

#### IV.—WILLIAM JAMES AND HIS PHILOSOPHY.

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As a philosopher, William James was singularly fortunate in the matter of education. He was brought up in close familiarity with the concrete sciences of physiology, biology and medicine, and under the eye of a naturalist of genius, Agassiz. And like Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Mill, Spencer, to mention only English writers, he was never taught any philosophy academically. He sometimes said that the first philosophical lectures at which he was present were those he was himself called upon to give as a professor at Harvard. As seems only natural in the son of a Swedenborgian writer, and in the brother of Henry James, the novelist, he was clearly impelled by his personal bent to the study of life and mind. After what was perhaps not altogether a false start as an artist, he began the approach to his manifest destiny through the portals of the Medical School at Harvard. With Harvard he remained identified until his retirement in 1907—up to within three years, that is, of his death on the 26th August, 1910, at the age of sixty-eight. As a student of medicine he was naturally drawn to physiology. As a physiologist his interest centred in the functioning of the brain and nervous system; and he was thus brought face to face with the biological fact that the brain is not merely an organ for the registration of sensations, nor even for 'disinterested' intellectual construction, but is, quite specifically, an organ of reaction upon stimulation, *i.e.* an instrument of action. His dissatisfaction, on the other hand, with the vagueness and inconsistency of the materialistic theorising in regard to that fact, drove him to a closer study of the nature of experience as seen from within. And so he woke one day to find himself a devoted student of the human mind, with that freshness and lucidity of vision which comes alone to the man who is permitted to follow his soul's affinities whithersoever they lead him, and is not wearied and staled by having to wade through a traditional syllabus carefully adjusted to the interest of examiners.

The demon of logical *Folgerichtigkeit*, backed by superficial appearances, will here insist on noting that from psychology James was led on to philosophy. But it would be truer to say that he remained a psychologist at heart, and that it was precisely his psychologic insight that enabled him to discern the personal sources of the big philosophical antitheses. James's fidelity, therefore, to what may *sub specie aeternitatis* be reputed so trivial a thing as the human soul and its destinies, need not necessarily be construed as a philosophical limitation. It can, in fact, be so construed only if the distinction between psychology on the one hand, and logic and metaphysics on the other, be taken so absolutely as is the fashion more especially with 'idealistic' writers. But what has strangely escaped the notice of such writers is, that the assertion of this distinction as irreducible and absolute is really a *confession*—a confession, namely, of total inability to establish any intelligible relation whatsoever between the Absolute and the human individual. It would not be correct to say that the distinction, so taken, is responsible for the absolutist fiasco: it is that fiasco.<sup>1</sup> For here, at least, it is true that there is nothing in the end but what was in the beginning.

James himself does not argue this question dialectically: such was not his way. But the *Principles of Psychology* show on every page how, for the psychologist, the abstract distinction between psychology and philosophy begins to fade in the light of concrete investigation; while the incidental criticisms of current philosophical doctrines perpetually suggest that for the metaphysician the only choice is between

<sup>1</sup> This has been, in principle, more fully shown in my articles on "Green's Refutation of Empiricism" in *MIND*, January, 1900, N.S., No. 33, and on "Pragmatism: the Evolution of Truth" in the *Quarterly Review*, April, 1900, No. 419. In Green's case the fiasco takes the shape of asserting the impossibility of 'comprehending in a single conception' what are nevertheless pontifically declared to be two 'aspects' of one and the same consciousness. But in every defence of Absolute Idealism the final *impasse* is essentially the same. And in every case the *impasse* is simply the final bringing to confused consciousness of a diremption inherent in the 'philosophy of identity' from the beginning. There are, however, several possible ways of developing Absolute Idealism, which would place it beyond the reach of this criticism, and which should offer no special difficulty to anyone who has received a sound Hegelian education. Why not explain, for instance, that things which have nothing else in common must of necessity share the identical difference which appears to divide them; that the greater the diversity, the more *fundamental* must be the underlying unity; that Absolute Difference is therefore the supreme type of Identity; and that thus the profounder meaning of the Law of Identity is, that A is never so truly itself as when it wears the outward form of some other letter of the alphabet?

good psychology and bad psychology. Of especial importance in this connexion is James's exposure of the dependence of Kantism, whether in its original form or in its English versions, on the psychological atomism of Hume.<sup>1</sup> And even where, as in the Objective Idealism of Green, the psychology has gone so very bad as to be hardly recognisable as such, we are made to feel, as we read James's good-tempered criticism,<sup>2</sup> that it is just the remnant of subjectivism, which such pathetic efforts are made to eliminate, that enables the 'system,' however perversely, to retain a spectral after-glow of meaning. It is just this, we perceive, that allows us to regard the meaning as logically confused instead of as psychologically non-existent—as in moments of exasperation one is tempted to declare.

The *Principles of Psychology*, then, are of profound philosophical importance, if only because the perusal thereof raises doubts as to the superhuman origin and eternal validity of the traditional borders and inveterate antagonisms between the various philosophical disciplines. James, being more interested in discovery than in definition, was not to be deterred from pursuing various vital questions simply because they were ruled out *a priori* by such formal and arbitrary distinctions as those between logic and psychology, or between logic and ethics.

It is precisely on the border-line between reputedly different sciences that the most interesting and fruitful discoveries are to be made. And the philosophic sciences, more than any others, were sorely in need of cross-fertilisation to renew their vitality. These particular distinctions can claim no special exemption from the supreme law that distinctions can retain logical significance only by proving their utility in concrete inquiry. This general principle knocks the bottom out of Formal Logic *überhaupt*, as completely as the particular application here suggested knocks the bottom out of Absolutism. And that is why Absolutism is, in its true inwardness, not Formal Logic gone mad, but Formal Logic with its madness made plain.

But over and above this general significance of the *Principles*, it is to be noted that all James's later writings simply enforce the underlying philosophy, and expand the overt teaching, of that great work—though with a curious lack of express references. To show in detail how James's philosophy is foreshadowed, and in all essentials pre-formed, in the *Principles*, would lead us too far afield for the purposes of this

<sup>1</sup> *Principles of Psychology*, i., 360-370.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, i., 366-370, and ii., 9-11.

paper. But a few detached quotations, taken from vol. i. alone,<sup>1</sup> may help to drive home a point which is not even yet as fully recognised as it should be.

"The study of the phenomena of consciousness which we shall make throughout the rest of this book will show us that consciousness is at all times primarily a *selecting agency*" (p. 139).<sup>2</sup>

"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'. *Real* ends appear for the first time now upon the world's stage. The conception of consciousness as a purely cognitive form of being, which is the pet way of regarding it in many idealistic schools, modern as well as ancient, is thoroughly anti-psychological, as the remainder of this book will show. 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" (p. 141).

Speaking of the Soul: "The fact is that one cannot afford to despise any of these great traditional objects of belief. Whether we realise it or not there is always a great drift of reasons, positive and negative, towing us in their directions" (p. 181). [This is all the more striking in that it occurs in an argument *against* positing a 'substantial' Soul, for psychological purposes.]

"The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it, and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. . . . The world *we* feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff. . . . My world is but one in a million alike embedded, alike real to those who may abstract them" (pp. 288-289).

<sup>1</sup> The highly important chapters on "The Perception of Reality" (see especially pp. 291-298 and pp. 311-317), "Reasoning" (especially pp. 329-336), "Will" (especially pp. 569-579—on Free Will), and "Necessary Truths—Effects of Experience" (especially pp. 624-640, and pp. 661-675), are all in vol. ii. But I only aim here at giving samples to show the general perspective of the book.

<sup>2</sup> Italics as in the original, throughout.

"The reason why we *do* pray . . . is simply that we cannot *help* praying. . . . The impulse to pray is a necessary consequence of the fact that whilst the innermost of the empirical selves of a man is a Self of the *social* sort, it yet can find its only adequate *Socius* in an ideal world" (p. 316).

"When we reflect that the turnings of our attention form the nucleus of our inner self ; when we see (as in the chapter on the Will we shall see) that volition is nothing but attention ; when we believe that our autonomy in the midst of nature depends on our not being pure effect, but a cause . . . we must admit that the question whether attention involve such a principle of spiritual activity or not is metaphysical as well as psychological, and is well worthy of all the pains we can bestow on its solution. It is in fact the pivotal question of metaphysics, the very hinge on which our picture of the world shall swing from materialism, fatalism, monism, towards spiritualism, freedom, pluralism—or else the other way" (pp. 447-448).

"The whole feeling of reality, the whole sting and excitement of our voluntary life, depends on our sense that in it things are *really being decided* from one moment to another, and that it is not the dull rattling off of a chain that was forged innumerable ages ago. This appearance, which makes life and history tingle with such a tragic zest, *may* not be an illusion. As we grant to the advocate of the mechanical theory that it may be one, so he must grant to us that it may *not*. And the result is two conceptions of possibility face to face with no facts definitely enough known to stand as arbiter between them. . . . For the sake of that [mechanical] theory we make inductions from phenomena to others that are startlingly *unlike* them ; and we assume that a complication which Nature has introduced (the presence of feeling and of effort, namely) is not worthy of scientific recognition at all. Such conduct may conceivably be *wise*, though I doubt it ; but scientific, as contrasted with metaphysical, it cannot seriously be called" (pp. 453-454).

"All that a state of mind need do, in order to take cognizance of a reality, intend it, or be 'about' it, is to lead to a remoter state of mind which either acts upon the reality or resembles it. The only class of thoughts which can with any show of plausibility be said to resemble their objects are sensations" (p. 471).

"Why from Plato and Aristotle downwards, philosophers should have vied with each other in scorn of the knowledge of the particular, and in adoration of that of the general, is hard to understand, seeing that . . . the *things* of worth are

all concretes and singulars. The only value of universal characters is that they help us, by reasoning, to know new truths about individual things" (pp. 479-480).

"The ideal working of the law of compound association, were it unmodified by any extraneous influence, would be such as to keep the mind in a perpetual treadmill of concrete reminiscences from which no detail could be omitted. . . . Let us call this process *impartial redintegration*. Whether it ever occurs in an absolutely complete form is doubtful. We all immediately recognise, however, that in some minds there is a much greater tendency than in others for the flow of thought to take this form. Those insufferably garrulous old women, those dry and fanciless beings who spare you no detail, however petty, of the facts they are recounting, and upon the thread of whose narrative all the irrelevant items cluster as pertinaciously as the essential ones, the slaves of literal fact, the stumblers over the smallest abrupt step in thought, are figures known to all of us. . . . *In no revival of a past experience are all the items of our thought equally operative in determining what the next thought shall be. Always some ingredient is prepotent over the rest.* . . . In subjective terms we say that *the prepotent items are those which appeal most to our interest*" (pp. 569-572).

Surely it should not have been difficult to recognise that the author of such a book as the *Principles* was no 'mere psychologist,' with a happy knack of writing, but a man of original and fructuous philosophical ideas? Surely it should at least have been obvious that a new *logtoal* principle—that of purpose, selection, *relevance*—had arisen to challenge the age-long supremacy of the Principle of Totality? And did not this new principle clearly hold the promise, or threat, of a new kind of philosophic synthesis which, by breaking down the abstract distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective,' should at last bring together what all previous so-called syntheses had thrust apart, namely, Man and Reality? But no. So firm a hold had the conventional scheme of classification, separating once and for all psychology from logic and metaphysics, on the trained philosophical mind in this country, that the philosophical significance of the *Principles of Psychology* seems at first to have been successfully hidden by the mere title of the book. Although all the foundations of James's pragmatism were laid, and all its methods were illustrated, in his *Psychology*, no one (with the exception of Dewey and a few others) looked to it for philosophic instruction. The philosophic world slumbered behind the ramparts of a 'system' within which Appearance was the

sole portion of man, while Reality was reserved to the Absolute; nor dreamed that a foe could approach save by the familiar ways. Hence James's later and more avowedly philosophical treatises crashed into the established dogmas with the disastrous suddenness of bombs hurled from an invading airship. Even now old-fashioned intellectualists find it hard to understand that they have been witnessing, not sporadic signs and wonders which betoken that the Absolute is wroth with its people, but the beginning of a new philosophic era.

Perhaps the most refreshing thing in James's philosophy is his view as to what philosophy itself really is and means. His *Pragmatism* characteristically opens with a quotation from Mr. Chesterton, which declares that "the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe. . . . We think the question is not whether the theory of the cosmos affects matters, but whether in the long run anything else affects them." And James endorses his paradox with the explanation: "The philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter; it is our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means. It is only partly got from books; it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos."

These words constitute a philosophic Declaration of Independence and a truly Jacobin vindication of the Rights of Man; but they challenge the conception of philosophy held most sacred by the vast majority of professional philosophers, who would deem their subject degraded by any condescension to the human *motif*. These instructors of youth may, to be sure, speak in somewhat uncertain tones of the position to be assigned to Ethics; but in Logic and Metaphysics they hold, with lofty dignity and great positiveness, that our aim is purely impersonal and 'objective,' and has nothing to do with personal vision or even with the 'practical make-shifts' of human science. It is because James made this innovation of refusing to treat philosophy as an idle pastime, or as 'intellectual gymnastics,' and demanded instead that some rational connexion should be made out between the 'theories' propounded by professional philosophers in the lecture-room and the beliefs that human beings actually live by in the larger world outside, that he has so scandalised the one class and so interested the other.

But this novel view of the scope of philosophy entails, and reflects, a correspondingly radical change of attitude towards the facts of psychology—a change of attitude more important



than any improvement in specific doctrines. James broke entirely new ground by refusing to accept the preliminary dilemma, that to *understand* the life of the spirit is to reduce it either to a system of intellectual categories or to a set of mechanical principles. He prefers not to reduce it to alien terms at all. He has the temerity to accept conscious life at its own valuation—a *tertium quid* which enlightened psychologists and philosophers had deemed unworthy of serious recognition, and which the amicable division of intellectual spoils between psychology and philosophy is cleverly designed to suppress. It was a standpoint contemptuously abandoned to the novelist, the religious preacher, and the man of affairs. But James's disconcertingly non-euclidean mind boldly challenged the intellectualist axiom, that the parallel lines of knowing and doing must never meet. What makes his *Principles of Psychology* as valuable a handbook of Ethics as it is of Logic, is that he seems to have grasped from the first intuitively<sup>1</sup> what he subsequently more explicitly urged, that this dualism, immanent both in transcendental monism and in Humian empiricism, this fatal cleft between man as knower and man as doer, must lead as surely to intellectual, as to moral, disaster. In a world where human feeling and will have no place save as an unsubstantial iridescent film, human knowledge, too, can aim at nothing more significant than at masking the reality within. This is the remarkably simple explanation of the apparent paradox, that consistent devotion to the ideal of 'purely theoretic' truth finally conducts to utter scepticism.

True it is, that this admission of human *values* as pervasive of reality completely transforms the world of 'fact'. For the 'values' enter into the 'facts' and quietly possess them, and no exorcisms of the most transcendental terminology can eject them. But the transformation is a return to human nature. It is the letting in of the familiar light of day, to lighten the dark places where our feet are set. Surely it compares favourably with that invisible transformation of 'fact' which the Absolute is supposed, for its own supra-conscious enlightenment or amusement, to effect behind our backs. Does it not savour both of disingenuousness and defect of ingenuity, that idealist critics of James should have thought of nothing better than to rake out the discarded notion of 'hard fact' from the obscure rubbish-heap to which they

<sup>1</sup> Cf., e.g., *op. cit.*, ii., p. 321 : "Will and Belief, in short, meaning a certain relation between objects and the Self, are two names for one and the same *psychological* phenomenon. All the questions which arise concerning one are questions which arise concerning the other."



themselves had relegated it, and should seek to use it as a stick to beat off the humanist attack withal? The only plausible explanation would seem to be that they knew not what they did because they knew not what they meant.

And as with 'fact,' so with 'intellectual satisfaction,' which Mr. Bradley and Mr. Joachim have so elaborately shown is the very thing Intellectualism is powerless to yield. The chief burden of our complaint against Intellectualism, as represented by such writers as these, is the failure to give any coherent account of what is *meant* by 'intellectual satisfaction'. For they seem to hold (a) that Truth is for us that which satisfies our intellect; (b) that Reality, as such, is nevertheless indifferent to any satisfaction we as individuals may feel; (c) that these two propositions are mutually explanatory, and indeed identical.

This ghostly bogey, then, of 'pure intellectual satisfaction,' which turns out to be as brainless as it is obviously and designedly bloodless, need no longer deter us from that other way of epistemological advance which James took in *The Will to Believe*. He pointed out that our emotional nature does in fact function as a guide to, and constituent of, what we hail as a 'truth,' and that, with the proper precautions, it need not always lead us into error. For as physical science long ago found out when, after long wanderings in the desert of *a priori* dogmatism, it accepted the risks involved in the 'deceitfulness of the senses,' and persevered in the path of experiment, only what leads us nowhere will never lead us astray. James, in fact, saw that the right to experiment is no monopoly of natural science—that the field of experiment is co-extensive with conscious life. Experience is experimentation; and so James proposes to extend to truth *überhaupt* the rights (and risks) of scientific truth.

From the first some have perversely interpreted this as meaning that whatever belief any one may choose to adopt is forthwith established as absolutely true. James had from the outset made clear the distinction between the (psychological) will to believe which he described, and the logical right to believe which he based on it, by emphasising the need of choosing a 'live hypothesis' and of running the risk of error.<sup>1</sup> In other words, *verification* was the hall-mark of truth. But even his constant protests, that a belief in order to be true must work, did not avail to eradicate the 'impression' that when he said 'work,' he *must* mean 'feel pleasant'.

This queer misrepresentation instructively illustrates both the aloofness of the 'philosophic' mind from the spirit of

<sup>1</sup> *The Will to Believe*, p. 29.

scientific investigation, and the obduracy of the intellectualist prejudices which James sought to dispel. It betrays the philosophical *idée fixe* that as the only kind of truth worth considering is absolute truth, so every new theory of truth must needs devise some new infallible self-acting snare in the shape of an 'absolute criterion' for the capture of that shy legendary fowl. But not only was James thus accused of widening the conception of truth, in the interests of religious dogma, till it lost all meaning, he was also accused of narrowing it till it was reduced to the trade mark of worldly success—an interpretation which at least had the grace to allow that experimental testing and the distinction between success and failure were essential to his theory. These two interpretations have not even been unfailingly discriminated; but they are so incongruous both with James's text as a whole and with each other that they may safely be left by the roadside to their mutual destruction.

Others, again, have imagined that James's theory of the intimate correlation between 'theoretic' and 'practical' truth is scepticism naked and unashamed. To which the answer is that whether 'scepticism' is to be taken as a term of reproach or commendation, depends on whether it teaches lessons of despair or of hope, of intellectual death or of intellectual life. Now there is just one form of scepticism which is in the strictest sense deadly. It is that which professes to define truth in the abstract, but adds that God or the Absolute alone can know what, in the concrete, is actually true. It claims to know just so much of the 'nature of truth' as is necessary to convince us that truth itself lies for ever beyond the grasp of man. That kind of scepticism, as Mr. Bradley has himself made plain, is the outcome of idealist metaphysic. And that is the kind of scepticism from which a humanist view of the nature of truth delivers us.

And so we resume our peaceful inquiry into what James himself really did mean. As we have noted, in place of the futile, elusive conception of truth as purely 'objective' and 'absolute,' he proposes to adopt and generalise the scientific view of truth as that which stands the test of experience.<sup>1</sup> But verification is never even in its simplest form a matter of mere passive receptivity; and it can never be final or 'absolute,' though for practical purposes it may be complete. Always it is a question of the comparative success or failure of our endeavour to manipulate the *data* of experience in the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *op. cit.*, ii., pp. 635-638 and 665-669. "'Scientific' conceptions," he says (p. 636), "must prove their worth by being 'verified'. This test, however, is the cause of their preservation, not that of their production."

interests of our vital necessities—necessities more imperious than any 'purely logical' necessity. The latter can only retain a footing as the servant, and not as the master, of the former. This manipulation (or 'mutilation,' as absolutist logic will have it) begins, indeed, with the breaking up of the continuous *datum* of experience into more or less distinguishable *data*. 'Pure sensation' and 'bare fact' are nothing but barefaced methodological fictions—of very dubious utility.<sup>1</sup>

But having once repudiated that *absolute* distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective,' which is the sure road to philosophical damnation—having once admitted a 'subjective' (i.e. human) element into the heart of truth—having once gone so far, James will not limit that element to matters of mere bodily moment. We are not as the beasts that perish: perhaps the beasts themselves are not that. James invites us to treat our moral and religious aspirations as methodologically on a par with scientific categories; as hypotheses, that is, concerning the possibilities of moulding the future, to be verified by their working. Of course, if we have no spiritual needs and aspirations, *cadit questio*. There will then be no ventures of thought to verify. James does not pretend to force the moral or religious life on us by logical compulsion, any more than he proposes to argue us into the satisfaction of our bodily needs, or to compel us to desire scientific knowledge. What he does say is that, as the will to live is the mainspring of all real knowledge, so the *kind* of life we will to live must determine our 'theory of the cosmos'.<sup>2</sup> In other words, a theory of the cosmos has no real meaning unless it is *also* a way of life. Faith without works is not even faith. And the faith to which he vindicates our right, is not to be expressed as the negation of

<sup>1</sup> *Principles of Psychology*, i., p. 224; ii., pp. 3-9 ("The Cognitive Function of Sensation").

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Principles of Psychology*, ii., 296-298: "The *fons et origo* of all reality, whether from the absolute or the practical point of view, is thus subjective, is ourselves. As bare logical thinkers, without emotional reaction, we give reality to whatever objects we think of, for they are really phenomena, or objects of our passing thought, if nothing more. But, as thinkers with emotional reaction, we give what seems to us a still higher degree of reality to whatever things we select and emphasize and turn to with a will. . . . The world of living realities as contrasted with unrealities is thus anchored in the Ego, considered as an active and emotional term. . . . Whatever things have intimate and continuous connection with my life are things of whose reality I cannot doubt. Whatever things fail to establish this connection are things which are practically no better for me than if they existed not at all." (In the original, the greater part of the foregoing is italicised.)

Doubt, but as the Courage which is willing to face real risks. Not the least of James's merits as ethical teacher is to have made the primary virtue of courage the foundation of man's whole life, both moral and intellectual.

The foregoing brief commentary on what James himself seems to have regarded as the most important aspect of his philosophy is not intended—it need hardly be said—to place that philosophy beyond dispute, but rather to indicate how closely allied it is to common sense and how sharply and directly it runs counter to a host of indurated philosophical conceptions. This seems a reasonable course to pursue, as contemporary criticism still apparently oscillates between treating these views as too paradoxical for detailed consideration, and as too 'purely psychological' and common-place to be of any philosophical importance. I have tried to show that neither of these two extremes is logically justifiable.

Nothing has been said directly of James's views on the continuity of consciousness, on the nature of will, on pluralism, on immortality—the list of omissions might be extended indefinitely. I have tried to concentrate attention on the essential novelty of his general attitude to the 'problems of philosophy'—namely, his perception that philosophy in general has no meaning save as an effort to bring unity into the life of man as it appears to the man himself. The achievement of such unity was the only ideal of consistency that he thought worth aiming at; and fidelity to that aim the only kind of working consistency that a philosopher has any right to be proud of. After all, James might well be content to rest his title to fame on his having translated the question 'What makes knowledge possible?' into the question 'What makes knowledge credible, and conduct possible?' That is what in the history of philosophy will be known as James's Answer to Kant; and there are those who believe that it will rank as more epoch-making than Kant's irrelevant Answer to Hume. In a word, to James belongs the glory of having first divined the Secret of the Plain Man, and ministered to his desire for a knowledge that is relevant to action and to life.