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# CLAREMONT

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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

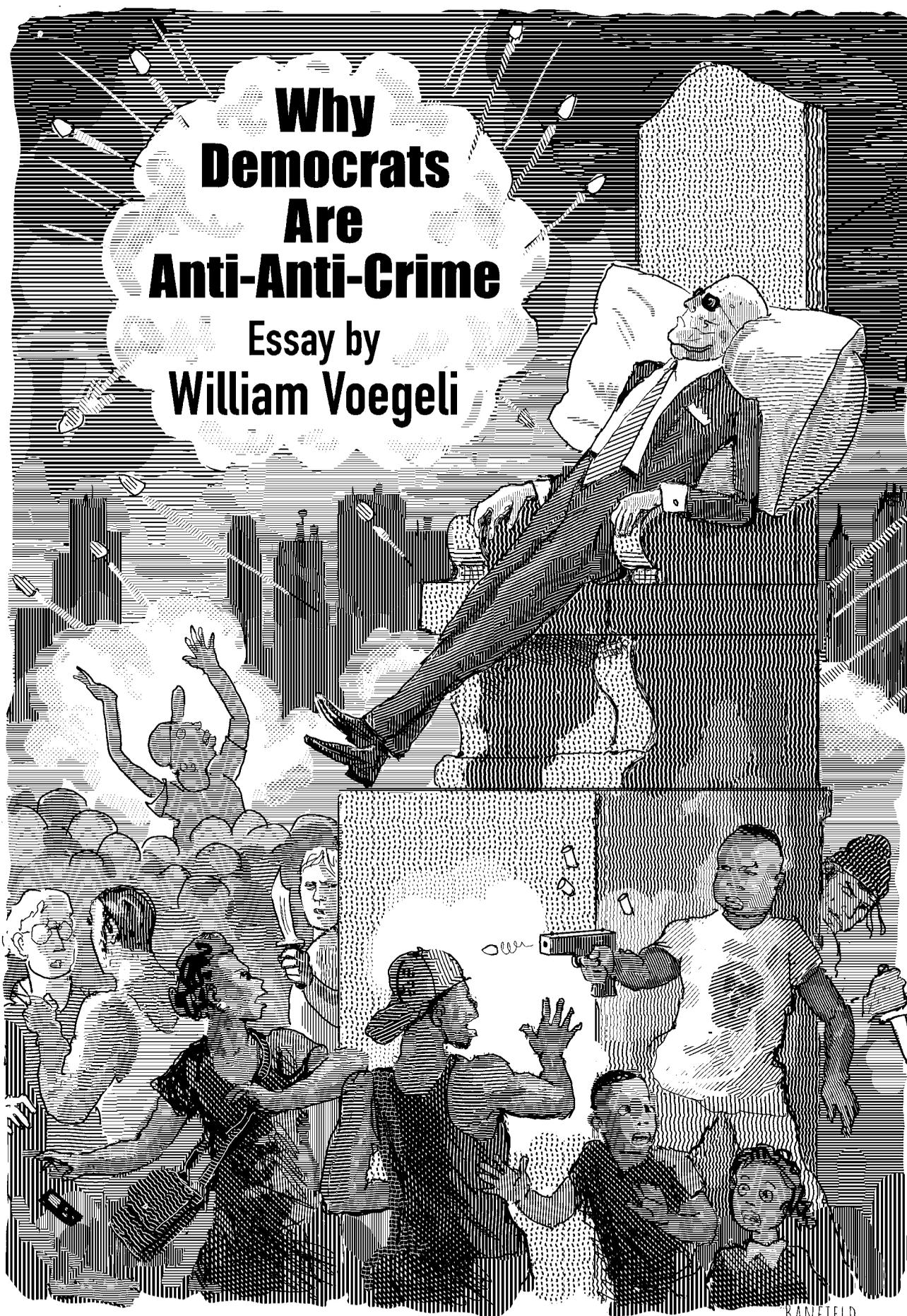
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Essay by Algis Valiunas

## AMERICAN PRAGMATIST

*William James and the modern sensibility.*



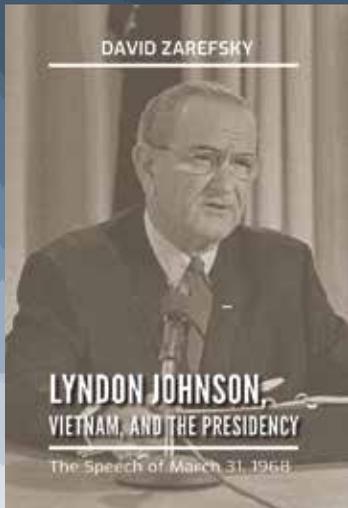
**M**ORE THAN A CENTURY AFTER HIS death, William James (1842–1910) remains perhaps the most influential and most revered American philosopher. He was and still is a decidedly liberal hero, and one with a popular touch, who explicitly rejected esoteric writing and spoke the truth as he saw it loud and clear to as many people as his voice could reach. Although he was anything but a showman, his lectures to his students at Harvard, self-improvers at Chautauqua, and gathered intellectual eminences at Oxford and Edinburgh were triumphs that made him admired and even beloved.

Most celebrated as the proponent of pragmatism—the Aaron to Charles Sanders Peirce’s Moses—he sought to convince both the experts and the multitude that truth resided not in the rigor of disembodied logic but in the palpable good that issued from a line of thought: the reality that an idea represented lay in its being of “practical account.” When you light upon a “rational conception,” he insisted, you feel it in your person: with a satisfying thrill the body endorses the mind’s discovery, as James wrote in *The Sentiment of Rationality* (1879). Yet even to speak of philosophical discovery may be misleading. Phi-

losophy for James is at least as much a human creation—it might be called a willed revelation—as it is a disinterested discovery about the world; the thinker’s character and *partis pris* matter as much in doing philosophy as in writing novels or painting pictures or delivering political speeches. “It is almost incredible that men who are themselves working philosophers should pretend that any philosophy can be, or ever has been, constructed without the help of personal preference, belief, or divination.”

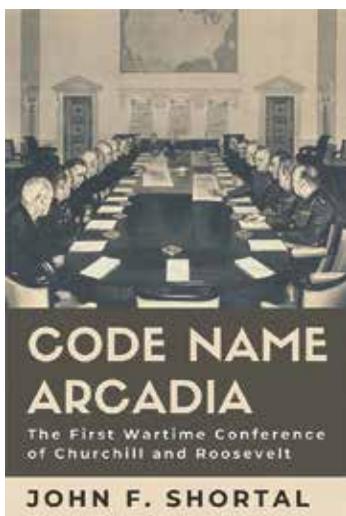
James elevated to a new dignity the “*anti-intellectualist* tendencies,” as he called them, of

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the pragmatic method. Feeling his thoughts and giving thought to his feelings, he was complete in a way modern men rarely are, since "the dissociation of sensibility" that T.S. Eliot famously blamed on the damnable 17th century. James was at once theoretical man and practical man, and the former served the latter. Whether a philosophy is convincing, he believed, depends on how it makes other men feel and act—especially how it makes them act. In a very modern, very American way, the ends of thought were to be found in the active life. As James wrote in *Pragmatism* (1907), he was undertaking a wholesale reorientation of philosophy: "looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts."

These facts might include fruits of the spirit that most philosophers regard as far from factual, indeed inimical to the very essence of philosophy. James favored Blaise Pascal's line that the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing. He treated religious insights as seriously as he did indisputable bald realities, and esteemed saints and mystics among the supreme benefactors of mankind. James was not pious himself, saying he could not possibly pray, for trying to do so made him "feel foolish and artificial"; but he was reverent toward the exceptional men and women who saw their way into mysteries that his own nature could not penetrate.

His consuming interest in extraordinary mental and spiritual experience led him into byways where respectable intellectuals do not often show their faces. He even served as president of the Society for Psychical Research, dedicated to "bringing science and the occult together"—an unnatural coupling to most learned observers. Detractors charged him with credulity, but they did not refute the possibility that what is commonly called the supernatural actually belongs to the province of nature beyond the reach of what James termed "mechanical rationalism." In "What Psychical Research Has Accomplished" (1896) he declared, "Religious thinking, ethical thinking, poetical thinking, teleological, emotional, sentimental thinking, what one might call the personal view of life to distinguish it from the impersonal and mechanical, and the romantic view of life to distinguish it from the rationalistic view, have been, and even still are, outside of well-drilled scientific circles, the dominant forms of thought." Philosophy to his mind could not simply dismiss out of hand such traditional human wisdom. Most philosophers would reply that to dismiss such stuff is precisely philosophy's appointed role.

Thinkers as different as Friedrich Nietzsche and Leo Strauss have taught that in studying a writer one must begin by trying to understand him as he understood himself. In the case of James, that means taking in his "personal preference, belief, or divination"—conducting a biographical excavation of the experiences that formed his mind and soul. For the facts of his life, and in certain instances for their interpretation, I have relied on four valuable books: Ralph Barton Perry's *The Thought and Character of William James: Briefer Version* (1948), the distillation of the 1935 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography; Robert D. Richardson's *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (2006); Alexander Livingston's *Damn Great Empires!: William James and the Politics of Pragmatism* (2016); and John Kaag's *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life* (2020).

### Getting Started

WILLIAM JAMES POSSESSED THE INTELLECT and talent that could have taken his life in several different successful directions. His father, a Swedenborgian mystic of independent means who tirelessly composed tomes of metaphysical extravagance (*The Nature of Evil*) that almost nobody read, saw to it that his eldest son's schooling was cosmopolitan, many-sided, and venturesome. William was rather more venturesome than his equally accomplished younger brother, Henry, the great novelist. When delicate little Henry wanted to tag along on a boyish adventure, William let him know namby-pambies were not welcome: "I play with boys who curse and swear." When William was 13 his father wrote, "I surround him as far as possible with an atmosphere of freedom," and the family headed off from New York to London, Paris, and Geneva for an excursion that lasted three years. The youth thrived under the regime without regulations. At 16 William was writing to a friend back in New York that he "love[s] every human being and every living and inanimate thing," that the sea and sky fill him with "wild joy," that "as soon as governments and priests are abolished, such a thing as sin will not be known," and that he intends to "be a farmer and do as much good in the natural history line as I can. How much that is, God only knows. I pray that I may do something." He would have some difficulty deciding what that something ought to be. He would also soon lose that feeling of debonair ease and natural grace.

On returning to the United States, William thought he'd go to Union College, where his closest friend was a student, but his father objected: "He says that Colleges are hotbeds



of corruption where it [is] *impossible* to learn anything." Residing in Newport, Rhode Island induced a craving for the practice of high art, and the patriarch thought it best to send William back to Europe, to Germany this time, until the dangerous longing abated. But to paternal dismay, William came back to Newport determined to become a painter, and he set himself to studying with the renowned William Morris Hunt.

Six months of intensive daily work were enough to convince him that he would be better off doing something else somewhere else—say, chemistry in the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard. By the fall of 1861 the Civil War was competing with his scientific interests for his attention, but his chronic sickliness—eye problems, constant back pain that he called “dorsal insanity,” a tendency to emotional morbidity that would eventually threaten actual insanity—kept him out of the military, more or less honorably. Biology came to attract him more than chemistry, and he attended religiously the lectures of the racist, anti-Darwinian, and masterly Louis Agassiz, the Swiss émigré who was America’s chief claim to scientific excellence at the time. Although William changed direction yet again and enrolled in the Harvard Medical School, which then required no college or even high school diploma, in March 1865 he signed on to Agassiz’s expedition to the Brazilian jungle that was out to prove definitively the untruth of Darwin’s natural selection. After eight months of exhausting field work, the academic cloister was looking better than ever before: “I long to be back to books, studies, etc., after this elementary existence,” he wrote home plaintively.

A year of jungle science was quite enough, and in March 1866 William was once again in medical school. His resolve to finish what he had started there, however, was fouled by continuing ill health—the combination of withering lumbago, impaired vision, and sepulchral melancholy that was to bedevil him for the next several years. Travel sounded like a possible restorative, and in the spring of 1867 he took off for Germany, again the cynosure of recent developments in experimental physiology, the next big thing in medicine. In Dresden, Berlin, and Heidelberg, the newly conceived connection between physiology and psychology was transforming both disciplines. Captivated, almost happy, William was beginning to understand what the next huge step in his scientific development would cover.

Personal moral transformation was occurring as well, as the passion for ancient Greek wisdom that was permeating German intellectual life at the time touched the wandering American: William enthused in letters home

about “the cool acceptance by the bloody old heathens of everything that happened around them, their indifference to evil in the abstract, their want of what we call sympathy, the essentially definite character of their joys, or at any rate of their sorrows (for their joy was perhaps coextensive with life itself).” The problem of evil had long penetrated William’s vitals, as it had been his father’s gnawing obsession, and it came as a profound relief to understand that classical moral genius saw only innocent life where the suffering moderns smelled out malignancy. “The Homeric Greeks ‘accepted the universe,’ their only notion of evil was its [the universe’s] perishability—we say the world in its very existence is evil—they say the only evil is that everything in it in turn ceases to exist.”

**Books mentioned in this essay:**

*The Thought and Character of William James: Briefer Version*,  
by Ralph Barton Perry.  
Harvard University Press,  
402 pages, out-of-print

*William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*,  
by Robert D. Richardson.  
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt,  
622 pages, out-of-print

*Damn Great Empires!: William James and the Politics of Pragmatism*,  
by Alexander Livingston, Oxford  
University Press, 240 pages,  
\$150 (cloth), \$32.95 (paper)

*Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life*,  
by John Kaag.  
Princeton University Press, 224 pages,  
\$22.95 (cloth), \$14.95 (paper)

Under Greek tutelage, William was beginning to join in mental combat with Christian theodicy, Schopenhauerian pessimism, and Hegelian dialectic, the three-headed nemesis that habitually menaced any hope he had of achieving tranquility. Here commenced the salvage operation that would rescue James from his spiritual shipwreck.

**Affliction of Soul**

**T**HE PROCESS WOULD TAKE SOME TIME; he had yet to hit bottom. James returned to Harvard to take his medical degree in 1869, the only degree he would ever

earn. But this hard-won success only compounded his perplexity about what he wanted to do with his life. Actually practicing medicine was not a live option; his ailing back and his disorderly mind were fiercely against it. He was still living with his parents in a Boston suburb and spending his time reading novels. The resources of his intelligence and character were being fatally depleted. The death from tuberculosis of his brilliant, beautiful, and adored cousin, Minnie Temple—a model for Henry James’s Daisy Miller—sent William crashing into despondency with no end in sight.

In his masterpiece, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James would recount a nearly psychotic episode from that time, in which he was overcome by revulsion at his own being and terror at the world he lived in. He originally attributed this account to an anonymous French sufferer, exemplar of the “sick soul,” but he would eventually acknowledge that it really came from his own hell:

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...with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them enclosing his entire figure.... *That shape am I*, I felt, potentially.

This apparent premonition of his own psychic deliquescence was nearly enough to drive him mad on the spot. For months he could not bear to be left alone or to venture out in the dark. Yet there was some benefit to this devastation, in his enhanced compassion for the “morbid feelings” of others, and his revived sense of religious hope, however desperate and tenuous that might have been. “I have always thought that this experience of melancholia of mine had a religious bearing.” Only his repeated invocation of familiar passages of Scripture, such as “I am the resurrection and the life,” he believed, saved him from raging insanity or possible suicide.

As a homemade remedy for what ailed him, William reread his father’s books and investigated Buddhist texts and the Hindu Upanishads. He began to see that his pitiable condition had been precipitated by wrong thought—as intellectuals’ psychological ruination often is—and he set about getting his mind right. Thinking of Minnie Temple’s



heroic boldness and grace as she was dying invigorated him to face his own terrors with some modicum of courage. And in the writings of Charles Renouvier, a French adherent of Immanuel Kant, William found precisely the antidote to his affliction of soul, which had convinced him of his utter helplessness in the face of the bleak world's iron law. Materialist determinism, belief in an inescapable predestined fate, was the source of his moral sickness unto death. But freedom lay entirely within his grasp, and he seized the opportunity to change his life dramatically, as he wrote in his diary: "My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will."

To believe in free will, James would later reflect, is to believe in chance, in both senses of that word. For things beyond one's control happen by accident, not according to some inexorable mechanical doom, and once one has realized this truth, new opportunities ramify from every contingency, so that one can choose what to make of them. His newfound sense of unbounded freedom enabled him to focus his energies and to pursue a more deliberate course. What had formerly oppressed him was the fear that he might be, in G.W. Leibniz's dire phrase, a "spiritual automaton," a pathetic creature with only the illusion of freedom, propelled in lockstep along a track he had no choice but to follow. Simply announcing his belief in free will liberated James to choose decisively.

Despite this breakthrough, progress came only gradually. But in time the mental and spiritual resolve that he would call, in one of his best-known books, *The Will to Believe* (1896), completely redirected the course of his life. The title piece, originally an address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown, is "an essay in justification of faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced." Again, following Pascal, the heart has its reasons. Yet despite the fervor of his sermonizing to impressionable youth, for James himself the will to believe might more accurately be named the will not to disbelieve; but even this half-hearted inclination toward belief was sufficient to lift him out of soul-killing desperation.

Emerging friendship with other gifted men also helped immeasurably. Charles Darwin reputedly averred, "There were enough brilliant minds at the American Cambridge in the 1860s to furnish all the universities of England." In 1871 or 1872 several of these minds joined forces to found the Metaphysical Club. James, Charles Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and several lesser planets revolved around the sun of Chauncey Wright,

then by far the principal star, though now less well known than the others. It was a society to foster amiable and searching conversation about the latest innovations in the world of thought, and "to twist the tail of the cosmos," as Holmes put it. The habitually retiring James began to open up and flourish in the company of their "charmed circle." He learned the most from Peirce, a logician like a thinking engine, whom in his own intuitive fashion the very different James deeply understood: no one else, Peirce would attest, better comprehended "the mainspring of my life better than he did." Others he got to know over the years would offer similar testimonials to James's life-enhancing friendship.

### The Thrill of Struggle

JAMES'S LIFE BEGAN TO TAKE ON A PLEASING shape. Important practicalities fell into place. He was given a teaching appointment at Harvard, and took over a class on Comparative Anatomy and Physiology

He wrote in his diary: "My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will."

in January 1873. In February he confided to his diary that "[p]hilosophy I will nevertheless regard as my vocation and never let slip a chance to do a stroke at it." A couple years later he was teaching a course on *The Relations between Physiology and Psychology*, a milestone on his way to the writing of his most ambitious work, a two-volume 1,400-page behemoth, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), which took 12 years to complete, and which Jacques Barzun called James's *Moby-Dick*, a book indispensable to an American education. James does psychology like both a physiologist and a philosopher. The seeds of his pragmatism are sown in his definition of consciousness: "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 these ends, discerning which facts further them and which do not." Cognition is not consciousness, but only the instrument that consciousness uses to pursue its appointed ends—just as philosophy is the agent that serves practical creaturely needs.

James recognized the excellence and the peculiar needs of men quite unlike himself, and this quality of his temperament underlay his philosophical advocacy of "a pluralistic universe," as he titled one of his books, which grew out of a series of lectures in 1908 that drew the biggest crowds of philosophy fans Oxford had ever seen. Each man seeks accommodation in his own way from an alien universe, in the hope of quelling the importunities of his distinctive nature. "The aim of knowledge," says Hegel, "is to divest the objective world of its strangeness, and to make us more at home in it." Different men find their minds more at home in very different fragments of the world." A thinker's "vision" is the most important thing about him, more important than his logic, and that vision is invariably partial—meaning both incomplete and prejudiced. "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 the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it." Philosophy is the expression of "personal preference" based upon one's reactions to the accidents—the chances—that have happened to come one's way. "All philosophers, accordingly, have conceived of the whole world after the analogy of some particular feature of it which has particularly captivated their attention."

James finds empiricism, which explains wholes by parts, superior to rationalism, which explains parts by wholes. He rejects the rationalist or "intellectualist" tendency to conceive the truth as absolute, although the emotional need that the absolute fills speaks in its favor: "the assurance that however disturbed the surface may be, at bottom all is well with the cosmos—central peace abiding at the heart of endless agitation." Thus James comes round, as he often does, to seeing the problem of evil at the center of his inquiry. The philosophy of the absolute seeks to explain, or to explain away, the existence of evil. Pluralism calls on every man to do his part in diminishing the universal sum of evil in whatever small way he can. "In any pluralistic metaphysic, the problems that evil presents are practical, not speculative. Not why evil should exist at all, but how we can lessen the actual amount of it, is the sole question we need there consider."

James jettisons the essentials of Christian theodicy while retaining certain Christian moral imperatives, which suited the secular democratic temper, and especially the progressivism of that era, in crucial respects. He seeks at the same time to encourage the "joy..



perhaps coextensive with life itself," however brutal that life might get, which he sees as the characteristic feeling and triumphant achievement of the classical Greeks. In essays such as "On Some Mental Effects of the Earthquake" (1906), "The Energies of Men" (1907), and "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1910), the thrill of struggle for the noblest ends resounds like a call to arms. Severe trial, he believes, brings out the best soldierly qualities in people. In "The Moral Equivalent of War," with which he coined his most celebrated phrase, he confesses his progressive faith "in the reign of peace and in the gradual advent of some sort of socialistic equilibrium," but he proceeds to invoke "the old morals of military honour" and "the military ideals of hardihood and discipline," which are needed to stiffen the spines of a populace softened by easy living, and to inculcate a comparable devotion to the civilian tasks of the currently peaceable world.

### But Is It Enough?

IT WAS OF COURSE THEODORE ROOSEVELT who most famously proclaimed the surpassing virtues of "the strenuous life" in an 1899 speech, and by example in the supremely manly life he led. James also preached eloquently in that vein—although he tended to strain against the very things that Roosevelt strained for. Both men were proud Progressives but they differed hugely on some of the most important points of doctrine. Victory over "Spanish tyranny" imposed what Rudyard Kipling called "the White Man's burden" on the United States in the Philippines, and Roosevelt denounced those anti-imperialists who feared to assume the burden, or thought it too expensive or troublesome. In a letter to a friend James announced himself just the sort of humanitarian that T.R. inveighed against, and spat the arch-imperialist's own words back in his face: "If the Anglo-Saxon race would drop its sniveling cant it would have a good deal less of a 'burden' to carry. We're the most loathsomely canting crew that God ever made."

Among progressives today, James's views on foreign policy enjoy far greater favor than Roosevelt's: the philosopher is seen as decent and humane, as against the political man's bloody-minded bravado. The most progressive professions of universal benevolence, however, are never far from the most poisonous sentiments toward those who might impede the long march to the peaceable kingdom. Witness James's 1901 letter to Katharine Sands Godkin, the wife of the editor of the *Nation*, which then provided orthodox weekly sermons on progressive scripture just as it does now; the subject is the assassination by an anarchist of President William McKinley, whose death elevated Theodore Roosevelt to the White House. "Czolgosz has been our great deliverer! You've no idea how it lightens the atmosphere to have that type of being gone!—I mean the McK. type." One wouldn't readily have guessed how much the great American sage has in common with today's imbecile pop singers and third-rate actors who dream of saving the republic by heroic violence.

Where McKinley and Roosevelt were James's foremost antagonists among practical men, George Santayana, who was James's student and then his colleague at Harvard, was his nemesis among philosophers, though the two men were always on cordial terms. In *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1920), his study and critique of American philosophy and education, especially at Harvard, Santayana declares that James's temperament unfitted him for the life of disinterested speculation and rapt contemplation.

There is a sense in which James was not a philosopher at all. He once said to me: "What a curse philosophy would be if we couldn't forget all about it!" In other words, philosophy was not to him what it has been to so many, a consolation and sanctuary in a life which would have been unsatisfying without it.... Philosophy to him was rather like a maze in which he happened to find himself wan-

dering, and what he was looking for was the way out.

In "the hortatory tradition of college sages," James, like most of his Harvard colleagues, sought to point his students toward the good life without knowing what the good life is. "They had much experience of personal goodness, and love of it; they had standards of character and right conduct," Santayana continued; "but as to what might render human existence good, excellent, beautiful, happy, and worth having as a whole, their notions were utterly thin and barbarous. They had forgotten the Greeks, or never known them."

Of course we have seen that James in fact did admire the joyous Greek acceptance of life's sad brevity. What Santayana has in mind instead is the Greek conception of the philosophic life. Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* subtly but decisively elevates the theoretical life over the life of action, intellectual virtue over moral virtue. The man who devotes himself to thinking of the necessary things, the eternal things that cannot be other than they are, knows a god-like happiness superior to that even of the great-souled man whose moral excellence is limited to mastery of the things subject to human choice, the practical things. And Plato in his *Symposium* has the wise woman Diotima teach Socrates about an elevated form of *eros* in which two men contemplate the pure essence of beauty together. William James quite contrarily subordinates the philosophic life to the active life; and instead of erotic identity in thought, he honors above all the superabundance of thought and feeling on the part of people dissimilar in essential respects. His lodestars are the democratic virtues advocated by John Stuart Mill and Walt Whitman: freedom and variety. James cherishes the things that most Americans cherish. Santayana makes one question whether those are really good enough.

*Algis Valiunas is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and a contributing editor of the New Atlantis.*

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