darwin Comes to America*, pp. 24-33 and 43-48. Most of the scientists who might still have argued against evolution had died by the mid-seventies. Numbers studied the attitudes toward evolution of the eighty American naturalists elected to the National Academy of Sciences between its founding in 1863 and 1900. He concludes that three accepted transmutation before 1859; ten—generally the oldest academicians—never accepted the theory; the remaining academicians supported evolution by the sixties or seventies. See also Russett, *Darwin in America*, pp. 8-11.

17 James’s correspondence from this period makes no mention of Harvard’s most prominent evolutionist, Asa Gray or Wyman’s tentative acceptance of Darwin. The theistic interpretation of evolution staked out by Gray would seem at face value to find a compromise between James’s competing monistic positions. However, Gray’s designed evolution remained materialistic and, as a teleological approach, was perhaps more deterministic than Darwin’s original idea. If anything, Gray’s take on Darwin, which became widely accepted, may have added to James’s suspicion that Darwinism was inherently deterministic. See John C. Greene, *The Death of Adam: Evolution and Its Impact on Western Thought* (1959) (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996), pp. 301-303 and Michael Ruse, *The Darwinian Revolution, Science Red in Tooth and Claw* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 248-250 for a treatment of Darwin’s reaction to Gray’s interpretation of his theory. For more on Gray’s views, see Dupree, *Asa Gray*, pp. 276, 288-289.
society. While James praised Huxley's intelligence, the latter's strong materialism did not receive James's complete approbation. James argued that Huxley fell under the category of "systematizers," scientists who attempted to find data to match a pre-conceived theory. Wallace he embraced with rather more enthusiasm, and James seemed to have wholly approved of his use of Darwin's theory to argue against polygenetic theory. He also agreed with Wallace that the effects of natural selection on humans were diminished or no longer active due to the ameliorating influence of modern society. These articles suggest that, though James was a believer in the evolutionary theory by the mid-sixties, he may not have been as wholly committed to it as most scholars suggest. However warm his initial enthusiasm for Spencer might have been, his critique of Huxley indicates that by 1865 James's excitement for a "systematized" approach had been tempered by a contrary, negative critique of scientific monism and physical determinism. James had entered the phase of his education most marked by ambivalent feelings; he was an evolutionist and thought of himself as a scientist, but he was already skeptical of the materialistic determinism he associated with science.


19 James's close intellectual relationship with Agassiz, generally dismissed by historians, further attests to somewhat ambivalent feelings. James did not agree with Agassiz's inveterate opposition
His ambivalence became manifest after James embarked for Germany in 1867. James spent the time abroad exploring opposed theories, epistemologies, and methods without complete satisfaction in any single approach. This led to further indecisiveness, and he would later view the ensuing convalescent year as an overwhelming failure, an entirely wasted period of his life in which he found neither cure nor professional insight. Certainly in its superficial aspects the trip exhibited all of the hallmarks of James’s earlier academic experiences. Although he embarked promising to take advantage of the Berlin teaching laboratories to study physiology, his activities immediately marked him as a well-heeled invalid rather than an erstwhile student. He pursued his cure in Dresden and at the baths in Teplitz, Austria, while maintaining an active social schedule, and when he finally did settle in at Berlin, after getting off to a promising start, he abruptly abandoned his courses just before the end of his first term. Still, it was during the German
to evolution, but the anatomist’s stance also did little to diminish James’s respect for his abilities as a scientist and teacher. Indeed, perhaps the fact that Agassiz resisted evolution, along with his genteel values and behavior, appealed to James in a way previously unrecognized by the historical literature. Agassiz’s science, both professionally and in its content, represented an alternative course for James, one he easily conflated with his father’s vision of a non-materialistic, spiritualist science—in spite of the fact that Agassiz was, himself, not religious and was materialist in his scientific approach.

20 Allen, William James, p. 151.

21 When defending his choice to abandon Berlin for Teplitz to his parents, he rather weakly pointed toward his future plans: “I find myself getting more interested in Physiology and nourishing a hope that I may be able to make its study (and perhaps its teaching) my profession; and joining the thought that If I came to Teplitz now for 3 weeks, I cd. have still another turn at it if neccessary [sic] in April before the Summer Semester at Heidelberg began...” (W. J. to H. J. Sr., January 22, 1868, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 255). Although Teplitz did nothing for his back troubles, he was able there to at least take full advantage of his condition, substituting reflective melancholy and wide-ranging readings for the more ominous considerations of career and calling.
year—away from his family, friends, and teachers—that James began to express real inklings of an assertive independence in thought and inclination. For the first time, he began to regularly write reviews and notices for publication, and in his correspondence home he was a willing—even eager—disputant to his father's philosophical arguments. The German experience, while not in itself conclusive, laid the groundwork for the real insights James achieved upon his return to Cambridge in the winter of 1868.

When James arrived in Germany he still lacked the terminology and expressive framework required to translate his concerns and vague ideas into concrete intellectual problems. He began to find that language during his year abroad without sacrificing his intimate sense of the relationship between ideas and individual character. Up to that point, his education had been remarkably unrigorous, lacking disciplinary focus and any philosophical background other than that supplied by personal readings and casual conversations with family and friends. In Germany, James's study followed much the same pattern, but his letters home demonstrated considerably greater sophistication. His thinking became more explicitly philosophical; the confrontation between the two monisms was recast as an epistemological and methodological issue characterized by the opposed styles of British empiricism and German Romanticism, while free will was placed within the

22 This may well have actually been a written continuation of disagreements heretofore expressed in conversation; the Jameses had moved to Cambridge in 1866.
context of the mind-body relationship. This growth was spurred by James’s new familiarity with recent developments in physiological psychology, but his thinking was not limited to science or experimental results. Indeed, James’s understanding of the disciplinary future of psychology was already at stake as he weighed the merits of approaching the mind-body problem from scientific and philosophical perspectives.

In 1868, there was as yet no clear distinction between psychology and the philosophy of mind. All systematic philosophies presupposed or constructed some description of the way individuals understood their experience and formed ideas, memories, and abstractions, and psychology remained a subdiscipline of philosophy in university departments until the late 1870s or eighties. However the research pioneered by a brilliant generation of German physiologists, including

---

23 At this early stage in his development James understood the mind-body problem in unsophisticated and imprecise terms. He wondered if mind had an existence independent of body and if that mind had autonomy of action and belief or was simply determined in its choices by physical processes.

E. H. Weber, Gustave Theodor Fechner, Johannes Müller, and his student Hermann von Helmholz, beginning in the 1840s did much to break down the common wisdom linking psychological problems exclusively to philosophical modes of inquiry. Self-consciously distancing themselves from the methodology and theory of the *Naturphilosophie* tradition associated with German Romanticism, these scientists pursued a non-theoretical, mechanistic research program aimed at reducing physiological and perceptive processes to a series of physico-chemical reactions that could be described by mathematical laws. Their methodology was based upon the techniques of experimental physiology; they collected data from dissections, vivisections, and reaction-time measurements and attempted to find numerical models for their results. The assumption that mind could be best understood in terms of its physical processes and characteristics was at the heart of physiological psychology and was one of the key motivations for the establishment

---

25 This work was intimately associated with the unique structure of German universities, which placed greater emphasis on research seminars and laboratory exercises than any other nation's schools. Many American scientists spent graduate years in Germany working within this system, and the German model was the single greatest influence in the development of graduate research programs in the sciences at American universities in the late nineteenth century. Sitting in on physiology seminars at Berlin, James was essentially getting his first glimpse of what would be the future of academic professionalization back home in the United States. See Mary Jo Nye, *Before Big Science: The Pursuit of Modern Chemistry and Physics, 1800-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 8-12 for some general remarks on higher education in Germany. Lynn K. Nyhart, *Biology Takes Form: Animal Morphology and the German Universities, 1800-1900* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) deals more specifically with biology within the German university system.

26 See Nyhart, *Biology Takes Form* for a detailed treatment of the relationship between new experimental techniques and the *Naturphilosophie* tradition. The story is considerably more nuanced than I present it here.
of an independent psychological discipline more closely allied in methodology to the sciences than to philosophy.

James was never explicit about what attracted him to the new psychology. He was first exposed to the new physiological approach in the autumn of 1867 while sitting in on courses in Berlin offered by Emil Du Bois-Reymond, a contemporary of Helmholtz and fellow student of Müller's. Du Bois-Reymond's lectures seemed to imbue James with an immediate enthusiasm for the potential of a physiological psychology. He wrote Tom Ward from Berlin, "It seems to me that perhaps the time has come for Psychology to be a science—some measurements have already been made in the region lying between physical changes in the nerves and the appearance of consciousness—in the shape of sense perceptions) and more may come of it." He was so excited by this prospect, he made immediate plans to continue his education along a psychological line: "I am going on to study what is already known, and perhaps may be able to do some work at it. Helmholtz & a man named Wundt at Heidelberg are working at it and I hope if I live through this winter to go to them in the summer." 27

27 W. J. to T. W., November 7, 1867, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 226. James did not follow through with these plans. He briefly visited Heidelberg in July of 1868, but determined after a few days stay that he "should not have been able to stand the monotony of Heidelberg," and fled back to Berlin. W. J. to H. J. Sr., July 3, 1868, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 327. Wilhelm Wundt, who studied under Helmholtz at Heidelberg until the latter's retirement in 1871, went on to become one of the world's leading advocates of physiological psychology. His Grundzüge I and II, published in 1873 and 1875, attempted to place his physiological results within the context of questions raised by philosophical psychology. Wundt established the first laboratory devoted to psychological studies in Europe. No comprehensive treatment of Wundt's life and intellectual contributions has been written in English. For more information, see the aforementioned general histories of psychology and W. Bringmann and R. Tweney, eds., Wundt Studies (Toronto: Horgrefe, 1980); Hans Hiebsch, Wilhelm Wundt und die Anfänge der experimentellen Psychologie (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1977);
James had come to Germany in order to recover from a somatic affliction with psychological reverberations, and he was therefore intellectually attuned to the implications of this scientific psychology. Indeed, unlike medicine or traditional physiology, psychology engaged James at a deeply personal level, filling a void he had always seemed to recognize. As he considered the future of psychology as a discipline, he was weighing his own intellectual and professional prospects and inclinations; psychology seemed to offer James just the sort of calling he had sought in vain back home. James's assessment of the personal consequences of a mechanistic psychology—for free will and his own invalidism—mirrored his internal attempts to balance science and philosophy. Psychology became a sort of palimpsest, a point of connection between James's personal hopes and the formation of a particular discipline. Here, the undeveloped state of psychology was an advantage. James recognized that psychology did not exist as an independent discipline in the United States, and if he could manage it he had the opportunity to constitute a new field back home, to do something individual and unique. As a psychologist, James hoped he might stake out a distinctive career and a corresponding social identity that would satisfy his early cravings for personal distinction.28 James's crafting of a professional identity, for psychology and


28 James may have been hesitant about an academic career in general, though. In Germany, university professors had a respected position culturally and within political and civil society (See Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 14-42.) The status and role of academics
himself, grew to be inseparable from his development of a unique personal voice.

At the time James was still not sure where his psychology studies might lead him. After his sudden abandonment of Berlin, he remained cautiously optimistic about the field, but he braced his confidence with doubts about his prospects: “I have a (perhaps erroneous) suspicion that psychology is not à l’ordre du jour until some as yet unforeseen steps are made in the physiology of the Nervous system; and if I were able by assiduous pottering to define a few physiological facts however humble I shd. feel I had not lived entirely in vain,” he wrote Holmes in May, 1868. However it was not yet clear to him how this interest could lead to a career:

I shall continue to study, or rather begin to, in a general psychological direction hoping that soon I may get into a particular channel. Perhaps a practical application may present itself some time—the only thing I can now think of is a professorship of ‘moral philosophy’ in some western Academy, but I have no idea how such things are attainable, nor if they are attainable at all to men of a non-spiritualistic mould.29

In 1868, James clearly still saw himself as a man of a “non-spiritualist mould,” and he thought this would exclude him from traditional psychological study in philosophy departments back home. In any event, James still did not express

---

29 W. J. to O. W. H., May 15, 1868, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 302.
interest in a philosophical career. Shortly before leaving Europe, he reiterated the scientific nature of his aspirations and temperament, writing Ward,

> The fact is that I am about as little fitted by nature to be a worker in science of any sort as any one can be, and yet in virtue of that great law of the Universe already alluded to, 'miscent quadrata rotundis,' &c my only ideal life is a scientific life. I should feel as if all value had departed from my life if convinced of absolute scientific impotence.…

James’s caveat is revealing; he felt he was “little fitted by nature” for science because of his back problems, which effectively prevented him from laboratory work. As a man of “non-spiritualist mould” incapable of scientific work, James did not see any position for himself within the university. He did not know it at the time, but this ambivalent view hinted at the median path he would later strike between science and philosophy.

---

30 W. J. to T. W., October 9, 1868, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 346.

31 Given James’s background in medicine, his interest in the insane, his new psychological interests, and his doubts about his career prospects, it is somewhat curious that he never seriously considered a career in medical psychiatry; this was a “practical application” that was either altogether unappealing or did not occur to him. For James, though, who was uncomfortable about the lack of intellectual prestige and distinction in conventional medicine, the uncharted waters of psychiatry were likely too murky. Even if the medical treatment of the mentally disturbed did not hit too close to home—and his references to insanity indicate that it did—it is unlikely that the psychiatry of the day could have met James’s professional needs. Befitting an era preceding the advent of scientific medicine, psychiatry, and psychology, though still undefined as independent disciplines, were distinct fields with largely separate genealogies. Rooted in the study, treatment, and classification of mental disorder, psychiatry in the mid-nineteenth century was only just receiving increased acceptance and attention within medicine. Care and perception of the mentally ill changed dramatically during the early nineteenth century; reformers lobbied for more humane facilities, and doctors and physiologists attempted to discern the physical causes for mental disorder and create diagnostic and classificatory descriptions of insanity and its related diseases in an effort to better understand dysfunction and consolidate their therapeutic authority. However the most fascinating development in psychiatric medicine during this period—the discovery of the hypnotic or magnetic sleep and its use as a treatment for various psychic and psychosomatic distress—at first seemed to undercut medical authority in treating and understanding the mentally ill by indicating the non-physical roots of psychological problems. The association of hypnotism with spiritualist movements and with the surge of alternative therapeutics then emerging in competition with
While in Germany James still grappled with his monistic assumptions, and he saw physiological psychology as inextricably linked to only one philosophical tradition. The associationist model of mental development closely allied with British empiricism was particularly suited to a materialist presentation and methodological approach. Associationists argued that beliefs, ideas, and perceptive abilities were the result of the association of simple sense experiences, that there were no innate faculties of mind and consciousness. For instance, an individual was not born with the notion of space—the capacity to translate two-dimensional sensations into three-dimensional perceptions; this intuitive capacity was gradually developed through the repeated experience of running into things, holding objects, getting a sense of size through touch, and then associating these memories with the comparative scale of mental images. All mental abilities, ideas, and feelings, no matter how complex, could be broken into the association of simple constituent

traditional medicine fueled the mainstream medical community's reluctance to give magnetic sleep much credibility as a phenomenon or as a treatment. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the determined advocacy of hypnosis as a legitimate therapeutic by reputable members of the medical profession, like Ambroise-Auguste Liébeault at Nancy and Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière in Paris, changed this attitude, and a new generation of psychiatrists eventually emerged distinguished from most other doctors by an occasional reliance on non-physical diagnostics and treatments. In 1868, though, the significance of Charcot and Liébeault was barely recognized, and there existed no distinguished, or obvious, career paths for doctors specializing in 'psychiatry.' James was already aware of Liébeault’s work; he read his *Du sommeil et des états analogues* while in Germany and wrote an anonymous review of the book, published in the *Nation* as “Moral Medication,” demonstrating curiosity about the work and the possibilities of applying scientific method in the study of mental abnormality. But his interest went no further. See Henri Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1970), pp. 254-331. See also, William James, Review (unsigned) of Ambroise-Auguste Liébeault's *Du Sommeil et des États analogues, considérés surtout au point de vue de l'action du Moral sur le Physique* (1868), *Nation* 7 (July 16, 1868): 50-52. At the time, James felt "the article dealt with a matter still in doubt and only fit for physicians to handle" he wrote his brother, complaining that it was published in the *Nation* instead of the *Quarterly Journal of Psychological Medicine and Medical Jurisprudence* as he had intended. W. J. to H. J. Jr., July 10, 1868, Berkeley, *Correspondence I*, p. 53.
sensations. Similarly, most associationists stated that beliefs and values were based upon a utilitarian or hedonistic logic; the individual espoused ideas associated with the sensation of personal pleasure. A corollary to most associationist psychologies was a materialist account of mind and development. The arrangement of matter within the brain determined mental states; our association of ideas was a reflection of physical connections and relationships that developed as a response to external stimuli. Spencer was one of the most prominent inheritors of this tradition in the mid nineteenth century. His psychology recapitulated associationist ideas within the context of his evolutionary philosophy. Adaptation of the physical matter of the brain to environmental stimuli resulting in the progressively elaborate association of ideas conformed to both Spencer’s Lamarckian views and his linking of evolution with increased complexity in form and function. Spencer was aware of the German physiologists’ experimental methods and accomplishments, and he cited their results as evidence for his physically determinist conception of consciousness. For Spencer, mind was the product of predictable material processes that could be translated into scientific laws.32

Like many of his peers in the late sixties, James viewed the scientific perspective as virtually synonymous with empiricism, and during his year in Germany his enthusiasm for both reached its zenith.33 He understood physiological

---

32 See Richards, DEETMB, pp. 243-330 for a, perhaps overly, sympathetic and comprehensive account of Spencer’s psychology.

33 Shortly after his arrival in Germany, James carried on a debate with his father concerning some of Henry Sr.’s recent articles. Henry argued, “it is very evident to me that your trouble in
psychology in the terms of Spencerian associationism, and not coincidently, it was at this time that he also discovered a new attraction for Darwin’s work. He read Darwin’s *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868) and wrote two separate reviews of the book, one published in the *North American Review*, the other in *Atlantic Monthly*. These reviews were critical of Darwin’s method, suspecting him of relying excessively on “ingenious reasoning” instead of evidential support and pointing to the fact that there continued to be no law, other than that of chance, for the origin of variations. The notices reveal James’s assumption that the discovery of physical causes was the final goal of science, a belief wrapped up with determinist implication. Still, in his critique of Darwin’s “ingenious reasoning,” his dissatisfaction with scientific monism peeks through.

But in a letter to his brother Henry he expressed an altogether less equivocal understanding [my articles] arises mainly from the purely scientific cast of your thought just at present, and the temporary blight exerted thence upon your metaphysical wit.” In response, James acknowledged that an “empirical” state of mind dominated his current outlook, and with some relish, he suggested that this led him to an “atheistic tendency.” This points to the conflation in James’s mind of science and empiricism and also indicates how he contrasted this perspective with his father’s religiosity. H. J. Sr. to W. J., September 27, 1867, Berkeley, *Correspondence 4*, pp. 204-205 and W. J. to H. J. Sr., October 28, 1867, Berkeley, *Correspondence 4*, pp. 217-221.

The associationist model continued to provide the framework for research in psychology throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Wundt, Skinner, and James all positioned their work in reference to associationist ideas.

William James, Review (unsigned) of Charles Darwin’s *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868), *Atlantic Monthly* 22 (1868): 122-124 and Review (unsigned) of Charles Darwin’s *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868), *North American Review* 107 (1868): 362-368. These were the second reviews attempted by James while in Germany, coming after a review of a novel by Herman Grimm, and he was very insecure about his abilities, sending the reviews along to Henry Jr. for revision before having him pass them to the magazines. James’s renewed interest in Darwin may have been in part encouraged by the fact that evolution was more widely believed and discussed in Germany than in any other nation, however there is no textual support to back this interpretation.
assessment: "The more I think of Darwin's ideas the more weighty do they appear to me—tho' of course my opinion is worth very little—still I believe that that scoundrel Agassiz (sic) is unworthy either intellectually or morally for him to wipe his shoes on, & I find a certain pleasure in yielding to the feeling." 36 This rejection of Agassiz and everything, "morally and intellectually," that he stood for reflects James's determination, despite his doubts, to embrace the new scientific attitude he saw in Darwin, Spencer, and his physiology studies and to position his scientific hopes within this conglomeration of ideas. 37

Yet even as James expressed the conviction of his scientific and empirical cast of thought he was exploring alternatives, and within months, his attitude would change completely. Indeed, after returning home, he seemed to chafe under the conclusions he associated with an essentially physiological psychology. In James's idiomatic understanding, derived from the associationism of Spencer, materialist conceptions of mind usurped free will and led toward an inevitable determinism in

36 W. J. to H. J. Jr., March 9, 1868, Berkeley, Correspondence I, p. 39.

37 By 1868, almost ten years after the publication of the Origin of Species, the permanent impact of Darwin's theory was increasingly evident. The theory suggested a myriad of research agendas in many fields, and for young intellectuals, allegiance to the theory, often along with belief in Spencer's wider vision, was a way of distinguishing themselves from the past. Writing about himself, the historian Henry Adams expressed the appeal of evolution to young American men in the post-Civil War era and the general confusion of biological evolution with social evolution: "He felt, like nine men in ten, an instinctive belief in Evolution...Natural Selection led back to Natural Evolution, and at last to Natural Uniformity. This was a vast stride. Unbroken Evolution under uniform conditions pleased everyone—except curates and bishops; it was the very best substitute for religion; a safe, conservative, practical, thoroughly Common-Law deity. Such a working system for the universe suited a young man who had just helped to waste five or ten thousand million dollars and a million lives, more or less, to enforce unity and uniformity on people who objected to it; the idea was only too seductive in its perfection; it had the charm of art." Others saw evolution more optimistically, but the point holds. Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams, an Autobiography (1907) (New York: Modern Library, 1931), pp. 225-226.
character and action. Soon after his arrival back in Cambridge, he had written Ward, “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....” Now sounding much like his father, he saw materialist science as an enemy, criticizing the “priggish tone” of scientists who assumed “that no particular religion existing has any right to quarrel with the results of ‘Science’” and concluding with a determined, if unclear, resolve, “It is not that we are all nature but some point which is reason, but that all is Nature and all is reason too. We shall see, damn it, we shall see.”38 As James reached a personal nadir in 1869 and ’70, he could no longer live with any exclusively materialistic or physically deterministic psychological models. Such a position would confirm his worst fears about the inevitability of his own constitutional weaknesses.

Nevertheless, James remained an evolutionist and to a considerable degree mechanistic in his descriptive approach; what he could not now accept was a monistic arrogance in scientific claims. He felt that any philosophy that reduced all choices, beliefs, sentiments, and desires to the mere consequences of ineluctable physical responses, to “Nature” in James’s word, left no room for an active will or effective consciousness. Even if Spencerian monism was in some sense true, the idea was not compelling for James because belief in it offered no advantages in the

38 W. J. to T. W., March, 1869, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, pp. 370-371.
formation and development of character. The espouser of physical determinism was admitting to a defeatist perspective on the capacity for an individual to grow, to change and overcome constitutional obstacles; determination was a negation of James's personal philosophy of growth and self-discovery. It was this realization that released James from his "monistic superstition." He began to mold a philosophical approach to psychological problems that allotted an active role to consciousness and that incorporated the whole range of human aesthetic and spiritual experience. This was essentially a pluralistic perspective that took as a first principle that humans are both all "Nature" and all "Reason." James in 1869 was at the point of overcoming his ambivalence toward scientific and spiritualistic monisms by relinquishing his dichotomy and by reducing the monisms to elements in a pluralistic universe.

The groundwork for this change had been laid back in Germany, when James's scientific enthusiasm had been at its height. James later attributed his recovery from depression in part to reading Wordsworth; in Germany, it was his encounter with the works of another Romantic poet that first seemed to suggest to him the pluralistic position.39 James found in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe an antidote to his studies in physiology and British empiricism. When he suddenly abandoned the university in Berlin for the Austrian baths, James brought Faust with him, and he was deeply impressed with Goethe's ideas and personality,

39 Allen, William James, pp. 179-180. Ironically, the greatest of nineteenth century British empiricists, J. S. Mill would also attribute his recovery from depression in part to reading Romantic poetry.
particularly his "deep belief in the reality of Nature as she lies developed and a
contempt for bodyless formulas." He had read Goethe before and found him
unbearably tedious, but in Germany, the Sage of Weimar seemed freshly relevant.
As James now considered a future career in academic science back home, Goethe's
Faustian critique of industrialization, professionalization, and intellectual
reification, arguing that these processes eroded German culture and spirit,
resonated. In his writings and career, Goethe seemed to shift easily between
science, literature, and philosophy with minimal contradiction or compromise, and
James found this inclusive approach extremely appealing. As he wrote to Tom
Ward, Goethe was

a perfect natural born collector, as much as Agassiz, and he does
hate to lose anything in creation—but he has the intelligent glance
none the less wh. takes no time to discern the relative value of the
different planes of being....The man lived at every pore of his skin,
and the tranquil clearness and vividness with wh. everything printed
itself on his sensorium, and found a cool nook in his mind without
interfering with any of the denizens thereof, must have been one of

40 "Bodyless formulas" were precisely what James learned in physiology. W. J. to T. W., May 24,
1868, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 348. He read Schiller with great pleasure at this same time.
He wrote Holmes, "The possession of [Schiller and Goethe]'s lives and works by a people gives
them a great advantage over neighboring nations," and James urged him and Ward to read Faust.
W. J. to O. W. H., May 15, 1868, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 303.

41 In the simplest terms, this critique argued that the cost of industrialization would be a denaturing
of Germany's traditional national culture, which he felt was bound up with agriculture and the land.
As for reification and intellectual professionalization, these implied a specialization in study and
knowledge that ran contrary to Goethe's views about the unity of all knowledge. He also worried
that reification would obfuscate nature as it really existed, as experience in the world. The
comparative physiology James was studying had in many ways been explicitly conceived in
opposition to the Naturphilosopie scientific approach associated with Goethe. Goethe was himself
highly critical of the lab-locked culture of professional, academic science developing in Germany
during the early nineteenth century. It is unclear if James was aware of these additional tensions
between Goethe and the physiological methodology he then embraced. See Karl J. Fink, Goethe's
History of Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 131-132 and Nyhart,
Biology Takes Form, pp. 65-102.
the most exquisite spectacles ever on exhibition on this planet.... I have drawn from Goethe a special lesson wh. is not easy for me to define in black and white but which may be called a lesson of theoretical patience and respect towards the Objective.42

The lesson of "respect towards the Objective" James derived from Goethe was essentially a basic form of pluralism, and it was not easy to "define in black and white" because it ran contrary to the monochromatic vantage of his monistic superstition. Goethe's work encompassed the entire spectrum of life, not losing "anything in creation" and marking as genuine every experience the world offered. No single methodological approach—not science, philosophy, or religion—could circumscribe the range of phenomena within its boundaries.

The tentative pluralism James found in Goethe's writings also gave far greater significance to individual freedom in will and consciousness than associationist and physiological psychologies. At the center of Goethe's "objective" viewpoint was an "intelligent glance" that saw all while maintaining a unique sense of self.43 This apperceptive "I" infused experience with individual meaning and purpose without resort to preconceived theoretical assumptions.

Goethe's pluralistic naturalism began to emancipate James from monistic

42 W. J. to T. W., May 14, 1868, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, pp. 306-307. James expressed similar sentiments about Goethe at rather greater length in a letter to his brother Henry from June 4, 1868, Berkeley, Correspondence 1, pp. 50-51.

43 While reading Goethe, James may have been reminded of Emerson's "Nature." In that essay, Emerson began by symbolizing the self as a "transparent eyeball," knowing, "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." This was an objectivity similar to Goethe's. By the end of the essay, Emerson's self, having learned "the lesson of power" establishes the "kingdom of man over nature, which cometh not with observation." By opening one's self to the wide universe, one could master it; observing was a prelude to understanding and to acting.
thralldom, encouraging him to exercise his own interpretive abilities. This led James to explore a radical individualism that echoed both Søren Kierkegaard and James's near contemporary Friedrich Nietzsche. He wrote Holmes,

If God is dead or at least irrelevant, ditto everything pertaining to the "Beyond," if happiness is our Good, ought we not to try to foment a passionate and bold will to attain that happiness among the multitudes? Can we not conduct off upon our purposes from the old moralities and theologies a beam which will invest us with some of the proud absoluteness which made them so venerable by preaching the doctrine that Man is his own Providence, and every individual a real god to his race, greater or less in proportion to his gifts & the way he uses them?

James's expansive consideration of the will and the individual that emerged from his engagement with Goethe pointed toward his later discussions of free will and the role of great men in society. While at the time Goethe's scientific ideas seemed at odds with his scientific studies, James's thinking during this period hinted at his forthcoming resolution of ambivalence and fatalism. Mastering both demanded an act of will, an assertion of individual agency that overcame the influences of society and religion. James hoped to apply in his own life Faust's final wisdom, "Nur der verdient sich Freiheit wie das Leben,/Der täglich sie eroben muß."46

44 James had heard of neither in the late sixties. Nietzsche, who also admired Goethe, did not publish his first book, The Birth of Tragedy, until 1872. Cf. note 33, when James also flirted with atheism.

45 W. J. to O. W. H., May 15, 1868, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 303.

46 "He only deserves freedom and life,/Who daily must conquer them." From Faust, Part II, Act 5, Scene "Grosser Vorhof des Palasts."
Goethe left an evident mark, despite the resumption of James’s deterministic malaise back home. He continued to independently study physiology and psychology, reading Spencer, Alexander Bain, and Fechner, but he did so with a critical eye, taking particular note of these authors’ handling of consciousness. James did not question that mind was in some capacity physical, but his disaffection with the rigid materialism of Bain and Spencer was clear. Spencer he described as “at one time...bent on proving [the mind] to be a mere product, is down on space etc. as involving an intrinsic...quality, and yet on the other hand in his doctrine of the unknowable...he of course implies that all the qualities of thought are due to an original NATURE in the subject.” James highlighted the contradictions within Spencer’s philosophy, demonstrating in his tone and negative assessment a new disapproval for Spencer’s methods and conclusions. Although he still seemed to closely associate determinism with materialist science, by 1869, James’s infatuation with Spencerian monism was over.

47 By October, 1868, while still in Europe, his letters indicated the influence of Goethe and an anti-utilitarian impulse; “I am poisoned with Utilitarian venom,” he wrote Ward, “and sometimes when I despair of ever doing anything, say: ‘why not step out into the green darkness?’ But then I think that loathsome and grotesque as most of the results of my living may be, and innocent and desirable as the fermentation, and crumbling and evaporation and diffusion wh. will succeed them seem in comparison, yet interwoven with the former are some tatters and shreds of beauty that may as well last, as long as they have been formed.” Here, James makes an interesting and complicated plea against a reductionist view of the value of life. There is more beauty in life no matter how corrupted or squandered, James says, than in the material constituents and their processes of growth and decay. W. J. to T. W., October 9, 1868, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 347.

48 Quoted from James’s reading diary in Bjork, William James, pp. 86-88. He wrote that Bain, “seem[s] to think that we may give to representation primitively a merely physical existence.....” The tone of the excerpt suggests his incredulity.
The influence of Goethe was even more prominent in James’s reading of the French philosopher Charles Renouvier. He stumbled across Renouvier’s work shortly before leaving Europe; while impressed, James did not absorb the full impact of his ideas until the spring of 1870. It was then that he famously heralded Renouvier’s definition of free will—"the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts"—as a panacea for his intellectual and personal fatalism. Renouvier argued that the essence of the natural world was an irreducible pluralism of unique individuality. He maintained that free will was a direct outcome of this pluralist perspective; individuals might be subject to the influences of various external agents, but they were ultimately self-determining, free to select from alternative ideas and choices or even shrug off all external pressures to forge an individual course. People defined their unique individuality through the life and ideological choices they made. The real effect of these ideas

---

49 Charles Revouvier (1815-1903) is remembered more today for his influence on other philosophers, especially James and Henri Bergson, than for his own contributions to philosophy. Renouvier emphasized the indeterminate nature of reality, extrapolating from this an individualistic, pluralistic philosophy that rejected epistemological certitude and celebrated the autonomy of the individual. This was a response to and a rejection of many aspects of the philosophy of his teacher, Comte; however Renouvier was not anti-science. He maintained the universal applicability of the laws of logic and mathematics while also arguing against the ability of those laws to achieve any true certainty. For an in-depth introduction to Renouvier and his philosophy see William Logue, *Charles Renouvier, Philosopher of Liberty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

50 From Divonne, France, he wrote his father, “I got a little book by a number of authors l’Année (1867) Philosophique wh. may interest you if you have not got it already. The introduction, a review of the state of philosophy in France for some years back is by one Ch. Renouvier of whom I never heard before, but who for vigor of style and compression, going to the core of half a dozen things in a single sentence, so different fm. the namby pamby diffuseness of most Frenchmen, is unequalled by any one.” W. J. to H. J. Sr., October 5, 1868, Berkeley, *Correspondence 4*, p. 342.

51 See Ch. 1, p. 62 for the full journal entry.
on James's depression is debatable and was certainly short-lived, but the French
philosopher's thought did give lucid, clear expression to the vague anti-mechanistic
and pluralistic inclinations Goethe had kindled in James.\textsuperscript{52} James quickly adopted
Renouvier's philosophy as his intellectual ideal.

After receiving the teaching offer from Eliot in 1872, James worked up the
courage to write Renouvier and express his gratitude and admiration. James
thanked Renouvier for inspiring in him a new faith in the power of philosophy and
ideas to effect change in life.\textsuperscript{53} His letter identified Renouvier's impact with a
revolt against the philosophical hegemony of British empiricism:

Chez nous, c'est la philosophie de Mill, Bain, & Spencer qui
emporte tout à présent devant lui. Elle fait d'excellents travaux en
psychologie, mais au point de vue pratique elle est déterministe &
matérialiste, et déjà je crois apercevoir en Angleterre les symptomes

\textsuperscript{52} As discussed in Chapter One, James's spirits and health did not significantly rebound after the
"crisis" inspired by his reading of Renouvier. However he continued to impart an almost religious
importance to his encounter with Renouvier's work; indeed, in his later recollections, the 1870
moment took on a cast similar to the conversion experiences James would describe in \textit{The Varieties
of Religious Experience}. Much of the James scholarship has reinforced this resemblance, following
the precedent set in Ralph Barton Perry's \textit{The Thought and Character of William James}. For Perry,
Renouvier was the central influence on James personally and intellectually. This exaggerates
Renouvier's real impact on James's development as a thinker. More accurately, Renouvier, with
greater clarity than Goethe before him, distilled all of the contrary impulses James felt during his
scientific studies, and he came to serve as a figurehead—to James and James scholars—for a array
of ideas inspiring James's pluralism and his rejection of determinism. See Perry, \textit{TCWJ BV}, pp. 121-
122, 152-153 for his classic account of Renouvier's influence of James.

\textsuperscript{53} "Je ne peux pas laisser échapper cette occasion de vous dire toute l'admiration et la
reconnaissance que m'ont inspirées la lecture de vos Essais...Grace à vous, je possède pour la
première fois une conception intelligible et raisonnable de la Liberté. Je m'y suis rangée à peu près.
Sur d'autres points de votre philosophie il me reste encore des doutes, mais je puis dire que par elle
je commence à renaitre à la vie morale, et croyez monsieur, que ce n'est pas une petite chose." W.
J. to Charles Renouvier, November 2, 1872, Berkeley, \textit{Correspondence 4}, pp. 430-431. "I must not
lose this opportunity of telling you of the admiration and gratitude which reading your \textit{Essais} has
excited in me.....Thanks to you, I possess for the first time an intelligible and reasonable conception
of freedom. I accept it almost completely. Upon some other points of your philosophy I continue to
have doubts, but I can say that because of your philosophy my moral life is beginning to be reborn,
and believe me, that is not small thing."
d'une renaissance de la pensée religieuse. Votre philosophie par son côté phénoméniste semble très propre à frapper les esprits élevés dans l'école empirique anglaise, et je ne doute pas dè s qu'elle sera un peu mieux connue en Angleterre et dans ce pays qu'elle n'ait un assez grand retentissement. Elle paraît faire son chemin lentement, mais je suis convaincu que chaque année nous rapprochera du jour où elle sera reconnue de tous comme étant la plus forte tentative philosophique que le siècle ait vu naître en France, et qu'elle comptera toujours comme un des grands jalons dans l'histoire de la speculation.54

James is unequivocal here about his association of determinism with the materialist psychology of British empiricism. While he still felt physiology offered promising psychological insights, he now actively sought philosophical supplements to the scientific and empirical approach. Renouvier’s pluralism both justified and provided fodder for James’s compromise position between science and metaphysical philosophy. James did not reject materialist, even mechanistic, science outright; rather, he looked toward an epistemologically pluralist resolution to his previously divided commitments to the scientific and spiritualist monisms.

This position accepted a multiplicity of valid ways of understanding experience.

James found in Renouvier a philosophical complement to his scientific ambitions,

54 “Here, the philosophy of Mill, Bain, and Spencer presently carries all before it. This has done excellent work in psychology, but from a practical viewpoint it is deterministic and materialistic, and I already perceive in England the signs of a renaissance in religious thought. On its phenomenalist angle, your philosophy seems particularly suited to appeal to minds trained in the school of English empiricism, and I do not doubt that when it is better known in England and this country it will attract considerable attention. It appears to make its way slowly, but I am convinced that each year will bring us nearer to the time when your philosophy will be recognized by everybody as the strongest philosophical effort of the century in France and will forever count as one of the great landmarks in the history of thought.” W. J. to Charles Renouvier, November 2, 1872, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, pp. 430-431. Translations extrapolated from Ralph Barton Perry’s, quoted in Elizabeth Hardwick, ed., The Selected Letters of William James (New York: Farar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), pp. 89-90.
and he now considered the possibility of being both materialistic scientist and
individualistic philosopher, not by synthesizing the two positions into one, but by
embracing their differences. A pluralist experience demanded many interpretive
perspectives. Contradictions between different heuristic models were an
expression of the essential complexity of the universe and experience, not a sign
that one model was true, the other false. Renouvier’s re-statement of the pluralism
hinted at in Goethe permanently altered James’s own work and style.

Renouvier’s most durable significance in James’s intellectual growth was as
a catalyst. James continued to correspond with Renouvier throughout the
seventies; the Frenchman adopted James as his American apostle, and James’s
essays and reviews from the early seventies bear the clear stamp of Renouvier’s
influence and style. But more importantly, Renouvier began to equip James with
a philosophical lexicon and a vocabulary of ideas with which he could confidently
express his beliefs. This had professional as well as intellectual consequences, as
James now realized that he was primarily concerned with major philosophical
questions about epistemology, determinism, and freedom. Science, he now felt,
could be an avenue into philosophy, and a scientific psychology might, in turn,
point toward a new role for philosophy. Considering his future at Harvard, James

---

55 See, for instance, William James, Review (unsigned) of H. Maudsley’s Responsibility in Mental
Disease, Atlantic Monthly 34 (1874): 364-365; Review (unsigned) of G. H. Lewes’s Problems of
Life and Mind, Atlantic Monthly 36 (1875): 361-363; and Review (unsigned) of The Unseen

56 James came close, finally, to viewing science as his father had. Instead of science at the service
of religion, though, James placed science at the service of philosophy.
wrote in an 1873 journal entry, "I decide to stick to biology for a profession in case I am not called to a Chair in Philosophy... while carrying on a more general philosophic study.... Philosophy I will nevertheless regard as my vocation and never let slip [a] chance to do a stroke at it." He felt he had found a professional calling as a psychologist who transcended the disciplinary boundaries between science and philosophy, and he now worked toward achieving his goals. As James grew as an original thinker, he made ideas like pluralism and indeterminacy his own, but the self-consciously philosophical impulse in his career and thought first emerged from this engagement with Renouvier. As he recalled years later, in his posthumously published Some Problems of Philosophy (1911), this did mark a turning point in his growth: "[Renouvier] was one of the greatest of philosophic characters, and but for the decisive impression made on me in the seventies by his masterly advocacy of pluralism, I might never have got free from the monistic superstition under which I had grown up."

As James continued to contemplate working, at least temporarily, in the sciences, he still faced theoretical hurdles, not the least of which was separating Darwinian evolution from Spencerian evolution. He had earlier endorsed the Darwinian theory in reviews and notices. Since that time, he had become disaffected with much of Spencer's work and methods, and he harbored serious doubts about his evolutionary and associationist depiction of consciousness.

57 Quoted in Bjork, William James, p. 90.

58 Quoted in Perry, TCWJ BV, p. 153.
During the seventies, James began to find ways he could maintain his belief in biological evolution while dispensing with deterministic psychology. His task was made more difficult by the wide intellectual currency of Spencer's evolutionary psychology and the publication of Darwin's *Descent of Man* in 1871 and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* one year later. Both books demonstrated Darwin's debt to Spencer in his marriage of evolution and associationist traditions. But evolution and its consequences were foremost amongst the ideas discussed in James's immediate intellectual circle during this time, the so-called "Metaphysical Club," and his increasingly sophisticated understanding of the significance of Darwin's work was guided by the thought emerging from this group.

---

59 James built on ideas from the early reviews. Even then, he had attempted to stake out a cautious position, criticizing Darwin and "systematists" like Huxley for excessive speculation and undue haste in applying the evolutionary model to a variety of different issues.

60 One of the leading American advocates of Spencer's philosophy was John Fiske, a friend of James's and a fellow member of the "Metaphysical Club."

61 The only 'member' of the club to refer to it as such was Charles Peirce, who wrote in an unpublished 1907 manuscript, "It was in the earliest seventies that a knot of us young men in Old Cambridge, calling ourselves, half-ironically, half-defiantly, 'The Metaphysical Club,'—for agnosticism was then riding its high horse, and was frowning superbly upon all metaphysics,—used to meet, sometimes in my study, sometimes in that of William James." Quoted in Philip P. Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 19. For Wiener, evolution was the central issue for the "founders of pragmatism." He writes, "Out of the cross-fire of their opinions about the prevailing claims of metaphysical and religious interpretations of evolution, one type of question emerged more clearly and urgently than all the rest: just how was one to proceed in thinking through the tangle of scientific, ethical, religious, and metaphysical questions about evolution?" Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism*, p. 43. Louis Menand's recent *The Metaphysical Club* treats the club metaphorically. Menand uses the term to signify a generation of intellectuals—represented by Charles Sanders Peirce, James, Holmes, and Dewey—and their engagement with the intellectual crisis precipitated by the Civil War.
Given great weight by Charles Peirce as the birthplace of pragmatism, the nature of this group and its membership is shrouded in considerable mystery and myth. Apparently including Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., James, John Fiske, Chauncey Wright, and Peirce, each varying in the degree of their participation, the club was most likely an informal discussion group centered around Peirce and Wright in which current philosophical and scientific ideas were debated and, occasionally, original papers were read and critiqued. Most of these men had known each other socially throughout the sixties. Holmes was one of James’s closest friends at the time, and Peirce had impressed James immediately upon his 1861 arrival in Cambridge. From the Spencerian Fiske to the logician Peirce, the club’s membership represented the cutting-edge of Cambridge intellectualism. Within its encouraging yet abrasive confines, James honed his philosophical wit and cemented his fractured self-confidence, a renewal brought to fruition when Eliot included James among the young lions he was assembling to launch the new Harvard curriculum. Under the tutelage of Peirce and Wright’s razor-sharp, combative minds, James came the closest he ever would to receiving an organized training in philosophical method.

The discussions of evolution in the metaphysical club helped James to pare the excesses of Spencer from Darwin’s principal theoretical insights. Within that

---

62 He wrote home, “this year’s class is nothing wonderful. In last year’s there is a son of Prof. Peirce, whom I suspect to be a very ‘smart’ fellow with a great deal of character, pretty independent and violent though.” Peirce’s father, Benjamin Peirce, was a noted mathematician, astronomer, and Unitarian. He taught at Harvard and was known by Henry James Sr. through Emerson. W. J. to his family, September 16, 1861, Bekeley, Correspondence 4, p. 43.
group, the greatest figures—and the two most important to James's intellectual
development—were undoubtedly C. S. Peirce and Chauncey Wright. Both were
far and away the most advanced members of the club in their grasp of mathematics,
logic, and the history of philosophy and science, and they were the most
intellectually mature. Wright was the ringmaster; as Peirce described him, he was
“our boxing master, whom we,—I, particularly, used to face to be severely
pummeled.”63 Although Peirce and Wright each believed the professionalization of
intellectual work within the university to be an important and positive
development, they were both tragic failures in the academic world. Wright earned
money performing astronomical calculations and spent the majority of his days
frequenting the homes of his friends and, as the “Cambridge Socrates,” doing what
he did best—conversing with depth and wit. His brief forays in teaching at
Harvard were unmitigated disasters, his lectures displaying an excess of
professional zeal in their extraordinary density and complexity; he actually
achieved far greater success giving classes for women or explaining complicated
principles to children. Wright died prematurely in 1875 from a stroke likely
excited by his chronic alcoholism and depression. Peirce lived a longer, but hardly
more successful life. His affairs were in a state of perpetual chaos aggravated by
his legendarily spiny personality, unfortunate romantic liaisons, and desperately
poor financial planning. Considered too wild to be hired by Charles Eliot, Peirce

---

63 From Charles S. Peirce, “Pragmatism.” Quoted in Menand, The Metaphysical Club, p. 221.
was given a brief teaching appointment at Johns Hopkins through the advocacy of James. His courses did not go over well, and he was again out of academia. He also struggled to find publishers for his articles due to their extraordinary logical complexity and his awkward style. Peirce maintained a career at the U. S. Geological Survey office until 1891, but the 1893 depression and his inability to manage his money ruined him financially. He was only saved from complete penury by the continued financial support of his few friends, particularly James. Ultimately Wright and Peirce were casualties of professionalization, men whose personalities were unsuited to academic realities, regardless of their personal feelings. Their thought reflected this irony, forward-looking and exuberant about contemporary ideas while doggedly sticking by tried and true methodological values.

Chauncey Wright was an early and enthusiastic partisan for the Darwinian cause. Wright’s formal training was in mathematics, but he had a knowledgeable interest in scientific issues in general. He thought of himself as a devotee of British empiricism, and he saw Darwin’s theory as a triumph of that tradition’s scientific methods. In true Baconian style, Wright was cautious in his application of evolutionary theory, maintaining that it should not be used in social, economic, and historical fields without further evidence; however, he was also hopeful—indeed

---

64 For more on Wright see Paul Croce, Science and Religion in the Era of William James, pp. 157-176; Edward H. Madden, Chauncey Wright and the Foundations of Pragmatism (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963); and Wiener, Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism, pp. 31-69.

65 Wiener, Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism, pp. 33-34.
confident—that future experimental evidence would establish the hypothesis of biological evolution as a fact of nature with social consequences that might then be explored. Although Wright was not a pluralist per se, he believed that science and religion and metaphysics should maintain independence in method and function. Beliefs should not influence scientific work, and science, in turn, could never dispel faith nor provide it with certainty.

Wright’s views on the separation of science and metaphysics were primarily motivated by his qualified definition of knowledge; beliefs were not a form of knowledge at all, he argued, since they could not be deduced from empirical evidence. For Wright experimental science, methodological and based upon incontrovertible facts—and he did not question the validity of sensual experience—was the most successful epistemological path to new knowledge ever devised. Despite this, he was sensitive to the probabilistic nature of scientific theories. Diametrically opposed to beliefs, scientific explanations were always tentative, at best only probably true, and were suitably appraised by the research plans they inspired. “Facts” were hypotheses rendered almost certainly true by repeated experimental confirmation. Wright’s differentiation of belief and knowledge led him to dismiss Spencer out of hand as a betrayer of true empiricism. “The names of Darwin and Spencer are closely associated,” he wrote, “[but] no two names are more widely separated by essential differences of method.”

careful collection of facts, tentatively set forth a probabilistic hypothesis to explain those facts. On the other hand, Spencer, expressing a boundless belief in scientific theory, composed universal truths from a few facts and tentative hypotheses. By setting Spencer’s ideas as non-scientific views, essentially no different than religion, Wright facilitated James’s own delineation of Darwinian and Spencerian evolution and his separation of science from an inherent determinism.

Charles Sanders Peirce exerted a greater influence on James’s development than probably any individual save Henry Sr. Peirce was as erratic as he was brilliant, and his work in epistemology and the philosophy of inquiry left an extraordinary and lasting impression on American thought. James incorporated in his own work ideas on truth, objectivity, indeterminacy, and freedom that were directly inspired by his discussions with Peirce and his reading of Peirce’s works. At the center of Peirce’s thought was his rejection of foundationalism, or the belief that epistemology required certain truths in order to develop any useful knowledge. Philosophy had long ago rejected the foundational authority of

---

67 Wright probably would not have lived up to his own rigid standards of objectivity. From his first introduction to Darwin’s theory, he was “converted,” throwing aside the hypothetical nature of the argument, and he spent the last fifteen years of his life determined to prove the fact of evolution with complete certainty. Croce, Science and Religion in the Era of William James, pp. 168-170.

68 Peirce’s philosophy is notoriously multifaceted, complex, and opaque to cursory readings. I will attempt to focus as much as possible on his thought through the 1870s, the time here under study, and only those aspects of clear significance to James’s intellectual development. For a more extensive introduction to Peirce’s philosophy, see Robert Almeder, The Philosophy of Charles S. Peirce: A Critical Introduction (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980). For biographical information, Joseph Brent, Charles Sanders Peirce, A Life: Revised and Enlarged Edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) for a recent, comprehensive treatment. See also Croce, Science and Religion in the Era of William James, pp. 177-224 and Wiener, Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism, pp. 70-96. For an excellent, brief and clear, introduction to Peirce’s thought, see Vincent Colapietro’s introduction to Peirce in the reader, Pragmatism and
religion, Peirce argued, and replaced it in Descartes' day with that of human consciousness. But this, too, was misguided, he felt, doomed to someday wither under skeptical assault; a far more fruitful path lay in the abandonment of absolute authority altogether. Peirce believed that it was time for philosophy to leave behind the concept of certainty and search for new criterion to measure the value in new ideas. Calling his position "fallibilism," Peirce pointed out that "there is a world of difference between fallible knowledge and no knowledge at all," and he attempted to outline ways of justifying new ideas without reliance on traditional demonstration, incorporating the logic of new developments in statistics and probabilistic mathematics. To this end, he studied closely the process of creating new knowledge in the sciences, in philosophy, and, most critically, in everyday life. This led him to several key conclusions. First, inquiry was a necessarily communal process, based upon disagreement and agreement between individuals and between different intellectual disciplines. Second, within the community of inquiry, the criterion of truth was some stability in the group's general opinion. Third, new ideas were genuine exercises of creative spontaneity. However, inquiry was also inevitably based upon certain communal assumptions or "habits of thought," which could be critically revised or appraised, but never completely dispensed with.


Finally, for an individual, the ultimate test of ideas was experience; for instance, it
would be foolish, albeit possible, to question the relationship between pain in our
stomachs and hunger if we know from experience—what Peirce would call
"common sense"—that this sign meant we should eat. Whereas James had
intuitively linked ideas with personality, Peirce articulated this position as a
philosophical principal. Belief, he argued, was meaningless until it found
expression in active engagement with experience.  

Peirce’s rejection of foundationalism was closely related to his
indeterminism. Although he was an epistemological falliblist, Peirce believed in
an external reality governed by universal principals, one of which was a pervasive
chance. He identified his position as **tychism**, defined as the belief that a real,
unpredictable randomness underlies some occurrences. He felt that this idea, with a
corresponding rejection of physical determinism, was beginning to surface in many
contemporary branches of inquiry, including mathematics, his philosophy, and
Darwinian evolution. Peirce recognized in Darwin’s theory the application of a

---


71 We could never understand this reality with certainty, but this was beside the point to Peirce. Our inability to know nature in itself, as it really existed, in no way undercut the value in attempting to understand nature for ourselves and for our communities. Other metaphysical and cosmological principles posited by Peirce were **synchism** and **evolutionary agapism**. Synchism was, roughly speaking, a belief in a basic interconnectedness between particulars. Opposed to atomism, which identified reality as finally composed of discrete units, synchism maintained that continuity of units was irreducible; individuation of a particular was only possible in reference to surrounding units; therefore, individuation was derivative of continuity. Peirce saw in history movement toward increased complexity in thought and culture. Chaos and conflict were components of this process, but Peirce saw an inherent evolutionary tendency toward order, structure, and ultimately harmony. This evolutionism is somewhat reminiscent of Spencer, but for Peirce, chance was a vital, driving force behind progress. Furthermore, evolution was a teleological law for Spencer; Peirce saw it as a process leading toward no clearly defined conclusion.
new argumentative logic, one in fact not in line with the tradition of British empiricism, as Wright had claimed.\footnote{Wright had actually realized the problem for causation raised by the role of chance in Darwinian evolution but had argued, through the metaphor of weather, that chance on a microscopic level was neither synonymous with accidental nor necessarily implied macroscopic indeterminacy. What humans perceived as chance occurrences, he also maintained, might well be caused by as yet unknown agents. "[Darwin] has not said often enough, it would appear, that in referring any effect to 'accident,' he only means that its causes are like particular phases of the weather, or like innumerable phenomena in the concrete course of nature generally, which are quite beyond the power of finite minds to anticipate or to account for in detail, though none the less really determinate or due to regular causes." Chauncey Wright, "The Genesis of Species," Philosophical Discussions (New York: Burt Franklin, 1877), p. 131.} Darwin’s argument, Peirce maintained, was irreducibly probabilistic and indeterminate for two reasons: first, it had at its core chance variations—which were the driving force for all development in natural history—and was therefore not a predictive model; evolution could never be a law in the sense of the law of gravity or other formulas. Second, the time required for the process of evolution was so great that the emergence of a new species could never be observed or experimentally demonstrated; therefore, the theory was beyond empirical proof.\footnote{Croce, Science and Religion in the Era of William James, p. 198. This second point troubled Peirce; if experience was the best judge of ideas, how could Darwin’s theory be appraised if it was beyond experience?} In Peirce’s hands, Darwin’s theory emerged as a new type of science, one that was probabilistic in argument and eroded the age-old assumptions about material causality that maintained physical determinism. Peirce felt that Spencer and Darwin not only used different methods and maintained positions different in many essential particulars, they belonged to entirely different rhetorical worlds.
James found much of Wright’s positivism to be cold, empty, even nihilistic, and he perpetually had difficulty in comprehending Peirce’s arguments. Nevertheless, at the key moment in James’s intellectual maturation, these men, along with Renouvier, exerted a decisive influence on his growth, an influence that would prove extremely durable throughout James’s career. Spencer’s psychology would continue to be an obstacle for James as he crafted his own psychological vision, but Wright and Peirce had demonstrated that Spencer could be overcome without sacrifice of either biological evolution or scientific credibility. Indeed, Peirce’s tychistic analysis of Darwinian theory suggested that evolution might be put to uses unforeseen by Spencer, might, in fact, through its

---

74 Yet another philosophical father, Wright did not escape James’s Oedipal mania. In an 1875 review of The Unseen Universe, James argued from a recognizably pragmatist basis that the fanciful theory presented in the book was still worth stating: “[A]ny one to whom [such an argument] makes a practical difference (whether of motive to action or of mental peace) is in duty bound to make it.” He then offered, “If ‘scientific’ scruples withhold him from making it, this proves his intellect to have been simply sicklied o’er and paralyzed by scientific pursuits,” a reference, he later admitted, to Wright. Wright responded by writing in a letter, “One remains a boy longer in philosophy than in any other direction. [James] has been for some time…in a rebellious mood towards the views I argue for; and he has written many private essays or notes on the subject; and very unwisely committed himself to expressions of his animosity in published writings.” Quoted in Menand, The Metaphysical Club, p. 220.

75 Peirce maintained that James’s pragmatism resulted from a misunderstanding of Peirce’s own thought, but this was an old problem. In 1866, after attending one of Peirce’s lectures in logic, James wrote his sister, “[I went] to C. S. Peirce’s Lecture of wh. I cd. not understand a word but rather enjoyed the sensation of listening to [it] for an hour.” W. J. to A. J., November 14, 1866, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 144. Three years later, he informed a friend, “I have just been quit by Chas. S. Peirce, with whom I have been talking about a couple of articles in the St. Louis ‘Journal of Speculative Philosophy’ by him wh. I have just read. They are exceedingly bold subtle & incomprehensible and I can’t say that his vocal elucidations helped me a great deal to their understanding, but they nevertheless interest me strangely.” W. J. to Henry Pickering Bowditch, January 24, 1869, Berkeley, Correspondence 4, p. 361.

76 Metaphysical club member John Fiske must have defended Spencer in discussions, but one can only imagine the combined forces of Peirce and Wright were altogether overwhelming.
incorporation of a fundamental element of chance, open fissures in deterministic arguments. James, following Renouvier, had come to equate indeterminism with free will and individuality, and it was Peirce who made indeterminism a philosophically viable, even commendable, position for James, one that was integrated into a methodology of inquiry and even, perhaps, science itself.\footnote{James has often been cast as a critic of science by historians. This characterization has been put forth quite well in David Hollinger, “William James and the Culture of Inquiry,” In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985): 3-22. It is true that James, along with philosophers like Peirce, challenged the purported objectivity of scientific knowledge. This is best understood, though, as part of a general critique of certainty. Peirce and James both still felt science was a very successful and useful method; for Peirce, science was the best method of fixing community agreement ever devised. And as Peirce realized, science was itself changing as chemistry, biology, and finally physics incorporated probabilistic arguments and models that seemed to accept fundamental uncertainty. This is a point raised in Paul Croce’s recent work on James’s scientific education. Croce argues that James learned to question the certainty of scientific claims during his scientific education, that “James gleaned messages of uncertainty from the heart of science itself....” (Croce, Science and Religion in the Era of William James, p. 12.) I might only amend Croce’s analysis by pointing out that James did not seem to recognize the “uncertainty [at] the heart of science” until he fell under the influence of the philosophers Peirce and Renouvier.}

James’s pluralism, too, found support in the thought of Peirce and Wright. Like Renouvier, Peirce linked indeterminism with pluralism, both metaphysically and methodologically. The insufficiency of any single mode of inquiry to achieve absolute truths about the universe meant that a multitude of different methods and ideas could, even should, productively coexist. Wright’s advocacy of the purity of science and its incommensurability with religion and metaphysics suggested something similar. This served to reinforce James’s notion that pluralism was both a solution to his divided intellectual ambitions and commitments and a powerful substitute for his deflated monism.
James had changed a great deal between 1867 and 1873. His sense of fatalism and doubt, his gloomy fear of physical determinacy, and his ambivalence toward science and metaphysics had begun to recede. He was now an advocate of pluralism, indeterminacy, and free will, and he seemed more optimistic about his professional future, looking toward a career in both science and philosophy. His depression and physical instability lingered until Charles Eliot's confidence gave him a final push into the world of the working well, and he began to apply his training and energy in teaching and articulating ideas that expressed his beliefs. Once established as a physiology instructor, James turned his attention toward the new psychology. As one of the field's defining founders in the Anglo-American context, James was perfectly situated to shape the young discipline. Over the next fifteen years, James plotted a course for scientific psychology that reflected in aim and content his intellectual values and the professional identity he had been searching for since 1860.
"Let me repeat once more, that a man's vision is the great fact about him," James wrote in his 1908 essay "The Types of Philosophic Thinking." "Who cares for Carlyle's reasons, or Schopenhauer's, or Spencer's? A philosophy is the expression of a man's intimate character, and all definitions of the universe are but deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it." James's own work as teacher, psychologist, philosopher, and popular intellectual exemplified this insight. The hard-won lessons of his own experience infused James's ideas and style with meaning for readers around the world, making him one of the most beloved figures of his day. Having somewhat reluctantly embarked upon a teaching career, James came to make for himself a true calling in the modern university. He poured his personal and intellectual identity into his work, and, in turn, his work was an exploration of his identity, an attempt to understand the struggles of his past and present and, through the process of understanding, overcome them. The professional identity James created reflected the same ambivalences and tensions that characterized his personal identity, and his unique genius resided in his ability to transform his ambivalence into strength. His inclusive pluralism—which sometimes resulted in outright contradiction—and his sense of struggle and

discovery led him to the success he had once thought was beyond his grasp.

Ultimately, though, his professional success was unique; the course he envisioned for the professional academy, as developed in his psychological and philosophical work and his teaching, was not pursued, even as James remained one of the greatest icons of American thought.

In spite of James’s decade of professional anxieties, his success at Harvard was immediate and complete. Only three years after teaching his first class at Harvard, Eliot promoted James to assistant professor in 1876; in 1878 he was courted by President Daniel C. Gilman for the psychology department at the new Johns Hopkins University and contracted by Henry Holt to write a text on the new science of psychology. In 1880 James claimed his coveted position in the philosophy department, and earned a promotion to professor of psychology five years later. Soon thereafter, he was widely recognized within the Harvard community as one of the best teachers at the university and as one of America’s most promising scholars. James still sometimes complained of physical ailments and depression, but these inconveniences no longer paralyzed his will to work or

---


3 In one of his many apparently contradictory stands, James still argued that “it was time for psychology to become a science,” but insisted that it was properly taught in the philosophy department. This only reinforces his statement, from 1873, that “Philosophy I will...regard as my vocation and never let slip [a] chance to do a stroke at it” (see Chapter Two, note 57). For James, science was a way of exploring great philosophical questions, and this was especially true of psychology.
upset his sense of self-worth. Having finally made the long-delayed and feared leap into a career in 1873, James shrugged off his remaining doubts and forged ahead with, at long last, apparent purpose. Struggle now fueled his work, serving as a backdrop for his passionate defense of free will, belief, and pluralism. As he successfully laid claim to professional identities as teacher, psychologist, and philosopher, James's fears of madness and invalidism receded.

James's intellectual and professional coming-of-age was entwined with the maturation of psychology as a discipline and of Harvard as an institution. He became Harvard's most famous teacher in a period of intense institutional reform; he became one of America's most prominent public intellectuals when what it meant to be an "intellectual" was redefined in the context of professionalization; and he was, arguably, the first psychologist in the United States. In each case, he developed identities grounded in the intellectual resolutions to his formative philosophical and personal dilemmas. Despite James's great success within professional academia, the identities he proposed existed, in many respects, outside of the culture of professionalization. He successfully resisted identification with any specialized profession; indeed, his published work consistently exploded the very idea of specialization, incorporating a variety of sources and methodologies, appealing to a general readership, and engaged more with the problems of lived experience than esoteric disciplinary questions. And, although James became one of Harvard's most famous ambassadors and educators, impressing a new generation of American leaders—such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Theodore Roosevelt—and the
large international audiences of his books, essays, and lectures with the character of America’s greatest university, he also became increasingly critical of the direction Harvard was taking toward professional, technical training. James was a professional academic and, unlike his friend Peirce, a highly successful one; but he never completely abandoned the genteel intellectual ideal instilled in him by his father and reinforced by Agassiz and his readings of Goethe. Ultimately, this element of anachronism was, in many respects, the key to James’s success. His contradictions, which he so eloquently and passionately expressed, spoke to the fears of an age in transition and to a bourgeois ambivalence that mirrored his own.

It was James’s intimate understanding of the problems contemporary American society could present for the individual that constituted the greatest source of his broad appeal. Many thinkers in the United States, as well as visitors from Europe, acknowledged that life in the industrial age was fraught with unprecedented psychological peril. The speed of modern life and the rapid pace of change appeared to assault individuals with unprecedented stresses threatening physical and mental collapse. George M. Beard’s 1881 depiction of an epidemic of neurasthenia in the middle classes, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and*

---


5 Even Herbert Spencer warned Americans in 1882 that the “high pressure” of modern life could cause “feeble health and decreased ability to enjoy life.” Henry Adams felt that the elite classes were constitutionally incapable of keeping pace with modern life, dooming them to become “just jellyfish, and flabby all through... as defunct as the dodo.” See Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher*, pp. 74-76.
Consequences, seemed to confirm many Americans’ worst fears.\textsuperscript{6} This angst was compounded by the dark underbelly of the superficial faith in progress: the twin terrors of individual degeneration and social decay.\textsuperscript{7} Individuals who failed to keep up with industrial change faced the fear that they might be somehow essentially unfit for modernity; on the other hand, full engagement with capitalist struggle seemed to require an abandonment of traditional beliefs in religion, moral responsibility, individuality, and community that seemed equally imperiling for American identity. James’s own experiences with physical and mental exhaustion made him highly sympathetic to concerns about finding a healthy and satisfying identity within modernity, and his attempts to address these issues resonated with a broad, literate public.\textsuperscript{8} As a professor and writer, James found that his ambivalence toward modern society, far from distinguishing him from his peers, was exceptionally timely, tapping into a vein of anxiety lurking just beneath the gild of progress, and with this realization he fluidly assumed the mantle of Emerson as public intellectual. It was a role James embraced, particularly after he had already

\textsuperscript{6} Neurasthenia was viewed as a particularly middle and upper class problem, but it was the working classes who were most affected by the alienating nature of modern labor. See Rodgers, \textit{The Work Ethic in Industrial America}.


\textsuperscript{8} James came to see himself as a typical neurasthenic in the 1890s. In an 1895 letter, he wrote, “I am a victim of neurasthenia, and of the sense of hollowness and unreality that goes with it.” William James to George H. Howison, July 17, 1895, James, \textit{Letters II}, pp. 22-23.
established himself professionally. All of his major works were aimed at a public readership and were steeped in contemporary cultural and individual struggles; one of James’s defining characteristics as a writer was his command of vernacular and anecdote, rhetorically grounding his ideas in everyday life.

James was among the last great public philosophers. One of the byproducts of professionalization and its creation of closed intellectual communities with particular languages of expertise was a denigration of works addressed to the public. This trend contradicted James’s idea of the purpose of intellectual work. He felt that scholars should explore ideas that would make a difference in everyday life, and he was suspicious of what he saw as excessive reification and specialization because such work did not seem to engage with the needs of living and working people. As James grew comfortable with his professional position, he ironically became increasingly at ease with his own discomforts with the

---

9 After 1890, James was in great demand as a public lecturer on a wide variety of topics. Most of these lectures were to a middle class, intellectual elite, but he also spoke to crowds of “[g]reat hulking rustics from prairie farms, with their thick hands” and on the Chautauqua circuit. W. J. to H. J. Jr., July 12, 1905. Quoted in Cotkin, William James, Public Philosopher, p. 12. James’s readers came from a variety of classes and backgrounds. A survey made by the St. Louis Public Library in the early 1930s indicated that James’s books were being read by “a trunk maker, machinist, stenographer, retired farmer, clerk, three wives, two physicians, a salesman, and a post office worker.” Quoted in Cotkin, William James, Public Philosopher, p. 12.

10 George Santayana described the nineteenth century intellectual as “clergymen without a church...at once genuine philosophers and popular professors;” but he felt that catering to the tastes and interests of the public harmed the prestige of the intellectual disciplines. His back-handed compliment that James “had a prophetic sympathy with the dawning sentiments of the age, with the moods of the dumb majority,” reflects this view. See George Cotkin, “Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James as Public Philosophers,” Historian 49 (November, 1986): 49-63.
professionalization of academic life in general. He mistrusted the Ph.D., which he never earned, as a badge of expertise and professional membership because he felt it encouraged extreme specialization and awarded conformity over creativity. Intellectual professionalization, he feared, was contributing to the rise of a crude positivism or scientism—the belief that science provided the only true knowledge throughout the academy as new disciplines attempted to tap into the prestige of the sciences. Only a variegated and plural knowledge, in methodology and content, could accurately capture the diversity of experiences, James reasoned. In 1903, James gave vent to his frustrations with “The Ph.D. Octopus.”

11 In reality, his relationship with professionalization cannot be easily reduced to such a summary statement. While James disliked specialization and resisted categorization in his own work and life, he also advocated, in his own way, distinct fields of expertise for different disciplines. This was one aspect of his epistemological pluralism. James felt that philosophy and science, for instance, should retain distinct methodological identities. For James, the most dangerous aspect of apparent specialization was that such distinctions were, in fact, falling away as all academic disciplines allied themselves with science.

12 James’s resistance to scientific monism dates back, of course, to his rejection of Spencer. A critique of scientism became a cornerstone of his intellectual work. In his 1878 lectures at Johns Hopkins, James challenged all science that claimed “a vast and fundamental theory” of materialism. He feared this was becoming all too common: “Now physics and chemistry are running together, whilst geology, zoology, astronomy and human history all seem to be coalescing into a vast system called the theory of evolution, whose aims whatsoever they may be are not modest, and to whose results no laboratory verification but only the large vague circumstantial evidence can be applied.” From James’s notes, quoted in Bjork, William James, pp. 110-111. James’s Will to Believe (1896), comprising essays written from 1879-1896, was in large part a critique of scientism, or the dominance of science in all modes of thought, which James was careful to distinguish from science. In 1904, he wrote L. T. Hobhouse that, “In [The Will to Believe] the evil shape was a vision of ‘Science’ in the form of obstruction, priggishness and sawdust, lording it over all.” W. J. to L. T. Hobhouse, August 12, 1904, quoted in Perry, TC WJB V, p. 215. See also William James, The Will to Believe, pp. 52-56.

13 James complained, when discussing the state of philosophy in America, that “physical science is becoming so speculative and audacious in its constructions, and at the same time so authoritative, that all doctrines find themselves, willy-nilly, compelled to settle their accounts and make new treaties with it.” William James, “The Teaching of Philosophy in Our Colleges,” quoted in Wilson, Science, Community, and the Transformation of American Philosophy, p. 36. See this book for further discussion of these developments.
In an article in the *Harvard Monthly*, he railed against the increasingly common requirement that university faculty possess the degree. By transferring “accredited value from essential manhood to an outward badge,” the emphasis placed on the Ph.D. stifled creativity and natural talent, James argued, and shifted the focus of education away from general learning and self-discovery and toward high specialization and test preparation. More perniciously, the “Mandarin disease” threatened to develop into “a tyrannical Machine with unforeseen powers of exclusion and corruption.” In the face of the dominant importance placed on titles in academia, James feared that the individual thinker might find his creativity swallowed by specialized, professional conformity.14

The critique of society as a “tyrannical Machine” threatening individual identity expressed in microcosm James’s concerns about the dangers life in industrial America presented for individual self-determination and health. James believed that it was the task of intellectuals to address this problem. James did not celebrate any specific tradition of intellectualism or idealize the Harvard of his youth. Far from it—His sensitivity to the deficiencies of his own Harvard

---

14 The gendered nature of James’s critique reveals his association of masculinity with independence and creativity and indicates that he viewed academic professionalization as, in some sense, emasculating. Earning a Ph.D. forced men to sacrifice their “essential,” basic masculine identities in favor of an implicitly effete, conformist professional identity. Of course, James did not have a Ph.D., so his “essential manhood” was presumably intact, but the views he expressed in “The Ph.D. Octopus” and other writings suggest that he viewed the academic life as essentially unmanly, at least in its current form. James hoped to present an alternative identity of intellectualism that preserved the qualities he associated with manhood—strength, creativity, individuality, and practicality. William James, “The Ph.D. Octopus” (March, 1903) reprinted in William James, *The Essential Writings*, Bruce W. Wilsbire, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), pp. 343-348. In this critique, James may have been thinking of his friends Peirce and Wright—two casualties of academic professionalism.
education made him immediately in tune with Charles Eliot’s vision of a new Harvard. Rather, James’s public philosophy was an attempt to bring those intellectual traditions that he did value—individuality, creative genius, and broad knowledge—into the industrial age. He envisioned American intellectuals following a path other than the one professionalization would eventually take, but one equally immersed in the culture and rhetoric of work, social utility, and progress.\textsuperscript{15} James hoped the new intellectuals might form an aristocracy of genius—experts through innate ability and experience, not through specialized knowledge—who through a sense of noblesse oblige would use their superior faculties to help individuals resolve the existential malaise he associated with modernity.\textsuperscript{16} It was the task of the intellectual to grapple with this malaise, in whatever form it took, personally and intellectually, and then convey the results of the struggle.\textsuperscript{17} This was the primary task James set for himself as an educator. His

\textsuperscript{15} For more on changing ideas about work and social utility, see Cotkin, Reluctant Modernism; Gilbert, Work without Salvation: America’s Intellectuals and Industrial Alienation, 1880-1910; Perry, Intellectual Life in America, pp. 261-378; and Rodgers, The Work Ethic in Industrial America.

\textsuperscript{16} In an essay “On the Social Value of the College-Bred,” James wrote, “In our democracy, where everything else is so shifting, we alumni and alumnae of colleges are the only permanent presence that corresponds to the aristocracy in older countries….our motto, too, is noblesse oblige; and, unlike them, we stand for ideal interests solely, for we have no corporate selfishness and wield no powers of corruption. We ought to have our own class consciousness.” Quoted in Gilbert, Work without Salvation, p. 192. James hoped his work would help all Americans, but he did not have much, if any, experience with people outside the educated middle and upper classes, at least until he met the “rustics” on the lecture circuit. Although his work did find a relatively large and diverse audience, the educated middle and upper classes remained his primary audience.

\textsuperscript{17} As Jacques Barzun, George Cotkin, and Ralph Barton Perry have noted, there was a pronounced heroic element in James’s conception of the individual and the intellectual. The individual gained self-definition and self-knowledge through a grappling with the pressures of their society. See Jacques Barzun, A Stroll with William James (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), pp. 268-276; Cotkin, William James, Public Philosopher; and Perry, TCWJBV, pp. 224-226.
classes, like his books and lectures, were designed to help his students develop the intellectual resources to cope with the demands of modernity and develop their own identities. This could be achieved by instilling in them a rugged sense of engagement with ideas and their own character. "What doctrines students take from their teachers are of little consequence provided they catch from them the living, philosophic attitude of mind, the independent, personal look at all the data of life, and the eagerness to harmonize them," James wrote in 1876. James associated his recovery from depression and development of a satisfying identity with a renewed sense of active engagement with ideas. He hoped, by encouraging in his students the same attitude, to give them similar benefits.

Students’ reactions to his classes were remarkably consistent: Unorthodox and erratic, James was nonetheless a born teacher. His vast scientific, philosophical, and literary knowledge was always clear; but students were most struck by his personal style and his unrivalled talent for making the most complicated ideas relevant to his students’ lives. In 1880, the Advocate urged all undergraduates to arrange their schedules in order to attend James’s physiology lectures because, besides the intrinsic importance of the topic, “Professor James’s

---


19 Ralph Barton Perry, one of James’s former students, said of his mentor, “Since no method stood between James and his students, his teaching was essentially a personal relation infused with his personal qualities. His humor, his playful exaggeration, directness, above all his generosity and comradeship, made him loved by his students and by his friends.” Perry, TCWJBV, p. 327.
faculty of making a subject interesting is so well known." This facility was in large part derived from his spontaneous style of running class. He prepared no lectures for his courses. Instead, he engaged his students directly in conversation, giving them the sense that he was re-exploring the material in each session and grappling with the ideas alongside them. "Prepare yourself in the subject so well that it shall be always on tap," he advised teachers; "then in the class-room, trust your spontaneity and fling away all farther care." He encouraged his students to argue with him and seemed willing to consider alternate opinions. James was widely recognized as both the greatest advocate and representative of the new Harvard ideal of tough, decisive, practical, and intellectually flexible thinking. As one admirer stated, it was the "unacademic qualities of William James [that made him] our leading academician." James was suspicious of passive thinking.

---


21 William James, Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals (1899) in Gerald E. Myers, ed., William James: Writings, 1878-1899 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 837. The downside of James's style was his tendency to occasionally allow his mind to wander off track; it was not unheard of for James to suddenly dismiss class early in a fit of confusion. See Townsend, Manhood at Harvard, pp. 159-163.

22 Walter Lippmann described James as "perhaps the most tolerant man of our generation...He listened for truth from anywhere, and in any form. He listened for it from a pulpit, a throne, or a soap-box; in the language of science, in slang, in fine rhetoric, or in the talk of a ward boss." Walter Lippmann, "An Open Mind: William James," Everybody's Magazine 23 (December, 1910), p. 801.

23 James's colleague, George Palmer, wrote him in 1900, "Because of men like you, Harvard is now taking a chief place in shaping the ideals of this country," and Josiah Royce celebrated James as "the prophet of the nation that is to be," the "representative" of contemporary America's best aspirations. Quoted in Townsend, Manhood at Harvard, pp. 169-170.

24 Quoted in Veysey, The Emergence of the American University; p. 420.
in the classroom; for him, education was rooted in the active struggles of daily existence, and the university experience should help boys become men. He tried, in short, to imbue his teaching with a nurturing toughness his own education had lacked. If James saw any irony in his stance against excessive intellectualization or in the fact that colleagues viewed him as an ideal guide for maturing young men, he kept it to himself.

25 He associated his own depression, in part, to excessive contemplation—of course, he also attributed his recovery to thinking. James conceived of two different kinds of mental activity, one passive, the other active. Contemplation or speculation—thought abstracted from life—was passive and potentially harmful. In his classes, James hoped to inspire thought that was engaged with experience and might lead to action. "Care little for speculation/ Much for the form of action/" he exhorted. In two early articles from 1875, a review of George Henry Lewes's Problems of Life and Mind and a review of Edmund Pfleiderer's Der Modern Pessimismus, James further developed his mild critique of speculation. If too much thinking interfered with acting in life, it was an indulgence no better than acting without thinking, James argued. This was an early expression of James's attempts to create a positive intellectual position that avoided paralytic skepticism. See William James, "Lewes's Problems of Life and Mind (1875)," Atlantic Monthly 36 (1875): 361-363, reprinted in William James, Collected Essays and Reviews (1920), Ralph Barton Perry, ed. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1969): 4-11 and William James, "German Pessimism," Nation 21 (1875): 233-234, reprinted in James, Collected Essays and Reviews: 12-19.

26 James advocated decreasing the standard undergraduate course of study to three years in order to prevent students from developing idle habits. Perry, TCWJBV, p. 243. In an 1891 article in the Harvard Monthly, James argued that a Harvard undergraduate education was nearly ideal as an "agent in the formation of character." He went on to describe the limits of coursework and excessive intellectualization in the development of men: "These excellent fellows [the average Harvard student] need contact of some sort with the fighting side of life, with the world in which men and women earn their bread and butter and live and die; there must be the scent of blood, so to speak, upon what you offer them, or else their interest does not wake up; the blood that is shed in our Electives, fails to satisfy them very long." Quoted in Townsend, Manhood at Harvard, p. 168. Elsewhere, he wrote, "Sweat and effort, human nature strained to its uttermost and on the rack, yet getting through alive, and then turning its back on its success to pursue another more rare and arduous still—this is the sort of thing the presence of which inspires us." Quoted in Rodgers, The Work Ethic in Industrial America, p. 100. By giving his students the habit of energy, he hoped they would be less susceptible to nervous exhaustion.

27 James had not wanted for role models at school; but men like Agassiz, Wyman, Henry Sr., and Wright did not set examples of adult, intellectual, and professional identities that seemed feasible or desirable in contemporary society.

28 James was, though, aware of the apparent paradox of intellectuals teaching young men how to live the vigorous life. A part of him seemed to always resent having to work for a living, and he would
James also felt a need to simply bring American universities up to the standards set by European models. Compared to the sophistication of the university work he had seen in Europe, the informality of his final medical degree oral examination and the amateurish thesis presentations that had embarrassed James in front of Agassiz back in 1867 seemed dangerously outmoded. These epitomized the 'old' Harvard; run by Northeastern elites for their Northeastern scions, the university did little more than initiate privileged youth into their birthright class. Updating the university for an industrialized America was Eliot's primary goal in reforming Harvard. “We mean to build here, securely and slowly, a university in the largest sense,” he promised at his first commencement address.29

Besides expanding the range of potential majors to include professions central to the industrial economy, such as business, and increasing the rigor of engineering and the sciences, Eliot attempted to open Harvard’s doors to representatives from all of America’s ethnicities, including African-Americans, Jews, and recent European immigrants.30 He and his faculty continued to imagine Harvard as a

---

29 Quoted in Townsend, Manhood at Harvard, p. 85.

30 By the time of Eliot's retirement in 1909, over half of Harvard's undergraduates came from outside the state of Massachusetts (compared to twenty percent in 1870). He also made good on his promise that Harvard would “welcome all the new races and to do its best for them.” From a population of 2100 students in '09, there were eight Italians, five “Negroes”, fifty-six students of Jewish descent, fifty Irish-Americans, thirty-three Russian Jews, and nineteen Chinese exchange
training ground for an American elite—it was the nature of that elite that had
changed. While the grand old New England families continued to hold spots at
their university, Eliot in his inaugural address imagined Harvard training a new
American aristocracy, "the aristocracy which excels in manly sports, carries off the
honors and prizes in the learned professions, and bears itself with distinction in all
fields of intellectual labor and combat; the aristocracy which in peace stands
firmest for the public honor and renown, and in war rides first into the murderous
thicket." Graduates of the new Harvard would skillfully and easily move through
the professional world while maintaining a sense of masculine duty and morality;

---

students—rather astonishing diversity for the time, even if, in reality, many of these new Harvard
some of his fellow faculty, James was genuinely interested in the increasing ethnic diversity of the
Harvard student body. On the one hand, the mix of peoples appealed to his own pluralistic
inclinations, and students like W. E. B. Du Bois and George Santayana—both, in their own way,
outside the Anglo-Saxon ideal of Harvard masculinity—found James a warm, supportive, and open
friend and teacher. In Du Bois's words, he was "in Harvard but not of it." Quoted in Lewis, *W.E.B.
Du Bois*, p. 80. Santayana himself would later comment on James's fondness for "lame ducks and
neglected possibilities," and James's colleague in the philosophy department, George Herbert
Palmer, often one of the most astute commentators on James's personality, suggested that James's
love for the "underdog, and his insistence on keeping the door open for every species of human
experiment, sometimes brought James into alliance with causes his social set looked on with
disfavor." George Santayana, *Persons and Places: The Background of My Life* (1944) (Cambridge,
admitted that he felt "our undisciplinables" were "our proudest product." Quoted in Townsend,
*Manhood at Harvard*, p. 165. On the other hand, the hypothetically diverse population at Harvard
gave James a reassuringly misleading impression of the American melting pot. Beneath the
superficial differences, James found an essential sameness—not surprising given the sort of students
Harvard accepted. James was committed to pluralism as an intellectual and social baseline and
needed to believe that pluralism could lead to stability and supportive coexistence, not struggle,
misunderstanding, and madness. The carefully measured Harvard mélange reassured him that this
was indeed the case. James's understanding of a pluralistic society is yet another instantiation of his
pervasive ambivalence: what was important in society, he felt, was for apparently different peoples
to realize their essential similarity to one another. This view helps explain James's inability to
appreciate the intractability of labor and racial tensions in late-nineteenth-century America. See

they would disperse from Harvard to all corners of the country, bringing with them a particular vision of American identity based upon a blend of rugged individualism and Victorian economic morality. These men were to be the leaders of politics and the captains of industry—a deserving elite that truly earned its position at society’s apex. Eliot envisioned his faculty molding the character of students, as well as imparting knowledge, and during his forty year tenure as president he succeeded to a remarkable degree in establishing Harvard as America’s leading institution of higher education, a distinctly American university on a par academically with any in the world.

Having struggled himself to come to terms with his Brahmin lineage, James was sympathetic to the idea of training a new aristocracy of professionals, both at ease within the modern economy and standard-bearers for a genteel tradition of character, duty, and leadership. And despite his criticism in the “Ph.D. Octopus,” James was now proud of his association with Harvard, in contrast to his medical school years.\(^\text{32}\) Not only did Eliot effectively magnify the intellectual and social prestige of the school, James’s goals as a teacher were generally well-suited to Eliot’s overarching pedagogical goal of teaching useful knowledge and training effective character. At several points during his career, James weighed the advantages of leaving Harvard for a position at another university, often at higher pay, but he could never bring himself to abandon his alma mater or his beloved...

---

\(^{32}\) James wrote Henry in 1882, after visits to several European schools, “Nowhere did I see a university which seems to do for all its students anything like what Harvard does. Our methods throughout are better.” Quoted in Townsend, *Manhood at Harvard*, p. 85.
Cambridge.\textsuperscript{33} For better or worse, his marriage to Harvard was a permanent one. The relationship was generally congenial; however, while James was ostensibly in line with Eliot’s project of transforming Harvard into a training ground for professional leaders, he remained characteristically ambivalent about this process. James’s and Eliot’s goals were remarkably similar, but the differences were crucial: Whereas Eliot wanted to turn gentlemen into professionals, James wanted to turn professionals into gentlemen. Central to Eliot’s vision for Harvard was expansion of the student body, a goal he achieved to a remarkable degree. Increasing enrollment was good for business, and it was good for society. James eventually found this aspect of modernization disgusting; Eliot seemed to be turning the university into a commercial venture, a factory milling graduates for profit.\textsuperscript{34} Plus, the education seemed increasingly narrow and specialized in order to better craft new professionals. James knew that his students would have to navigate professional and industrial economic realities, but he worried that the new university would churn out a student who “may remain a cad, and not a gentleman, intellectually pinned down to his one narrow subject, literal, unable to suppose anything different from what he has seen, without imagination, atmosphere or mental perspective.” A university education should, first and foremost, “enable us

\textsuperscript{33} In the early 1900s, James seriously considered resigning from Harvard and taking a short appointment elsewhere. By then, he could have taught at virtually any American or European university, but he was drawn to the Sorbonne and, especially, Stanford. James went as far as submitting a letter of resignation, which an aghast Eliot persuaded him to withdraw. Allen, \textit{William James}, pp. 450-455.

\textsuperscript{34} See James, “The Ph.D. Octopus,” and Townsend, \textit{Manhood at Harvard}, pp. 163-164.
to know a good man when we see him," James argued. James remained a man of divided sensibilities. He actively participated in modern university reform but remained concerned about many of the features of those reforms, particularly increased specialization in training and research. His teaching reflects his own vision for the modern university and James’s continuing struggle to bring his past into America’s future.

James’s success at Harvard allowed him the flexibility to personally resist professional definition. He was at turns psychologist, philosopher, teacher, writer, lecturer—but these categorizations never subsumed his individual identity. In the case of psychology, he came to subtly resist identification with the field. The distance between James and the rest of the psychological community, though, was also a consequence of James’s unique vision for psychology and his distrust of professionalization. He had moved quickly to establish the new physiological-psychology at Harvard in the seventies. The field was of genuine interest, but he probably also saw it as an area in which he could quickly make a mark and translate his position as physiology instructor into a chair in philosophy. James had spent his first two years on the faculty teaching natural history, and following the death of Jeffries Wyman on September 4, 1874, James assumed several of his former mentor’s responsibilities at the university; he took full charge of the course “Natural History 3” on “The Comparative Anatomy and Physiology of the

---

Vertebrates," and he stepped in as temporary curator of Wyman's comparative anatomy collection.\textsuperscript{36} But James shortly began to steer his courses toward subjects that more closely reflected his own intellectual ambitions and interests. At the beginning of the 1875 academic year, he introduced a graduate course in "The Relations between Physiology and Psychology" that included a laboratory section in which students presumably performed experiments like those James had read about in the publications of Helmholtz and Wundt and had seen in Berlin.\textsuperscript{37} A similar undergraduate course followed the next year, and by 1877 at the latest, James had established a permanent laboratory in Lawrence Hall for psychological and psychophysical research.\textsuperscript{38} At the end of the decade, James awarded his, and

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{36} This collection was housed in Boylston Hall during Wyman's lifetime. In the autumn of 1875, under James's oversight, the specimen were moved to Agassiz's Museum of Comparative Zoology in order to make more room for chemistry department laboratories. Charles Loring Jackson, a friend of James's and a chemist, recalled James returning to Boylston to gather a few last items: "His call on us must have been at the beginning of [the academic year] '75-76.... I had just returned from two years in Europe, and, talking of my work, I said that once when I was working with amyl nitrite in Berlin and Englishman who was also in the loggia began singing and laughing as if he were drunk. By the evening I was in the same state. James was immensely interested and asked to try some of it. At first he very properly held the bottle at a distance, and waved the vapor toward himself; but when to his continual questions, 'Is my face flushing?' we answered 'No,' he at last put it against his nose and took a good sniff. Then he felt blindly for the table, put the bottle on it and said, 'O! how queer I feel!' took up two battery-jars full of alcohol (two quarts if I remember) and started across the Yard." Quoted in Perry, \textit{TCWJBY}, p. 142. This characteristic and amusing anecdote, so reminiscent of the stories Henry James Jr. told about his brother's experiments as a youth, indicates how little patience James had with proper experiment. A scientific education and training had done nothing to stem James's zest for pure experience and his view that the best knowledge was felt personally and was immediate in effect, not methodological or rigorous.

\textsuperscript{37} This course was actually taught in the philosophy department.

\textsuperscript{38} There are, in fact, no contemporary accounts of what experiments were performed or what work in James's lab was like. G. Stanley Hall rather pejoratively recalled the lab being "in a tiny room under the stairway of the Agassiz Museum," where James "had a metronome, a device for whirling a frog, a horopter chart and one or two bits of apparatus." Coming in the aftermath of a long debate between Hall and James about priority in establishing the first American psychological laboratory, the rustic quality of the remembered lab may be exaggerated—however, conditions in the early lab were undoubtedly makeshift and crude as James lacked in both experimental training and the
Harvard's, first Ph.D. in Psychology-Philosophy to G. Stanley Hall.\(^39\)

Establishing the Harvard teaching lab was a natural requirement of James's plan to instruct physiological psychology as it was done in Europe, and, at the time, he did not seem to consider it a major accomplishment.\(^40\) Within twenty years, though, James's Harvard lab would be recognized as one of his major disciplinary achievements. It was the first laboratory devoted entirely and permanently to psychological research in the United States and probably the world.\(^41\) As the Harvard lab operated on a largely informal basis until at least the early nineties, this priority was an issue during James's lifetime, and although James often affected inclination to devote himself to laboratory technique and methodology. Nevertheless, his publications from this time demonstrate both a comprehensive understanding of the results of psychophysical research around the world and a relatively firm grasp of experimental methods. G. Stanley Hall, *Life and Confessions of a Psychologist* (New York & London: D. Appleton & Co., 1923), p. 218.

\(^39\) Charles Eliot had organized the Harvard graduate school in 1872, shortly after his appointment as president. The program was modeled after the German system; previously, any Harvard graduate could purchase an M.A. for five dollars. Allen, *William James*, p. 194-195. For more on Hall and his central role in the development of American psychology, see Dorothy Ross, *G. Stanley Hall: The Psychologist as Prophet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

\(^40\) He makes no mention of the lab in his correspondence from this period.

\(^41\) Wilhelm Wundt's Leipzig laboratory, generally acknowledged as the first of its kind in Europe, was not established until 1879, although Wundt had performed relevant experiments much earlier in physiology labs, and the next American lab was founded by G. Stanley Hall at Johns Hopkins in 1881. This is the chronology almost universally accepted today. In 1891, using several thousand dollars he had collected, James moved the psychology laboratory to Dane Hall, where it remained until 1905 when it was again transported, this time to a space specifically designed for the experimenters' needs in the new Emerson Hall. Robert S. Harper, "The Laboratory of William James," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* 52 (November 5, 1948): 169-170. Some historians have challenged that Charles Peirce deserves credit for being the first experimental psychologist in America on the grounds that he recognized German psychophysics and published relevant papers before James. Thomas C. and Joyce V. Cadwallader, "America's First Modern Psychologist: William James or Charles S. Peirce?" *Proceedings of the American Psychological Association* 7 (1972): 774 and Thomas Cadwallader, "Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914): The First American Experimental Psychologist," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 10 (1974): 293-296. This is a semantic point that does not seem particularly important.
indifference to professional distinctions, in this case, he rather energetically defended his accomplishment. In 1894, Hall challenged that his Hopkins laboratory was actually the first of its kind in the United States. James responded to Hall’s assertion of priority in a letter to Science; for his part, James was surprised and hurt by his former pupil’s claim, finding his “statement the more remarkable in that [he]...studied experimental psychology himself at Harvard from 1877-1879.” Hall, ostensibly James’s junior in psychology, was far more willing than his former teacher and sometimes friend, to actively assume a leadership role in the profession, and James was sensitive to being eclipsed by his student.

42 James’s biography indicates that he was, in fact, far from indifferent to matters of prestige.

43 In an 1895 editorial in the Hall-founded American Journal of Psychology, Hall wrote, “When the American Journal of Psychology was founded in 1887, it was a pioneer in its field. It represented the department of psychology at Johns Hopkins University, was for years the only of its kind in the country, and the establishment of which, as its subsequent history shows, was one of the boldest and most sagacious as well as one of the most successful and beneficent steps ever taken by this leader of the new academic movement.” He then claimed that his students and colleagues at Hopkins and Clark had founded experimental programs at Harvard, Yale, Pennsylvania, Columbia, Toronto, Wisconsin, and several other universities. G. Stanley Hall, “Editorial,” American Journal of Psychology 7 (October, 1895): 3-4, quoted in Ross, G. Stanley Hall, pp. 242-243.


45 The relationship between James and Hall was never an easy one, combining elements of friendship and hostility. Hall, who was only two years younger than his teacher, quickly established himself as one of America’s premier scholars, igniting in James a spark of competitive anxiety that grew hotter over time as Hall and James came, increasingly, to disagree intellectually and they both sought to assume leadership of the American psychological community. Hall founded the American Psychological Association as well as the American Journal of Psychology, the first American journal in experimental psychology. Despite these accomplishments, in some respects, Hall bowed to James. In 1890, Hall wrote him, “You started this whole movement [American psychology] yourself and are the very best man in my opinion, in the world at the present time in your own lines and I only fear that you are working too hard on your book [the Principles of Psychology]. The cause of Psychology in this country is more dependent upon you and your safe delivery of that book than upon anything else whatever.” G. Stanley Hall to W. J., April 7, 1890, quoted in Bjork, William James, p. 172. When James’s book was finally published, though, it received some of its most aggressive critiques from Hall’s pen. When Hall was asked by the newly established Clark University to be its first president in 1888, the bypass caused James to be “a little stirred up....”
controversy surrounding the lab was in large part a question of definition, but by the 1890s, as the growing American psychological community considered its narrative of origin, both Hall and James seemed eager to stake their claims to primacy. However makeshift the early lab was, however dubious he was of professionalization in general, and, indeed, however lukewarm James's enthusiasm for experiment ran, he felt the importance of protecting his precedence in this important disciplinary achievement and his corresponding role as primogenitor of the budding American psychological community.

James's position as psychology's paterfamilias in the United States was cemented by the publication of *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890, but his active role in disciplinary politics was limited. He recognized the importance of maintaining a psychology lab at Harvard, but, having never cared for laboratory work himself, as soon as he had the adequate institutional authority, he searched for someone to run the lab in his place. In 1892, he handed the lab over to the emerging German psychologist Hugo Münsterberg, freeing him to devote his time

---


46 Hall eventually stepped back in his claims.

47 In the seventies, James did not seem to place much importance on the lab, and it receives no mention in his correspondence from the period. In general, James's interest in most aspects of discipline-building should not be exaggerated. Broad-minded to the end, he never lost his ambivalence regarding the professionalization of academic fields, and, although he supported the creation of a psychological community in a variety of ways, he was seldom the initiator of new publications or societies.
to teaching, lecturing, and more synthetic and explicitly philosophical writings. He rarely took the lead in forming and directing professional societies or new journals. He was engaged in the community; he knew every major psychologist and was often used as a medium between different parties and individuals, but Hall, John Dewey, James Mark Baldwin, and James Mckeen Cattell, among others, were more instrumental in forging disciplinary institutions and identity. American psychologists did recognize the importance of association with James because of his international connections and prestige, as well as his universally recognized back-door political abilities, and he did serve as president of the American Association of Psychologists in 1893, the same year he was president of the British Society for Psychical Research, but this was a largely honorific position.

48 "I may say," James wrote the German psychologist Carl Stumpf in 1894, "that I myself enjoy inward peace and a good professorial conscience for the first time, now that Münsterberg has taken charge of the entire experimental field." W. J. to Carl Stumpf, January 24, 1894, quoted in Allen, William James, p. 369. Münsterberg (1863-1916) did not accept a permanent position at Harvard until 1897; he had hoped until then to return to Germany and make a career there. The appointment did not live up to Münsterberg’s or James’s high initial hopes. The two disagreed on a wide variety of psychological and philosophical positions, and Münsterberg’s extreme sensitivity and German elitism strained the personal relationship between the two. Münsterberg was a pioneer in social psychology, and his work served as an important basis for American behaviorism, but, in a climate of increased xenophobia during the 1910s, he was forced to leave Harvard in disgrace. See Bjork, The Compromised Scientist, pp. 39-70.

49 The one society James did form independently was the American Society for Psychical Research in 1884. This society, though, was devoted to research into psychical phenomena—telepathy, communication with the dead, etc.—that was, even at this early date, decidedly outside the mainstream of psychology.

50 James was both genuinely well-liked and genuinely interested in getting to know the leaders of the international psychological community, two traits that made his opinion and intervention often quite useful. James never served as editor of any of the major journals, in part because he loathed proof-reading. He was offered editorship of a proposed new journal of the American Association of Psychologists in 1893 and flatly refused. A few years later, upon receiving some proofs to look
James was still an important figurehead and advisor, but this could not disguise the fact that after the triumphant publication of The Principles in 1890 and the Psychology: Briefer Course (the "Jimmy" to students, as opposed to the "James") in 1892, James's interest in the direction of mainstream psychological research was beginning to wane.\textsuperscript{51} Indeed, most historians have depicted James's post-Principles career as a conscious movement away from psychology into philosophy and religion, supporting this interpretation with various derogatory remarks about psychology from James's letters during the period, the decline in number of his expressly psychological publications, and his abandonment of the Harvard laboratory.\textsuperscript{52} James's interest in psychology, though, did not in fact

\textsuperscript{51} The "Jimmy" was explicitly designed for use in classrooms, and indeed, the book became a standard for a generation of English speaking psychology undergraduates. James's opinion of this book, though, was self-deprecating: He wrote his publisher Holt in 1891, "By adding some twaddle about the sense, leaving out all polemics and history, all bibliography and experimental details, all metaphysical subtleties and digressions, all quotations, all humor and pathos, all interest in short, and by blackening the tops of all the paragraphs, I think I have produced a tome of pedagogic classic which will enrich both you and me, if not the student's mind." W. J. to Henry Holt, July 24, 1891, James, Correspondence I, p. 314.

\textsuperscript{52} In 1894, James wrote Henry Rutgers Marshall about himself, "There isn't a page more of psychological literature in this child's mental organism.... Our reputation first begins as our talent commences to decay." W. J. to Henry Rutgers Marshall, 1894, quoted in Perry, TCWJBV, p. 200. In 1895, he wrote Stumpf, "As I grow older I get impatient (and incompetent) of details and turn to broad abstractions. I wish to get relieved of psychology as soon as possible, but am trying at present to keep Münsterberg's nest warm for him ere his return, which we all pray for...." W. J. to Carl Stumpf, December 18, 1895, quoted in Perry, TCWJBV, p. 204. The traditional division of James's life into a psychological and philosophical period, which dates back to James's life, has only recently been explicitly challenged, most notably in Taylor, William James on Consciousness beyond the Margin.
decline; his conception of psychology, its subject and methods, was simply coming into increasing conflict with the views of most members of the American community. A key source of James’s disaffection with the psychological profession lay in the refusal of most of his peers to take seriously the religious or psychic phenomena that held his fascination. James’s interest in psychic experience was almost unanimously considered an embarrassment by other psychologists, who considered such phenomena unscientific and, in all likelihood, fraudulent. For James, any mental experience was fair ground for psychological investigation; that apparently metaphysical, non-rational experiences were still valid experiences was a key to his philosophy. Other psychologists wanted the field to distance itself from its roots in metaphysics, religion, and philosophy in favor of a rigorous scientific methodology. In the context of late-nineteenth-century academic culture, adoption of an exemplary scientific character was fundamental to establishing public and intellectual credibility, but to James, this attitude was indicative of a narrow positivism and scientism he was finding more and more to be antithetical to his own “radical empiricism,” pluralism, and individualism.53 He wanted psychology to speak to these values and felt that it was

---

53 A more detailed explanation of James’s philosophy after 1890 is outside the purview of this thesis and can, therefore, only be suggested. James’s radical empiricism was an attempt to take seriously the “big blooming buzzing confusion” of real experience and to question the assumption that any monistic epistemology—be it science or religion—could adequately explain experience. Essentially, James was positing a pluralistic universe in the grandest sense, one in which our only guide to knowledge was individual experience. James’s pragmatism was a guideline to navigating through such a universe, to forming beliefs and establishing truths. For James, forging beliefs in this environment became an intrinsically heroic task, because of both the essential uncertainty in experience and the constant pressure to conform our beliefs and understandings to a monistic distillation. See Lambreth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* for a good, relatively
failing to do so. James’s ultimate disappointment with psychology was, retrospectively, not surprising. A reluctance regarding his proposed project of “turning psychology into a science” was evident in his pluralist inclinations dating back to the late sixties, and *The Principles* is rife with inner tensions. But it was only after 1890 that James began to consciously come to terms with his contradictions, expounding and justifying them philosophically. As a result of this exploration, he grew intellectually, if not personally, estranged from both the American psychological community he had been so instrumental in building, and his early, vague idealization of an epistemologically inclusive science.

By then, and certainly by 1903, the date of “The Ph.D. Octopus,” James was fighting a rearguard action against what were rapidly becoming entrenched professional standards in psychology and in the academy, and he probably knew that the struggle was a hopeless one. Characteristically, James wanted his professional space—the university—to be decidedly unprofessional in organization, resisting the tendency toward specialization and the hegemony of the supposedly practical fields, such as science, engineering, and business. In James’s classes and works, he insisted that everything could be practical—philosophy, religion, as well as science, but this was a redefined practicality, individual rather than social. James may have been the epitome of the new Harvard professorship; however, he was also one of the institution’s most persistent critics. Similarly,

---

recent entrée into James’s philosophy. See also, Seigfried, *Chaos and Context* for a now classic analysis of radical empiricism.

54 As assessment, given the rise of behaviorism, that was not entirely inaccurate.
James remained the face of American psychology abroad and in undergraduate courses even as he and the disciplinary mainstream began to part ways. In his career, James embodied what were, perhaps, the inevitable contradictions of a transitional figure; he was never entirely at ease with what he had helped forge at Harvard and in psychology. It was these contradictions, though, that were at the center of James’s vision and at the heart of his work. His anti-foundational pluralism was ambivalence writ large, an intellectual attempt to come to terms with competing impulses and seemingly contradictory values. James’s triumph was in translating his ambivalence and his contradictions into a ceaseless exploration of ideas that were understood in terms of their effects on individual psychology and experience.

These central tensions were nowhere more apparent than in James’s *Principles of Psychology*. James’s publisher Henry Holt had intended the volume for his “American Science Series” to be a general survey of current theories and work, and he had hoped to have the book by 1879, a year after contracting James; James thought it might take two years. During that time, the project had become much more than a survey: James intended *The Principles* to be no less than a manifesto for both a discipline

---


56 In hindsight Holt’s patience is remarkable. Clearly he, like Eliot, saw in James a potential that merited confidence and was worth waiting for. Holt had an unusual skill in handling often troublesome authors such as James; he was able to absorb their high-handedness and capable of dealing barbs of his own. Naturally the long-delayed project strained James’s and Holt’s relationship, but it is a testament to both of their characters that it never ended their friendship. See Perry, *TCWJBV*, pp. 186-191.
and a personal philosophical/psychological vision. As a work of scholarship, *The Principles* is a tour de force, incorporating an astonishingly comprehensive knowledge of every relevant article or book published in Europe or America. The research alone was daunting, but James was even more overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues involved. Each problem "bristles with obstructions," he complained, that could take years to resolve. The "'science' is in such a confused and imperfect state," he told Henry, "every paragraph presents some unforeseen snag, and I often spend many weeks on a point that I did n’t [sic] foresee as a difficulty at all."\(^{57}\) Plus, James had things to say about almost every debate, forcing him to confront "the resistance of facts, to begin with, each one of which must be bribed to be on one’s side, and the resistance of other philosophers to end with, each one of which must be slain. It is no joke slaying the Helmholtzes as well as the Spencers."\(^{58}\) This was no small matter indeed and progress would have been slow regardless. The situation was exacerbated by James’s apparent inability to work for protracted periods of time. His fragile health prevented extended concentration, especially at night, even if his mercurial nature had allowed for prolonged focus on a single project. James was only slightly embarrassed by his slowness. Primarily some sensitivity was evident in his correspondence with Henry, who was capable of writing at a torrid pace.

---

\(^{57}\) W. J. to H. J. Jr., April 12, 1887, Berkeley, *Correspondence 3*, p. 63.

\(^{58}\) W. J. to H. J. Jr., September 19, 1887, Berkeley, *Correspondence 3*, p. 68.
James freighted the book with weighty personal significance. *The Principles* was to be the ultimate transcendence of his early mental and physical struggles; it was to be both a testament to his recovery and a translation of the individual insights of that period into intellectual insights. James intended his first book to be a true magnum opus, transcribing his entire world and incorporating a lifetime of often painful learning and experience within its covers. When he finally finished reading the proofs in May of 1890, he expressed the relief of a man who shrugged off a great burden. As he wrote his wife, Alice, after finishing, “I came home very weary, and lit a fire, and had a delicious two hours all by myself, thinking of the big étape of my life which now lay behind me (I mean that infernal book done), and of the possibilities that the future yielded of reading and living and loving out from the shadow of that interminable black cloud.”

Writing had been an act of personal exorcism and completion left him exhausted, satisfied, and more than a little relieved that a major chapter in his life had closed.

James was proud of the fruit of his labors. He immediately realized the magnitude of his intellectual accomplishment. “As ‘Psychologies’ go, it is a good one,” he told Henry, before continuing in a more a self-deprecating vein, “but

---

59 W. J. to Alice James, May 24, 1890, *James, Letters 1*, p. 295.

60 "At any rate, it does give me some comfort to think that I don't live wholly in projects, aspirations and phrases, but now and then have something done to show for all the fuss. The joke of it is that I, who have always considered myself a thing of glimpses, of discontinuity, of aperçus, with no power of doing a job, suddenly realize at the end of this task that it is the biggest book on psychology in any language except Wundt's, Romini's, and Daniel Greenleaf Thompson's! Still, if it burns up at the printing-office, I shan't much care, for I shan't ever write it again!!" W. J. to Alice James, May 24, 1890, *James, Letters 1*, p. 295.
psychology is in such an ante-scientific condition that the whole present generation of them is predestined to become unreadable medieval lumber, as soon as the first genuine tracks of insight are made. The sooner the better, for me!”\textsuperscript{61} James’s assessment of the book “as a unit,” though, indicated that he was aware that his work was different from most psychology texts: It seemed to him now “as if it might be rather a vigorous and richly colored chunk — for that kind of thing at least!”\textsuperscript{62} Given the extraordinary popularity of the book and its 1892 abridgement with scholars, students, and an intellectual reading public, his appraisal accurately touched upon the unique qualities of his psychology and his prose style.\textsuperscript{63} The book’s durability serves as even greater testament to its virtues. The Principles has not been reduced to “unreadable medieval lumber;” the book has continuously remained in print and has captured the attention of philosophers, psychologists, and a broad intellectual public in each successive generation. The centennial anniversary of its publication was occasion for celebration and reflection, and James’s legacy continues to occupy a place of primacy in American philosophy and

\textsuperscript{61} William further downplayed his accomplishment by withholding revelation of his accomplishment until midway through the second paragraph of this letter, but he could not completely conceal his sense of accomplishment—and relief. “The great event for me is the completion at last of my tedious book. I have been at my desk with it every day since I got back from Europe, and up at 4 in the morning with it for many a day of the last month. I have written every page 4 or 5 times over, and carried it “on my mind” for 9 years past, so you may imagine the relief. Besides I am glad to appear at last as a man who has done something more than make phrases and projects.” W. J. to H. J. Jr., June 4, 1890, Berkeley, Correspondence 2, p. 138. Cf. the letter to Alice quoted in note 59.

\textsuperscript{62} W. J. to Alice James, May 18, 1890, James, Letters 1, p. 295.

\textsuperscript{63} For more on the reception of The Principles, see Allen, William James, 323-326 and Simon, Genuine Reality, p. 232.
psychology. Today, *The Principles* remains a labyrinthine treatise, immediate yet profound, that defies cursory analysis even as it draws readers into its inconsistent, internally conflicted, and diffuse world. However James's conception of psychology, his rejection of physical determinism, his defense of the efficacy of consciousness, and his critique of monism and corresponding pluralism each serve as an Ariadnean thread to James's career and thought and the relationship between his formative experiences and his work.

In the "Preface" to *The Principles of Psychology*, James claimed to “have kept close to the point of view of natural science throughout the book” in the interest of outlining a course toward a scientific psychology. This was one of his primary goals in writing the book, an avowal he made at greater length in an 1892 article from the *Philosophical Review*, "A Plea for Psychology as a ‘Natural Science.” “I wished,” James wrote, “by treating Psychology like a natural science,

---

64 See, for instance, Johnson and Henley, eds., *Reflections on The Principles of Psychology: William James After a Century* and the essays in Putnam, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to William James* for some indication of the range of continued interaction with James and *The Principles*. The complete scholarship on James and his psychology is far too voluminous to cite.

65 In his review of *The Principles*, George Santayana gave a perfect summation of the flaws and strengths of James's book: The study lacked rigor and system, he said, “But it would be pedantry to regret the loss of logical unity in a book so rich and living, in which a generous nature breaks out at every point, and the perennial problems of the human mind are discussed so modestly, so solidly, with such a deep and pathetic sincerity.” Quoted in Perry, *TCWJBY*, p. 197. G. Stanley Hall’s review also seems to capture an important quality of *The Principles*: “[James] might be described as an impressionist in psychology.... His portfolio contains sketches old and new, ethical, literary, scientific and metaphysical, some exquisite and charming in detail and even color, others rough charcoal outlines, but all together stimulating and suggestive.” Quoted in Bjork, *The Compromised Scientist*, pp. 12-13.

to help her to become one.\textsuperscript{67} James's essay was occasioned by critical notices of \textit{The Principles}, particularly one by George T. Ladd, that argued that James's declaration of a "science of psychology" was premature and, in fact, undermined by James's own flights into metaphysical musing.\textsuperscript{68} He countered by admitting that scientific psychology was in a primordial state, similar to what "physics was before Galileo, what chemistry was before Lavoisier," while insisting that any science needed a start, no matter how shabby. This start was already being made by "biologists, nerve-doctors, and psychical researchers," and philosophical-psychologists could either support such work or get left behind.\textsuperscript{69}

It was true that James's aims were more metaphysical than he let on, but his conception of science was itself unusual. His description of science was as much, or more, a negative marking out of the limitations of the scientific perspective as it was a positive definition. A natural science, James argued in his "Plea...," was "a mere fragment of truth broken out from the whole mass of it for the sake of practical effectiveness exclusively." Sciences aimed to devise laws corresponding to phenomena with the end of predicting and, perhaps, controlling those

\textsuperscript{67} William James, "A Plea for Psychology as a 'Natural Science,'" \textit{Philosophical Review} 1 (1892): 146-153, reprinted in James, \textit{Collected Essays and Reviews}: 316-332, p. 317.

\textsuperscript{68} See G. T. Ladd, "Psychology as so-called 'Natural Science,'" \textit{Philosophical Review} 1 (1892): 24-53; also see Perry, \textit{TCWJBY}, pp. 196-197. James anticipated this critique in a letter to Holt from 1890, as he neared completion of the book: "No one could be more disgusted than I at the sight of the book. \textit{No} subject is worth being treated of in 1000 pages! Had I ten more years more, I could rewrite it in 500; but as it stands it is this or nothing -- a loathsome, distended, tumefied, bloated, dropsical mass, testifying to nothing but two facts: \textit{1}º, that there is no such thing as a \textit{science} of psychology, and \textit{2}º, that W. J. is an incapable." W. J. to Henry Holt, May 9, 1890, James, \textit{Letters 1}, pp. 293-294.

\textsuperscript{69} James, "A Plea for Psychology as a 'Natural Science,'" p. 317, 327.
phenomena. In order to function as a unified discipline, each specific science accepted uncritically certain foundational presuppositions—for instance, the existence of the phenomena under study and an essentially comprehensible natural world. It was beyond the scope of science to question these assumptions or attempt to arrive at any "ultimate solutions," by which James meant any attempt to translate scientific theory and fact into universal law or essentialist explanation. "Metaphysical" exploration of the assumptions of science and speculation about the far-reaching implications of scientific data was the realm of philosophy, James claimed. He approvingly quoted the Scot Andrew Seth that "Psychology has become more scientific, and has thereby become more conscious of her aims, and at the same time, of her necessary limitations. *Ceasing to put herself forward as philosophy*, she has entered upon a new period of development as a science...." It was desirable, James concluded, for philosophers and scientists to both remain interested in psychology, mutually aware, but approaching different questions from different trajectories.70 Defining science by outlining its boundaries clearly bore the influence of Chauncey Wright and targeted James's old foe Spencer's evolutionary metaphysic.71

70 James, "A Plea for Psychology as a 'Natural Science,'" p. 317, 318, 322. Cf. with the following quote on the limits of psychology from *The Principles*: "...we cannot aim 'generally' at the universe; or if we do, we miss our game. Our scope is narrow, and me must attack things piecemeal, ignoring the solid fulness [sic] in which the elements of Nature exist, and stringing one after another of them together in a serial way, to suit our little interests as they change from hour to hour." In psychology, this meant that the methods of analysis would change depending upon the subject and the goals of the study. James, *Principles*, pp. 669-670.

71 James had used Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* as a text in his undergraduate course in psychology, but he primarily used the work as an intellectual punching bag. Teaching Spencer
James’s definition of science was potentially controversial for several reasons. For one, James’s emphasis on the limitations of science seemed sometimes to be critical of foundational assumptions of scientific objectivity and dubious of some of its traditional methods. In *The Principles*, James repeatedly emphasized the constructed nature of scientific thought. “The Preface” had pointed to the metaphysical beliefs underlying any scientific activity, and he returned to this theme in the final chapter. “The popular notion that ‘Science’ is forced on the mind *ab extra*, and that our interest have nothing to do with its constructions, is utterly absurd,” James challenged, continuing, “What makes [certain metaphysical] assumptions ‘scientific’ and not merely poetic, what makes a Helmholtz and his kin *discoverers*, is that the things of Nature turn out to act as if they were of the kind assumed.”72 This did not imply that science was a mirror of nature, though, or provided the only, or even the best, method for understanding our world. “It is undeniably true,” he admitted, “that materialistic, or so-called ‘scientific,’ conceptions of the universe have so far gratified the purely intellectual interests more than the mere sentimental conceptions have. But, on the other hand...they leave the emotional and active interests cold.”73 James clearly had an additional

---

made James “completely disgusted with the eminent philosopher,” he wrote Tom Ward; he “seems to me more and more to be as absolutely worthless in all *fundamental* matters of thought, as he is admirable, clever and ingenious in secondary matters. His mind is a perfect puzzle to me, but the total impression is of an intensely two and sixpenny, paper-collar affair.” W. J. to T. W., December 30, 1876, Berkeley, *Correspondence* 4, p. 552.


agenda in defining science from this negative perspective. While legitimately providing a template for a scientific psychology, he meant to criticize the scientism of the day and prepare a validation of non-scientific knowledge and a pluralistic epistemology.74

James also made the unexpected move of immediately dismissing the associationist and faculty psychological foundations as excessively metaphysical.75 Faculty psychology remained the basis for many religiously minded teachers of philosophical psychology, while associationism was the epistemological and theoretical basis for many psychological experimenters, particularly those steeped in the Anglo-American tradition. Perhaps more importantly, a materialistic associationism had become the de facto evolutionary psychology, through the influence of Alexander Bain, Spencer, T. H. Huxley, and Darwin himself. In The Principles, even James seemed to suggest that the two went hand in hand, describing Spencerian psychology simply as "evolutionary psychology" and declaring that this psychology demanded the assumptions of associationism.76

---

74 James considered the "aspiration to be 'scientific'" to be "an idol of the tribe to the present generation." James, The Principles of Psychology, p. 866 note.

75 Wilhelm Wundt’s psychology represented another path, albeit one that was certainly no less metaphysical. James quoted liberally from Wundt’s work and disagreed with many of his specific ideas, but he did not develop a systematic critique of Wundt’s system, as he did for associationism. This was probably because of the limited influence of Wundt’s theories on late-nineteenth-century psychology. Whereas Wundt’s physiological methods were pioneering, recent scholarship has indicated that few psychologists understood Wundt’s system and fewer still adopted it as a theoretical basis for their work. Acceptance of Wundt was not abetted by his resistance to Darwinian evolution. See Albert L. Blumenthal, "A Wundt Primer: The Operating Characteristic of Consciousness" and Robert W. Rieber, "Wundt and the Americans: From Flirtation to Abandonment" in Rieber and Robinson, eds., Wilhelm Wundt in History: 121-144, 145-160.

76 See James, The Principles of Psychology, p. 95.
1890, almost all scientists accepted biological evolution as a fact and one that was, clearly, central to future development of the life sciences.\(^7\) In this context, James’s apparent rejection of “evolutionary psychology” would have been startling. Of course, James also accepted biological evolution, and in *The Principles*, he assumed a readership of evolutionists. He utilized Darwinian metaphors and arguments to defend some of his points in the book, and in his chapters on “Instinct,” “The Emotions,” and “Necessary Truths and the Effects of Experience,” he engaged in debates about the heritability of acquired characteristics and the origin of apparently innate responses to certain environmental stimuli.\(^8\) James’s challenge was to craft a unique evolutionary psychology that was not derivative of the associationist tradition.\(^9\)

James’s motivation in dismissing the prevailing evolutionary psychology in favor of his own alternative was grounded in his continued opposition to

---

\(^7\) See Numbers, *Darwin Comes to America* and Russett, *Darwin in America*.

\(^8\) He ended up seeming to argue for the sufficiency of natural selection as the mechanism for evolution and against Lamarckian inheritance; although he was somewhat unclear about this, and his reasoning was not always straightforward. For instance, “[Man] is, *par excellence*, the educable animal. If, then, the law that habits are inherited were found exemplified in him, he would, in so far forth, fall short of his human perfections....” James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 691. This was an unusual argument of a sort typical of James. See James, *The Principles of Psychology*, pp. 890-897 for a more direct exploration of the arguments in favor of Lamarckian and Darwinian evolution and James’s position.

\(^9\) As suggested in the previous chapter, though, the influence of Darwinian ideas on James was not as straightforward as some historians have claimed. In particular, Bird, *William James*; Boring, *A History of Experimental Psychology*; Richards, *DEETMB*; Taylor, “William James on Darwin;” and to a lesser degree Wiener, *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism*, have promulgated the view that Jamesian psychology was directly influenced by Darwinian theory. James’s Darwinism was heavily influenced by Peirce’s analysis of Darwinian evolution and was made to serve philosophical positions not necessarily dependent upon evolutionary thought—indeed, sometimes in opposition to prevailing interpretations.
materialistic determinism, particularly as espoused by Herbert Spencer. In his more mature thought, James had not shed the concerns about evolutionary thought his virulent opposition to Spencerian theory occasioned; if anything, these grew more pronounced. The primary source of James’s reluctance was the conflation of evolution with materialistic determinism and the temptation, seemingly irresistible to many philosophers and social thinkers, to hail this sort of evolution as a universal theory that could sufficiently explain all phenomena.\textsuperscript{80} This was the same monistic assertion that had troubled James during his depressive period, and in his scholarly work, he consistently challenged this deterministic view with the pluralist response he had developed in the early seventies. For James, as for Peirce, the most compelling aspects of Darwinian theory were the primary roles assigned to

\textsuperscript{80} There is a wonderful early statement of James’s epistemological pluralism worth quoting at length: “The facts of evolution have crowded upon the thinking world so fast within the last few years that their philosophy has fared rather hard,” James wrote in an 1879 review. “Chaotic cohorts of outlandish associates, the polyp’s tentacles, the throat of the pitcher-plant, the nest of the bower-bird, the illuminated hind-quarters of the baboon, and the manners and customs of the Dyaks and Andamanese, have swept like a deluge into the descent gardens in which, with her disciples, refined Philosophy was wont to pace, and have left but little of their human and academic scenery erect. Many of the previous occupants, though broken-hearted at the desecration, have submitted, in a sort of pessimistic despair, to the barbarian invaders. Others, temporarily routed, are uncertain what to do. The victors meanwhile, intoxicated with success, assume, for the most part, that Philosophy herself is dead, or that, if she still has vitality enough left to continue propounding any of her silly conundrums, she will be shamed to silence, as now one, now another, of the conquering ragged regiment stands forth to face her down. We are the truth and the whole truth, they cry. Emotion, in short, has paralyzed reflection on both sides, as it always does in sudden revolutions. But when the newcomers grow accustomed to their situation, and the original possessors get better acquainted with their strange bedfellows, things will settle down on very much the old basis.” William James, “Spencer’s ‘Data of Ethics,’” \textit{Nation} 29 (1879): 178-179, in James, \textit{Collected Essays and Reviews}: 147-150, pp. 147-148. One of the most outrageous claims made by any disciple of Spencer’s, and one that particularly infuriated James, was made by the American Grant Allen, who argued in a series of articles in 1878 that he could write a “deductive history of nations,” because “every national character must necessarily be due to the special physical characteristics of the country in which it is developed….there is no caprice, no spontaneous impulse in human endeavors. Even taste and inclination must themselves be the result of surrounding causes.” Quoted in Richards, \textit{DEETMB}, p. 428.
chance and variety. Using this emphasis as a basis, he developed a Darwinian refutation of Spencerian social determinism. In two essays from the 1880s later published in *The Will to Believe*, he presented a uniquely Jamesian social Darwinism. Due to the essential contingency of variations, individual differences were unpredictable, spontaneous, and vital to social progress, James argued. Historical change "is due to the accumulated influences of individuals, of their examples, of their initiatives, and their decisions," and the "great men" of history were like particularly successful Darwinian variations. The social changes wrought by these individuals were preserved by their social environment through a process analogous to natural selection, but the environment could not be said to have therefore caused the changes; it was the individual, the social spontaneous variation, who deserved the credit.\(^{81}\) Individuality, creativity, and will—the traits James associated with maturity—were key to social progress. Reductive social science was wrong—it was individuals, not society, that was important, and it was vital that individual autonomy be preserved in the industrial era.

Although the arguments in these essays were not reproduced in *The Principles*, they point to the ways in which James would oppose his psychology to materialistic associationism while still incorporating an evolutionary perspective. Spencer's view, as James understood it, was that individual mind simply mirrored the physical environment according to the law of the "adjustment of inner to outer

---

\(^{81}\) James, *The Will to Believe*, pp. 216-262.
relations."\(^8\) As an associationist, Spencer conceived of mind in terms of ideas and sensations which had a physical basis, a "mind-dust" in James's words. For Spencer and for James, the "mind-dust" was necessarily a monad because of the continuous nature of evolutionary development, i.e. during the process of cosmic evolution, there could be no introduction of new material, otherwise, there would be a discontinuity in evolutionary development. The most complicated products of evolution would essentially be comprised of arrangements of an original building-block—the monad. Materialist associationists argued that the sensory stimuli caused this physical matter of the mind to arrange itself in particular ways that corresponded to ideas and categories of understanding. The mind was, therefore, completely a product of its environment. Our instinctual responses to certain stimuli were the result of the inheritance of acquired mental frameworks which had developed over time through this process of association. The collapsing of complicated ideas and perceptive abilities into simple sensory blocks was the primary goal of the associationist psychological research program. This appeared to leave no room for individual agency; indeed, the individual was simply a receptor of environmental factors.

\(^8\) From Spencer's *Principles of Psychology, Part III*, quoted in William James, "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 12 (1878): 1-18, reprinted in James, *Collected Essays and Reviews*: 43-68, p. 44. This key essay served as the basis for "Chapter Five: The Automaton Theory" and "Chapter Six: The Mind-Stuff Theory" of *The Principles of Psychology*. 
But what, James wondered, are we to make of consciousness? From a Spencerian position there was only one explanation to account for the development of consciousness, he claimed: "If evolution is to work smoothly, consciousness in some shape must have been present at the very origin of things," each monad, in other words, possessed "an aboriginal atom of consciousness." Otherwise, consciousness would have been introduced at some evolutionary moment as a new element, an idea undermining the monistic position. However, even if primordial consciousness was admitted, it was impossible to conceive of how consciousness might develop within an associationist framework, James argued. How could environmental stimuli provoke the development of higher states of consciousness, and, even if this was possible, how would the addition of monadic consciousness result in a unified sense of consciousness? Other evolutionary associationists, such as T. H. Huxley, attempted to sidestep the issue by treating consciousness epiphenomenally, as a byproduct of purely automatic physical processes without any agency like, in Huxley's famous simile, "the steam-whistle which accompanies the work of a locomotive engine is without influence on its machinery." James challenged that "Darwin's Bulldog" was, in this case, failing to take into account basic Darwinian theory. "It is very generally admitted," he began, "though the

---

83 James understood consciousness to mean self-awareness, the feeling of experience, and he took it as a first principle that consciousness existed.

84 James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 98.

85 Quoted in *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 86.
point would be hard to prove, that consciousness grows the more complex and intense the higher we rise in the animal kingdom.” Natural selection implies that consciousness must, therefore, be of advantage to its possessor. If it were merely an epiphenomenon, it would not be preserved and increased through evolutionary development. James reasoned that evolution proved, then, that consciousness was functional.

In one of the most famous, and upon closer inspection mysterious, passages from *The Principles*, James proceeded to theorize what that function might be.

“We talk, it is true,” he wrote, when we are darwinizing, as if the mere body that owns the brain had interests; we speak about the utilities of its various organs and how they help or hinder the body’s survival; and we treat the survival as if it were an absolute end, existing as such in the physical world, as sort of actual should-be, presiding over the animal and judging his reactions, quite apart from the presence of some such superadded commenting intelligence (whether it be that of the animal itself, or only ours or Mr. Darwin’s), the reactions cannot be properly talked of as “useful” or “hurtful” at all. Considered merely physically, all that can be said of them is that if they occur in a certain way survival will as a matter of fact prove to be their incidental consequence….In a word, survival can only enter into a purely physiological discussion only as an hypothesis made by an onlooker, about the future. But the moment you bring a consciousness into the midst, survival ceases to be a mere hypothesis. No longer is it, “if survival is to occur, then so and so must brain and other organs work.” It has now become an imperative decree: “Survival shall occur, and therefore organs must so work!”…Every actually existing consciousness seems to itself at any rate to be a fighter for ends, of which many, but for its presence, would not be ends at all. Its powers of cognition are mainly subservient to those ends, discerning which facts further them and which do not.86

86 *James, The Principles of Psychology*, p. 92.
Consciousness thus introduces a teleological element into the life of the organism. The conscious individual is no longer the victim of blind physical processes, is no longer determined, in short, by their bodies or their environments. Our consciousness is able to seize its own destiny, directing and molding its body to its own purposes; even our understanding, our power to reason and make sense of our world, is directed toward conscious ends.

James concluded his critique of associationism by reiterating his argument that its metaphysical assumptions and concerns went beyond the boundaries of science and positivist demonstration. Ultimately, he stated, while the arguments for materialist associationism are not strong, we cannot rule them out altogether. They are simply beyond the purview of a scientific psychology. James could afford to adopt the tone of high-minded science: He had achieved his ends. He had posited consciousness as the central fact of mentality and made his long-anticipated move to undermine the scientific validity of physical determinism and Spencerian monism. An efficacious, active consciousness would occupy the central position in James’s psychological science; consciousness became the agent by which James substituted the passive mind of associationism with a dynamic mind, capable of engaging its environment and, even, its physical substance.

James intended his psychology to help other people seize control of their lives and assert their individual freedom, as well. Indeed, James’s frank desire to

---

87 *The Principles* unabashedly incorporated elements of self-help literature, spicing even the most technical discussions with encouraging exhortations. “Chapter Four” on “Habit” demonstrates how James’s conception of an active consciousness melded to a still material conception of the brain.
craft a psychology that would be useful to individuals tipped his hand: As his philosophical investigations into the metaphysics of scientific epistemology indicated, James believed that the necessary theoretical assumptions of a science were not self-evident, were, in a sense, underdetermined and contingent. James knew he could not prove the existence of a free willing consciousness or disprove materialistic determinism. The question was beside the point; James believed in free will and this was what seemed important. His defense of this choice was pragmatic. When faced with competing theories which seem to square with experience equally well, "That theory will be most generally believed which, besides offering us objects able to account satisfactorily for our sensible experience, also offers those which are most interesting, those which appeal most urgently to our aesthetic, emotional, and active needs." Whether we are determined by environment or physiology or not, we still live in a world of choices.

could become a positive outline for individual and social improvement. James agreed with the associationists that repeated actions physically changed the brain, making those actions over time more immediate, fluid, and natural no matter how complicated initially. This was especially so during the formative period between ages twenty and thirty. It was crucial during this time to cultivate good habits, he argued, through conscious pursuit of actions: "Seize the very first possible opportunity to act on every resolution you make, and on every emotional prompting you may experience in the direction of the habits you aspire to gain." He concluded, "The physiological study of mental conditions is thus the most powerful ally of hortatory ethics. The hell to be endured hereafter, of which theology tells, is no worse than the hell we make for ourselves in this world by habitually fashioning our characters the wrong way. Could the young but realize how soon they will become mere walking bundles of habits, they would give more heed to their conduct while in the plastic state." James, The Principles of Psychology, p. 81, 83. His passion on this topic was fueled by experience; during his "plastic" period, James had struggled to act, and he felt that it negatively affected his ability to work and his mental health thereafter. During that time, he had worried that he was potentially unfit by nature, an invalid; now, he argued that if he had developed the habits of a healthy person through an act of conscious will, he could have become healthy. His teaching and much of his later popular work extended this encouragement to develop good habits of character and action.

88 James, The Principles of Psychology, p. 655.
James felt; "Freedom's first deed should be to affirm itself. We ought never to hope for any other method of getting at the truth if indeterminism be a fact. Doubt of this particular truth will therefore probably be open to us to the end of time, and the utmost that a believer in free-will can ever do will be to show that the deterministic arguments are not coercive." In James's pluralistic world, it was up to the individual to make meaning according to personal ends.

James's conception of free will was not unbounded, however. The depiction of will in The Principles still bore the influence of associationism, particularly Alexander Bain's conception of the reflex arc. For Bain, the brain was primarily a processing center; sensory stimuli entered the brain through the nerves, and the brain responded with a reaction to the stimuli, usually some physical response.

James attempted, as much as possible, to bring his plan for a scientific psychology in line with this indeterminate, teeming conception of mental life. After stating his position contra associationism, he felt prepared to more specifically outline his psychological science in "Chapter Seven: The Methods and

---

89 James, The Principles of Psychology, p. 823. Cf. James's famous journal entry from April 30, 1870, made after reading Renouvier: "My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will." James's conception of the will and consciousness as a selective agent choosing between different ideas, actions, and objects of attention was closely related to Renouvier's definition of free will, "the sustaining of a thought because I chose to when I might have other thoughts." See Chapter One, note 79. Compare this with James's final word on conception: "This whole function of conceiving, of fixing, and holding fast to meanings, has no significance apart from the fact that the conceiver is a creature with partial purposes and private ends." James, The Principles of Psychology, p. 314.

90 James approached relativism, but it would be a mistake to assume he leapt into the abyss. He did not question the existence of an actual external reality, and he was serious in his view that experience with this reality served as a limiting agent on our conceptions.
Snares of Psychology." He began by listing what he thought of as the necessary assumptions of psychology: the psychologist, the thought studied, the thought's object, and the psychologist's reality, to which might be added the existence of a human consciousness and the correlation of that consciousness with nerve physiology. It was the task of psychology to study the operation of individual minds in interaction with reality: "These thoughts are the subjective data of which he treats, and their relations to their objects, to the brain, and to the rest of the world constitute the subject-matter of psychologic science." The primary tool of the psychologist was introspection, which James understood to be vulnerable to various fallacies but felt, nonetheless, to be the only method of getting at mental states. Indeed, James, like Wundt, felt that introspection, like observation in other sciences, could be objective. The experimental method he considered useful, but of secondary value. Indeed, he could hardly conceal his scorn for experimenters:

91 In the "Preface," "Chapter One," and "A Plea for Psychology as a 'Natural Science,'" James had posited the existence of "mental states," including "such things as we call feelings, desires, cognitions, reasoning, decisions, and the like," as a first principle. He considered this more or less synonymous with "state of consciousness," although it might be safer to say that consciousness subsumes changing mental states; it is, in a certain sense, a continuous awareness a "stream" in James's famous metaphor. After arguing for the efficacy of consciousness in the previous chapters, James proceeded to articulate the existence of consciousness as a fait accompli. "I regard this belief [in consciousness] as the most fundamental of all the postulates of Psychology, and shall discard all curious inquiries about its certainty as too metaphysical for the scope of this book." Some correlation between mental states and physical structure was accepted by James immediately in The Principles. James was uncertain about the nature of the relationship between mind and body; he inconsistently seemed to settle upon a form of dualism. See James, The Principles of Psychology, p. 3, 121; James, "A Plea for Psychology as a 'Natural Science,'" and Myers, William James, pp. 54-58.

92 James, The Principles of Psychology, p. 129.

93 James, The Principles of Psychology, 122-126.
"This method taxes patience to the utmost, and could hardly have arisen in a country whose natives could be bored." It was, therefore, particularly suited to the Germans, he asserted, and he was more than content to let them have it. Lurking behind this half joke was a suspicion that psycho-physical experimentation was of limited value and, in any case, inherently tainted with associationism. Finally, James did not think much of the comparative method popular among many English Darwinian psychologists, such as Galton and Romanes. It was of some use in testing hypotheses otherwise derived, but there was a strong danger of misunderstanding animal behavior through anthropomorphism. By assuming the existence of a consciousness that dynamically interacts with its environment and arguing that the best way of understanding this consciousness is through introspection, James supported his stands in the previous chapters against strict materialism. However, in most respects, his definition of a scientific psychology

---

94 James, The Principles of Psychology, pp. 126-127. As mentioned before, James disliked performing experiments and had little interest in giving experimentation a position of great importance in his psychology. As James grew older, he viewed laboratory psychology with greater skepticism. In 1896, he wrote Flournoy, "I have got rid of the laboratory forever, and should resign my place immediately if they reimposed its duties upon me. The results that come from all this laboratory work seem to me to grow more and more disappointing and trivial." W. J. to Théodore Flournoy, December 7, 1896, Robert C. Le Clair, ed. The Letters of William James and Théodore Flournoy (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), p. 61.

95 See James, The Principles of Psychology, pp. 682-691 for James's analysis of the differences between men and animals. In this section, James makes the usual evolutionary assumption that "nature never makes a jump," so animals have the same abilities as men in lesser degrees. Elsewhere, James is willing to consider the possibility of a human soul endowing men and women with unique capacities. See James, The Principles of Psychology, p. 118-119.

96 His introspective method also facilitated the translation of his values into psycho-philosophical theory.
seems conventionally positivist in its aim to develop laws of mental behavior and relationships based upon objective methods.

It would be unfair to say that James did not follow up on his plan for a scientific psychology in the remainder of *The Principles*, but his deep commitment to developing a pluralistic epistemology and a defense of individual agency often found him at cross-purposes to his positivist project. In some famous instances, James pursues materialistic psychological goals. James's theory of emotions argues that what we call an emotion is only the sensibility of some physical process or reaction to external stimuli—for instance, we are sad because we cry, not the other way around.97 James would later claim to be uncomfortable with the chapter, but it fits in well with many of the psychological ideas presented in *The Principles*.98 Even the psychological conception of will—an idea so fundamental to James's philosophy—is bounded within the physical framework of attention and reflex. Free will, James argued, manifested itself in belief and in the capacity to direct attention.99 "The essential achievement of the will, in short, when it is most 'voluntary,' is to ATTEND to a difficult object and hold it fast before the mind."100

The materialistic aspects of James's psychology have been underemphasized in this


99 James did not consider will to be present in action. He subscribed to the ideo-motor theory, which maintained that action automatically followed the idea of action; there was no intermediary sense of effort or will. The will was, in a sense, in the idea.

100 James, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 815.
treatment, but they represent an important side of James’s thought. On the one hand, James claimed, “It is, in short, the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention,” and in his famous chapter on “The Stream of Thought,” James presents an impressionistic view of a continuous consciousness in its totality, suggesting that consciousness resists being broken up into particular mind states and is therefore not accurately understood by scientific analysis.101 On the other hand, chapters such as “Emotion,” “Will,” and “Habit” display an earnest attempt to subject complicated mental phenomena to materialistic explanation. These apparent disagreements make sense when placed in the context of James’s epistemological pluralism. James wanted to develop a science that was limited in its ambitions. Human beings were too individual and too complicated, he suggested, to fall altogether within the scientific gaze, yet mental processes could still be understood scientifically—science simply did not give a complete portrait of mind. James hoped for his psychology to create a knowledge that served his goals of freedom and individuality, not one that imprisoned consciousness within a predictive, controlling system.

The apparent tensions within The Principles of Psychology were to some degree intentional, but not entirely so. The work was an essentially transitional one in both psychology and James’s intellectual development. In writing the book,

James was working through a lifetime of ambivalence and contradictions, and he was clearly still developing certain aspects of his thought. Sometimes, his ambivalences were unwittingly preserved, occasionally preventing James from achieving completely mature insights. But more often, the book rings with a remarkably confident voice and sense of purpose. *The Principles* continues to strike an authentic chord, perhaps because the breadth, inner-tensions, and ambivalences of James’s work seem to embody more fully his pluralistic views than any systematic explanation. Similarly, his career defied easy categorization in an era of professionalization. Transforming his reluctance into determination, James achieved success as psychologist, teacher, philosopher, public intellectual, and, perhaps most surprisingly, as a man. Ultimately, James found the unique individual identity he had craved within these diverse roles, infusing each with his particular values and ideals.

---

102 James almost develops what would have been a revolutionary psychology based upon performative personality, but falls just short. *James*, *The Principles of Psychology*, p. 188.
Publication of *The Principles of Psychology* both cemented James's public and professional reputation and inspired him with confidence in his abilities to bring large projects to fruition. James was already nearly fifty when *The Principles* was completed, but the twenty years until his death in 1910 were by most measures the most intellectually fecund of his life, witnessing the production of ten more books and James's ascendance to international celebrity and financial security. Retrospectively, the book seems even more epochal than he or his peers had realized at the time. In James's life and work, the significance of *The Principles* is unambiguous: The project was both the culmination of his long period of intellectual exploration and psychophysical recuperation beginning in the late sixties, and it marked the onset of the continuously productive final decades of his life. James would continue to suffer from occasional depressive attacks and physical breakdowns in his later years, but these no longer had a debilitating effect upon his confidence in his individual character or capabilities as a scholar.

---

1 James's books after *The Principles of Psychology* were: *Psychology (Briefer Course)* (1892); *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897); *Human Immorality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine* (1898); *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (1899); *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902); *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907); *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to "Pragmatism"* (1909); *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy* (1909); *Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy* (posthumous, 1911); and *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (posthumous, 1912).

2 In 1898, James began to develop the heart troubles that would eventually lead to his death in 1910. He related most of his physical and mental problems during this period to this condition, giving him the diagnostic handle he had lacked in the 1860s. Understanding his ailments with some precision, coupled with his obvious professional success, may have alleviated some of the worries about
Although he still felt uncomfortable with certain aspects of his world, he no longer doubted his essential fitness to live and succeed in that world.

Intellectually, The Principles was the pivotal moment in James’s career. Every major theme of James’s early and mature thought found some expression within The Principles; indeed, much of his later career was devoted to articulating more clearly ideas only suggested in his magnum opus or submerged within the flow of other arguments and expositions. The book was also a leave-taking of sorts, representing James’s last attempt to divorce, however unevenly, the new psychology from its philosophical roots. James’s supposed shift after 1890 from psychology to philosophy has been exaggerated by interpreters assuming, erroneously, a static conception of the disciplinary boundaries between the two fields, but his movement toward more overtly philosophical topics and methods did represent an important change in James’s conception of the relative relationship between the new psychology and philosophy. “I confess that during the years which have elapsed since the publication of the book [The Principles],” he wrote in the “Preface” to an Italian translation of Psychology from 1900, “I have become more and more convinced of the difficulty of treating psychology without inherent weakness that had plagued him earlier in his life. See Bjork, William James, pp. 229-244 for an account of James’s later depressive periods. Bjork asserts that James suffered from a depression in the 1898 and 1899 at least as severe as the one he toiled through in 1868-1869, a fact that has been overlooked by biographers anxious to emphasize the success of James’s philosophical self-cure. Bjork, basing his argument on a journal from the period, may be correct, but this depression seems much different in tone than that of the young James. The older James’s anguish was that of an ambitious man in his professional and intellectual prime prematurely confronting his own mortality. In 1868, the unproven James did not fear death so much as invalidism and the prospect of a long life squandered and rudderless.
introducing some true and suitable philosophical doctrine." The mature James embraced what had been tacit in *The Principles* and his other early writings—the centrality of a core set of convictions in freedom, pluralism, and belief to his scientific psychological work—coming to see this as the inevitable result of pragmatism applied to scholarly activity. Earlier in his career, James’s evident philosophical goals had been tempered by a professed desire to craft a scientific, non-metaphysical psychology, an ambivalence left unresolved in *The Principles*. In the 1890s and 1900s, James seemed to have, by and large, settled this tension in favor of philosophy and metaphysics. Even his remaining psychological interests in his later years were primarily focused on metaphysical phenomena, such as spiritualism and religion.

James did not abandon psychology after 1890, but his understanding of the discipline changed, leading to an increased alienation from the new, scientific psychology. The pluralist epistemological position espoused by James in *The Principles* and exemplified in his method granted different ways of knowing—for instance science and philosophy—equal footing on separate terrain: Science was best suited to answer some questions about experience, while religion or philosophy gave more fulfilling answers to other questions. No single category of knowledge could comprehend the entirety of experience, but this did not make experience necessarily incomprehensible. After *The Principles*, though, James’s pluralism seemed to take on a subtly different form. This later pluralism stated a

---

3 Quoted in Perry, *TCWJBV*, p. 194.
fundamentally anarchic view of experience. His interest in religious and abnormal psychology emerged in part from his desire to illustrate the unpredictable, metaphysical nature of human reality. The world was full of chaos and confusion; all meaning was impressed upon experience by consciousness prior to sensation.\(^4\)

James was now primarily concerned with understanding how this pluralistic universe in its totality could be navigated and understood, not how different aspects could be comprehended, a project that misrepresented and distorted real experience. This philosophical pluralism was more dogmatic than the somewhat naïve pluralism of *The Principles*, as James, in effect, gave philosophy—and with increasing significance, faith and religion—pride of place in translating the pluralistic universe into individual meaning.\(^5\) This was not a return to the religious monism of his father, although a paternal influence did become more prominent in James's later work. Philosophy was no longer one aspect of epistemology for James—it was fundamental. Psychology, as both an account of how human minds understand and a functional aid to education and self-improvement, flowed naturally from a philosophical basis, James felt, making the important psychological questions virtually inseparable from key philosophical questions.\(^6\)

---


\(^6\) When James petitioned Charles Eliot to change his title to professor of philosophy instead of psychology after the hiring of Hugo Münsterberg, he said that he felt that psychology was not “a big enough subject to be represented in the titles of two full professorships.” W. J. to Charles W. Eliot, June 10, 1897, quoted in Bjork, *The Compromised Scientist*, p. 128.
James had always been a somewhat uncomfortable transitional figure in the shift from philosophical to scientific psychology, and by the end of his career his psychological views had more in common with older traditions of philosophical psychology than with many of the ideas of his scientific psychological peers.7

It was as a philosopher that James achieved his greatest reputation, but within the academic culture of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century philosophy, many of James’s ideas and methods were as out-of-place as they were in psychology. This in part stemmed from his general reluctance to conform to professional stylistic standards. A pragmatic bias—a belief that positive applicability to issues of modern life was a basic requirement of intellectual work—had informed James’s psychological and philosophical interests and activities since he began publishing, and this did not change after he began to achieve prominence within intellectual circles. As he wrote in his final book, the posthumously published Some Problems of Philosophy, James believed that, “Philosophy, like life, must keep the doors and windows open,” looking out toward

---

7 James’s mature position toward science was more complicated than it is presented here. His later work only amplified the somewhat tentative erosions of the positivist mystique of scientific objectivity he had advanced in The Principles, but he also claimed that his radical empiricism and pragmatism were truly “scientific,” opposed to the scientism of, in his mind, Huxley and the Continental positivists, because pragmatism weighed all the datum of experience equally and took an experimental approach to truth. This position is indicative of James’s attempts to bring all forms of knowledge under his philosophy. See Gavin, William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague; Lamberth, William James and the Metaphysics of Experience; Siegfried, Chaos and Context, and Taylor, William James on Consciousness Beyond the Margin for more on the relationship between James’s mature philosophy and science.
the bustling plurality of experience in the world. Most professional philosophy of his day, James felt, was too rarified, more concerned with internal logical coherence and bureaucratic distinctions than adherence to the facts of reality. Plus, James wanted his philosophy, like his psychology, to be functional; pragmatism was intended to be a philosophy of action, designed to assist individuals struggling with the uncertainties and confusions of modern life.

James’s literary abilities, particularly his facility with metaphor and parable, were especially suited to rendering his philosophy in a manner easily accessible to a

---


9 James did seem to consider his pluralistic, empirical philosophy to be more objectively true than artificially coherent philosophical systems. In a 1903 notebook, he complained about the “professional-philosophy-shop” exemplified by a congress his colleague Hugo Münsterberg planned to hold at the 1904 St. Louis exhibition. James’s disdain for most academic philosophy, and his feeling of superiority, is evident. The passage merits protracted quotation because it also reveals the continued influence of James’s anti-professionalism tendencies, his apparent philosophical resistance to institutionally sanctified authority. “All neat schematisms with permanent and absolute distinctions, classifications with absolute pretensions, systems with pigeon-holes, etc., have this character [of ‘bad taste’]. All ‘classic,’ clean, cut and dried, ‘noble,’ fixed, ‘eternal,’ Weltanschauung seem to me to violate the character with which life concretely comes and the expression which it bears of being, or at least of involving, a muddle and a struggle, with an ‘ever not quite’ to all our formulas, and novelty and possibility forever leaking in.... Münsterberg’s Congress-program seems to me, e.g., to be sheer humbug in the sense of self-infatuation with an idol of the den, a kind of religious service in honor of professional-philosophy-shop, with its faculty, its departments and sections, its mutual etiquette, its appointments, its great mill of authorities and exclusions and suppressions which the waters of truth are expected to feed to the great class-glory of all who are concerned. To me ‘truth,’ if there be any truth, would seem to exist for the express confusion of all this kind of thing, and to reveal itself in whispers to the ‘meek lovers of the good’ in their solitude—the Darwins, the Locke, etc.,—and to be expressly incompatible with officialism. ‘Officials’ are products of no deep stratum of experience. Münsterberg’s Congress seems to be the perfectly inevitable expression of the system of his Grundzüge, an artificial construction for the sake of making the authority of professors inalienable, no matter what asinities they may utter, as if the bureaucratic mind were the full flavor of nature’s self-revelation. It is obvious that such a difference as this, between me and Münsterberg, is a splendid expression of pragmatism. I want a world of anarchy, Münsterberg one of bureaucracy, and each appeals to ‘nature’ to back him up. Nature partly helps and partly resists each of us.” This concluding moment of self-reflection, while striking a somewhat disingenuous note, indicates that James was not unaware that his philosophy could undercut his authority as well as his opponents’. Quoted in Perry, *TCWJBV*, pp. 385-386.
wide public of diverse education. This style was inseparable from the content of James's thought and was perfectly designed to convey the elusive nature of James's reality, his belief in the essential imprecision of definitions, categories, and logical imperatives. This also meant that, despite his many fans and friends amongst the international intelligentsia, James's mature works, such as Pragmatism, were often greeted with ringing criticism from professional philosophers for their inconsistencies and logical inadequacies. No matter his obvious successes throughout his career and his almost unimpeachable reputation, James took these barbs personally, planning, and putting-off, a work of serious academic philosophy—eventually published posthumously as Some Problems of Philosophy—for most of the last decade of his life. This work was to be the philosophical equivalent of his Principles, a comprehensive textbook stamping James's maverick personality on the professional community.

James did leave his mark on American philosophy and American psychology, but the nature of his influence eludes simple characterization. James was a pivotal, inspirational figure in both fields, yet his ideas spawned no true school of psychology and it is the pragmatism of Peirce and Dewey that has had, arguably, a more lasting legacy. Countless texts in the new psychology followed in

---

10 The book was a mixed success. James's philosophy was not suited to any traditional presentation. His was a popular philosophy, a fact he sometimes openly regretted. "I actually hate lecturing," he wrote in a letter from 1908, "and this job condemns me to publish another book written in picturesque and popular style when I was settling down to something whose manner would be more strengwissenschaftlich, i.e., concise, dry, and impersonal." Quoted in Seigfried, Chaos and Context, p. 8. James was consistent in both his criticisms of mainstream academia and his desire to be fully accepted into the professional fold. See Perry, TCWJBV, pp. 352-356.
the wake of The Principles, exploring some aspects of James’s template for the new science, but few, if any, took up the wandering, vernacular style that had been so central to the book’s substance or echoed his underlying commitment to individual self-control and agency. Similarly, James’s primary tool of psychological inquiry, introspection, soon fell almost completely out of use within the science.11 James is often characterized in histories as the father of functional psychology, and this is partly true in two senses of the word: James advocated a functional view of consciousness, and he argued for a psychology that was useful. But the differences between James’s psychological vision and the functional and applied psychologies of the behaviorists that came after him at Harvard are fundamental. The function of James’s psychology was always directed toward the individual and was wary of, if not outright opposed to, the social utility imagined by many behaviorists. He certainly found their deterministic, mechanistic, and experimental agenda disagreeable. In fact, James and his ideas did not fit comfortably within any major current in American psychology by the turn of the century.12


12 No work satisfactorily placing James within the history of American psychology has been written. See Bjork, The Compromised Scientist for an incomplete look into the relationship between James and some of his psychological contemporaries. See also Perry, TCWJBV, pp. 198-199. Many scholars have located Jamesian legacies in various psychological schools of the twentieth century. These attempts are sometimes insightful but do little to clarify James’s though historically. See, among others, Rand B. Evans, “William James, The Principles of Psychology, and Experimental Psychology,” The American Journal of Psychology 103, #4 (1990): 433; Mary Henle, “William James and Gestalt Psychology,” in Johnson and Henley, eds., Reflections on The Principles of
There was, ultimately, something deeply unscientific about James’s mature thought. The emphasis he placed on individuality and anarchy did not easily suggest translation of mind into meaningful, general scientific laws or theories. James’s psychological perspective likely had a more immediate impact on American psychiatry and the interpretation and treatment of individual psychological and psychosomatic difficulties. His publications and lectures consistently straddled the genres of academic scholarship and self-help, and his many admirers looked toward his work for personal inspiration and assistance in their own lives. Although James did not accept the Freudian conception of the unconscious or endorse other most other aspects of Freudian psychology, many of his ideas, particularly his work in habit, religion, and psychic phenomena, looked toward the eventual American embrace of psychoanalysis. Like Freud, James...
was also a stylistic innovator, inspiring the artistic exploration of basic assumptions about language and thought during the twentieth century. James’s obvious distaste for professional institutionalization also meant that he willingly remained on the sidelines of the psychological profession during its formative decades. While *The Principles* was justly considered by most contemporaries to signal the coming-of-age of the new psychology in the United States, it was also one of the last great examples of a pre-professional style of scholarly work in America. Facing out from the gates of the academy as much as in, speculative and open-ended, and unabashedly personal in its idiosyncrasies and sources, *The Principles of Psychology* moved through intellectual waters professional scholars would largely abandon in the ensuing decades.

James’s vision for academic psychology outlined, for the most part, a path not taken. This itself accounts for some of his continued relevance—many of his psychological ideas still seem fresh because they remain alternatives to the mainstream of psychological research. To be sure, James’s positive contributions to psychology in its formative period were crucial. *The Principles* helped establish psychology as an independent academic discipline and, by emphasizing the inadequacies of the two major theoretical traditions in psychology, faculty understanding of ‘functional’ psychology, which is the real psychology.” W. J. to Mary W. Calkins, September 19, 1909, quoted in Perry, *TCWJB*, p. 199. Also see W. J. to Théodore Flournoy, September 28, 1909, *The Letters of William James and Théodore Flournoy*, pp. 222-225. For more on James’s views on Freud, see Myers, *William James*, pp. 210 (the unconscious) and 472 (religion) and see also Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), pp. 211-212.
psychology and associationism, opened the way for the introduction of new
conceptions of the human mind. James’s disassociation of Darwinian theories from
empirical and Spencerian psychology was also groundbreaking, and many of his
specific ideas, such as his theory of emotions and the reflex action, were a basis of
continuing research.

Nevertheless, James’s importance to future generations of American
psychologists and in the history of American ideas transcends his direct intellectual
or professional influence. After The Principles, James became the great man he
had always hoped to be, both individual and successful. But like all great men and
women, the fact of his greatness often overwhelmed his ideas. Even before his
death, James became an American icon, a man whose personality had greater
legacy than any particular intellectual contributions. People who knew James, even
after meeting him only casually, inevitably commented on the impact of his
character; engagement with him breathed life into his ideas.\textsuperscript{16} Since his death,
readers have continued to find James’s biography and the personality evident in his

\textsuperscript{16} There are countless testimonials to James’s personality from both students and peers. His
liveliness, exuberance, generosity, open-mindedness, and mental toughness were all cited. A couple
of recollections: James student Rollo Walter Brown thought he was “an irresistible gust of life
coming down the street. Not that he moved along with any noisy kind of strenuousness. Rather he
seemed to be a man who had passed through some great fire of suffering and purifying that made
him alert to the world about him and responsive to almost every kind of people in it, so that he
vii. Freud walked with James after his lecture at Clark University and was impressed with his
counterpart’s stoicism. As they walked, James suddenly stopped short, feeling the first signs of an
attack of angina pectoris. He handed Freud his briefcase and told him he would catch up with him
when the attack passed. “Since then,” Freud remembered, “I have always wished for a similar
fearlessness in face of the near end of life.” Quoted in Gay, \textit{Freud}, p. 211.
publications the key to his thought. James’s struggles with fundamental modernist issues—questions of free will, autonomy, and personal belief—have continued to resonate with readers. James has come to embody one side of the modernist personality: the ambivalent individual, alienated from his times, yet successful within them—the modernist contra modernism. Unlike so many exemplars of modernist dualism, James’s life was a story of success, of triumphantly crafting identity and meaning in life and work. This note of iconic heroism undoubtedly contributes to his continuing popularity and resonance.

James was a protean figure who managed, nonetheless, to achieve a remarkable consistency in his commitments and concerns. This thesis has attempted to examine the origin of some of James’s key values, place them within the charged social and intellectual context of post-bellum America, and examine how James’s individual engagement with his milieus affected his work as psychologist and academic. What emerges is the portrait of a man very much of his time. James’s attempt to craft an identity true to the expectations of his past and the demands of his present was perhaps the crucial factor influencing his involvement with major ideas of his day and leading to his commitment to a

17 Jacques Barzun’s testimony to James has been echoed many times over: “...his ideas, his words, his temperament speak to me with intimacy as well as force... ‘he does me good.’ ...He is for me the most inclusive mind I can listen to, the most concrete and the least hindered by trifles...he helps me to understand what his contemporaries and mine were and are doing. I stroll with him again and again because he knows better than anyone else the material and spiritual country I am traveling through.” Barzun, A Stroll with William James, p. 4.
pluralist epistemology. His desire to establish a unique and satisfying social and individual self, navigating between the professional paths open to him and his hope for distinction and freedom, led directly to his interest in the new psychology and his conception of what that science should be. But James remained a transitional figure, ambivalent about science and professionalization; this contributed to both his success, his ability to articulate problems in a style that resonated with his public, and his final disaffection with the new psychology he had helped establish.

I have left many important themes unexplored or merely suggested. A comprehensive analysis of James's life and career as a professional awaits completion, as does a more careful analysis of James's significance within the American academy, psychology, and late-nineteenth-century society in general. By highlighting the contingent nature of many of James's ideas and his professional plan for psychology, I do mean to suggest a similar contingency for the actual course psychology in the United States took after James, but this thesis has not provided any satisfactory analysis of the American psychological community, its constituents, professional ideals, or theories. Furthermore, while I make no claim for James as a representative figure of any Zeitgeist, his sensitive, personal engagement with social and intellectual trends toward scientization and professionalization might illuminate problems faced by other members of James's class and background. As a tentative case study of the circular chain of interaction between an individual's social setting, his or her work, and the effect of that work
on society, this study might provide useful theoretical insights for other biographers and historians. Ultimately, this thesis is a study of James's interaction with his historical moment. By attempting to take seriously James as a man of weaknesses and doubts and the complex nature of influence, individual history, and social setting, I hope to do justice to his achievements.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


---


---


---


James, Henry Jr. *Notes of a Son and Brother.* New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944.


Nott, Josiah, et. al. *Types of mankind: or, Ethnological researches, based upon the ancient monuments, paintings, sculptures, and crania of races, and upon their natural, geographical, philological and Biblical history: illustrated by selections from the inedited papers of Samuel George Morton and by additional contributions from Prof. L. Agassiz, LL.D.; W. Usher, M.D.; and Prof. H. S. Patterson, M.D.; by J. C. Nott, M.D.; and Geo. R. Gliddon.* Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott & Co., 1965.


