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Ideas and Ideals in the Philosophy of William James

by

Forrest Oran Wiggins

James' views concerning the nature of the individual may best be found by a study of his treatement of ideas and ideals. In spite of the diversity of problems which James attempts to solve, he always emphasizes the importance of individual experience and of his belief in the individual as the standard and the goal of all experience, both actual and possible. Before plunging, however, into his views concerning ideas and ideals, it would be well to pause to paint in the background of his thought on this subject.

In his Principles of Psychology he asserts:

The fons and origo of all reality, whether from the absolute or the practical point of view, is thus subjective, is ourselves.

And as a reaction against the sociological type of thought which would reduce the individual to a cipher in a table, James protests: "The preferences of sentiment creatures are what create the importance of topics. They are the absolute and ultimate lawgiver here."

This view of the importance of the individual in the social process is strikingly brought out in his eulogy of his friend Davidson:

Surely the individual, the person in the singular number, is the more fundamental phenomenon, and the social institution, of whatever grade, is but secondary and ministerial. . . . The best Commonwealth will always be the one that most cherishes the men who represent the residual interest, the one that leaves the largest scope to their peculiarities.

The individual is a "variant" in the Darwinian sense. How he happens to be what he is, is a question which we cannot solve. But, whatever he happens to be, it is the duty of the community to provide a place where the exceptional qualities of outstanding men can be developed. For whatever ideals the community has, it possesses only because they find locus in particular individuals as bearers and innovators.

James holds that the two factors in social evolution are "wholly distinct." There is little inter-play or interaction between the individual and culture. The individual "brings his gifts, unique contributions of himself to society. If society be wise, she will accept them; if not, she will stagnate and wither away.

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1 William James, Principles of Psychology, Vol. II, pp. 296-297. (All references in this paper are to the works of William James.)
2 The Will to Believe, p. 261.
3 Memories and Studies, pp. 102-103.
4 The Will to Believe, p. 232.
One or two more quotations will serve to emphasize the individualistic trend of James' whole thinking.

Radical empiricism thus leads to the assumption of a collectivism of personal lives (which may be of any grade of complication, and superhuman or infrahuman as well as human), variously cognitive of each other, variously conative and impulsive, genuinely evolving and changing by effort and trial, and by their interaction and cumulative achievements making up the world.\(^5\)

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* he states:

By being religious we establish ourselves in possession of ultimate reality at the only point at which reality is given us to guard. Our responsible concern is with our private destiny, after all. . . .

. . . Individuality is founded in feeling; and the recesses of feeling, the darker, blinder strata of character, are the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making, and directly perceive how events happen, and how work is actually done.\(^6\)

If the term individual is interpreted in its two traditional senses, we can see the applicability of the term to the thought of William James. Individual means (1) subjective and (2) personal. On both counts James is an individualist. Not only the *fons* and *origo* is subjective, but the individual and his experience are the standards of value. The individual is, then, the ground not only of existential judgments, but of judgments of value as well.

\(\text{I}\)

In our discussion of the place of ideas in James' "system" we shall be hindered because it will be necessary to make divisions and distinctions which James himself did not make. For purposes of methodology, however, we shall divide the present section into two main divisions. In the first we shall deal with the origin of the idea, its relation to other ideas, and its relation to "mind." In other words, we shall "define" ideas in terms of their origin in physiological and psychological bearings. In the next division we shall inquire into the nature of the "truth" value of the idea. To keep these two aspects of the idea entirely disparate would be an impossible task; and whatever violent distortions result to James' thought from such an attempt can perhaps be rectified in a later section.

James' method as well as his data are psychological; this means that his material is experience. The term "experience" has two very conflicting connotations (both of which are inextricably mixed in James). In the first place experience may mean the immediate sense data, which emphasizes the subjective aspects. This is mine; it belongs to me; it is non-sharable. In the second place experience may

\(^5\)Collected Essays and Reviews, p. 444.
\(^6\)The Varieties of Religious Experience, pp. 500-501.
mean the sense or common object of experience for mankind. This is in our mind, but not particular to any mind. As extremes we may liken the first to the mystic's trance or the hallucinations of the hysterical. The second would be like a house, a tree, or a constellation of stars. This is what the scientist means by experience—that is, capable of being experienced. The first use of the term points to the private, the second to the public aspect of experience.

As a physiological organism the individual is a locus of afferent and efferent nerve impulses. But between these two processes lies a temporal interval. At this place and/or time attention intervenes. The organism is not a passive recipient; it exercises a selective role. The phenomenon of attention means, then, a selecting and grouping of stimuli on the part of the organism. The act of attention is cognitive and connative at the same time. As selective, attention breaks the purely mechanical, causal chain. The organism not only responds, it acts. If it were a pure automaton it would respond equally and indifferent to every stimulus presented to it. To act means that a movement is transformed so that it performs a teleological function; and James asserts that every "conscious process, merely as such, must pass over into motion, open or concealed."7 In mental life three divisions are present: impressions, deliberation, and action; and each part plays an important role in the mental life of the individual as well as makes its claim upon him.

But James is interested less in the physiological antecedents of mind than he is in its teleological character. On the basis of the "reflex theory of mind" even physiologists must recognize "mind" as an essentially teleological mechanism. Experience is the center or core of reality. This point is important, for it provides the springboard which allows James to jump from psychology to metaphysics. In the state of deliberation the mind takes its raw material, mere data and, through its active interest, creates for itself a world of value. The real is not the presented as such. (We shall have to modify this assertion later on.) The real is, rather, that which satisfies the demands which the mind imposes upon it. The deliberative stage is the stage of volition; the will is teleological. It is not satisfied with what is, but introduces an ought-to-be. As James states it:

I am not sure, for example, that all physiologists see that it [reflex theory of mind] commits them to regarding the mind as an essentially teleological mechanism. I mean by this that the conceiving or theorizing faculty—the mind's middle department—functions exclusively for the sake of ends that do not exist at all in the world of impressions we receive by way of our senses, but are set by the emotional and practical subjectivity altogether.8

Mental activity is a fact of mind. Mental unity is super-imposed on its data. There is no ego to unify the mental elements—thoughts, feelings, transitory states of consciousness. But, since the mind is active, James cannot accept association psychology, which, unable to find a bond of unity among the mental states, had to impose this

7 Talks to Teachers, etc., p. 17.
unity through some similarity in the sensations themselves. This was the solution of Hume. Although James does not use the term "gestalt," he would surely be in sympathy with that view. On the other hand James rejects equally the Hegelian and Kantian notion of relations among mental elements, for both had to bring in an experiencer to hold these elements together. James insists that mind goes from percep to percep in an ambulatory, not a salutary fashion. In this way he can dismiss the a priori character of concepts and replace them by percepts.

Whatever the character (ontological) of the object with which the idea puts us in touch, in the knowing relation it is the purpose of the idea to put us in relation with it. This relation James designates by the term 'ambulatory.'

I say that we know an object by means of an idea, whenever we ambulate towards the object under the impulse which the idea communicates. . . . In any case our idea brings us into the object's neighborhood, practical or ideal, gets us into commerce with it, helps us towards its closer acquaintance, enables us to foresee it, class it, compare it, deduce it—in short, to deal with it as we could not were the idea not in our possession.

. . . and when we say that the idea leads us towards the object, that only means that it carries us forward through intervening tracts of that reality into the object's closer neighborhood, into the midst of its associates at least, be these its physical neighbors, or be they its logical cogeners only.

. . . My thesis is that the knowing here is made by the ambulation through the intervening experience. . . . Cognition, whenever we take it concretely, means determinate 'ambulation,' through intermediaries, from a terminus a quo to, or towards, a terminus ad quem.

Mind thus functions through stages from the concrete object of experience to another object in experience. But an idea may stand for another idea; hence, it acquires a symbolic character; it is a 'fiction.' Thus there are no objects in a physical sense which corresponds to the numbers on a bookkeeper's ledger; these numbers are symbols of possible physical operations. Human life can facilitate its operations much more easily by using these symbolic systems.

The towering importance for human life of this kind of knowing by means of symbols lies in the fact that an experience that knows another can figure as its representative, not in any quasi-miraculous 'epistemological' sense, but in the definite practical sense of being its substitute in various operations, sometimes physical and sometimes mental, which lead us to its associates and results. By experimenting on our ideas of reality, we may save ourselves the trouble of experimenting on the real experiences which they severally mean. The ideas form related systems, corresponding point for point to the systems which the realities

9 Meaning of Truth, pp. 141-142.
form; and by letting an ideal term call up its associates systematically, we may be led to a terminus which the corresponding real term would have led to in case we had operated on the real world.\(^{10}\)

These symbolic ideas exercise an almost autocratic control over the thinking of the individual. He cannot manipulate them as he pleases. He can no more disbelieve that fire will not burn than he can that two and two do not make four. The symbolic ideas James calls "mental ideas." They form a sphere "where true and false beliefs obtain." When they are true, they bear the same name either of definitions or of principles.\(^{11}\) And, in another place James says:

> Between the coercions of the sensible order and those of the ideal order, our mind is thus wedged tightly. Our ideas must agree with realities, be such realities concrete or abstract, be they facts or be they principles, under penalty of endless inconsistency and frustration.\(^{12}\)

Of course if one asks why we want to be consistent and why man has this theoretic interest, one cannot explain it. It is a "characteristically human differentia."\(^{13}\)

We have introduced these quotations to show that although the second stage in the mental department operates according to the "interests" or will of the individual, will can not be mere blind "wilfulness" or caprice, if the individual wants to get along with his sensible and ideal world. Some of the ideas will have to be modified, some discarded, some enlarged. For a mind is a system of ideas, each with the excitement it arouses, and with the tendencies impulsive and inhibitive, which mutually check or reinforce each other.\(^{14}\) And the process of education itself is "nothing but the process of acquiring ideas or conceptions, the best educated mind being the mind which has the largest stock of them, ready to meet the largest possible variety of the emergencies of life."\(^{15}\)

One more consideration of the ideas themselves and we shall examine the doctrine of the significance or truth. James attempts to show that judgments, which in the school logic were held to be \textit{a priori} forms of knowing, arise from certain "attitudes" of mind. Sensible experience comes to us in time and space relations which we cannot alter. But in judging we are not restricted to the space-time manner in which we received our sensible experience. These forms of judgment may be explained by the way in which experiences befall in a mind gifted with memory, expectation, and the possibility of feeling doubt, curiosity, belief, and denial. The conjunctions of experience befall more and less invariably, variably, or never. The idea of one term will then

\(^{10}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 118.  
\(^{11}\) \textit{Pragmatism}, p. 209.  
\(^{12}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 211.  
\(^{13}\) \textit{Meaning of Truth}, p. 86.  
\(^{14}\) \textit{The Varieties of Religious Experience}, p. 197.  
\(^{15}\) \textit{Talks to Teachers, etc.}, pp. 145-146.
engender a fixed, a waverling, or a negative expectation of another, giving affirmative, the hypothetical, disjunctive, interrogative, and negative judgments, and judgments of actuality and possibility about certain things. The separation of attribute from subject in all judgments (which violates the way in which nature exists) may be similarly explained by the piecemeal order in which our perceptions come to us, a vague nucleus growing gradually more detailed as we attend to it more and more.\textsuperscript{16}

The pragmatic value of conceptual systems lies, therefore, in their efficacy in providing rapid transitions from idea to idea; and, with other systems of ideas, they allow us to go towards our ultimate termini in a labor-saving fashion.

While it is true that these short-cuts are substitutes for nothing actual; they end outside the real world altogether, in wayward fancies, utopias, fictions or mistakes. But where they do re-enter reality and terminate therein, we substitute them always; and with these substitutes we pass the greater number of our hours.\textsuperscript{17}

James employed the term “idea” in the Lockian sense as designating any sort of mental phenomena. We saw that the idea arose in the deliberative stage of mental activity, and that every mental phenomenon tended to issue in action. But what kind of action? The answer is action which satisfies the interests of the actor. Interest is a purely human attribute—the interest in truth as well as any other interest. If this be true, the truth of the idea can be gauged by its closeness to approach to satisfaction. We may say, then, that the idea points in two directions. It has its origin in the human being, and, on the other hand, it points towards objects. But it has still another dimension. The success of its ambulation must be determined in terms of its satisfaction to the individual who has interests, wants, needs, intentions. The appearance of a human being in the world makes a difference; or, stated otherwise, human beings through choice, preference, will, desire, interest, create differences. They prefer or value one type of experience to another. In questions of value—and truth is a value—they are judges. Hence truth is not something extrahuman, existing in a Platonic realm of essences and antedating experience. Truth can have meaning only with reference to human beings who intend. Science has long talked of the indifference of nature, both in its details and in large, to human motives and values. But one human being in the world introduces the factor of choice, and this choosing is a part of the universe and is as indisputable as any fact of nature.

Since James’ definition of truth revolves around the successful working of the idea, perhaps it would not be amiss to quote him at length to find out what he means by the idea working.

The trueness of an idea must mean something definite in it that determines its tendency to work, and indeed towards this object rather than towards that. . . . What that something is in the case of truth psychology tells us: the idea has associates

\textsuperscript{17} The Meaning of Truth, p. 113.
peculiar to itself, motor as well as ideational; it tends by its place and nature to call these into being, one after another; and the appearance of them in succession is what we mean by the "working" of the idea. According to what they are, does the trueness or falseness which the idea harbored come to light. These tendencies have still earlier conditions which, in a general way, biology, psychology and biography can trace. This whole chain of natural causal conditions produces a resultant state of things in which new relations, not simply causal, can now be found, or into which they can now be introduced—the relations namely which we epistemologists study, relations of adaptation, of substitutability, of instrumentality, of reference, and of truth.\textsuperscript{18}

The truth is in the idea only in the sense in which we can say that mortality is in a man before he dies or nourishment in bread before it is eaten. If bread, for example, were put in a fire, where would its nourishing qualities go? The same holds true of the idea, within a different setting, and leading to other cognitive processes, it might result differently, work differently. Truth is a function of the idea, not of the object. The object is a member of the physical universe. Its existence is contingent upon physical relations. Truth is something which the idea gets. The idea is made true or false. It is verified, validated—all of which suggests, demands an activity. The heart of the idea is activity, an activity which seeks quiescence in the satisfaction which truth brings. In support of this exposition let us offer a few quotations:

True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not. . . .

Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process; the process namely of its verifying itself, its verification. Its validity is the process of its validation.\textsuperscript{19}

True is the name for whatever idea starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience.\textsuperscript{20}

And in giving approval of the direction started by Schiller and Dewey, James says:

. . . these teachers say, 'truth' in our ideas and beliefs means the same thing that it means in science. It means, they say, nothing but this, that ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience, to summarize them and get about them by conceptual short-cuts instead of following the interminable succession of particular phenomena.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} The Meaning of Truth, pp. 174-175.

\textsuperscript{19} Pragmatism, p. 201.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 204.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. 58.
In another section we shall have to inquire about the ontological status of the object. But here we must see that James is not as subjective as some of his critics would make him. Truth is not a matter of personal caprice. It is not a static but a functional relation between the idea and the object.

Truth here is a relation, not of our ideas to non-human relatives, but of conceptual parts of our experience to sensational parts. Those thoughts are true which guide us to beneficial interaction with sensible particulars as they occur, whether they copy these in advance or not.\textsuperscript{22}

Objects are neither true nor false; they are. Ideas are true of objects. Hence it is possible that ideas may possess different degrees of truth; and, since the individual lies outside the object, his relations to it are external.

The maximal conceivable truth in an idea would seem to be that it should lead to an actual merging of ourselves with the object to an utter mutual confluence and identification. . . . Total conflux of the mind with reality would be the absolute limit of truth, there could be no better or more satisfying knowledge than that.\textsuperscript{23}

There seems to be no other interpretation possible except to say that different parts of reality, the conceptual and the sensible, merge in order to give maximum knowledge. This contention is borne out when James asserts:

The object, for me, is just as much one part of reality as the idea is another part. The truth of the idea is one relation of it to reality, just as its date and its place are other relations. All three relations consist of intervening parts of the universe which can in every particular case be assigned and catalogued, and which differ in every instance of truth, just as they differ with every date and place.\textsuperscript{24}

But there is yet another sense in which ideas are not completely verified; this occurs whenever verification is not carried to its completion. Ideas are accepted as true on a credit basis. In fact most of our ideas are so accepted. Unless challenged, we do not continue thinking. Nothing says "no" to us, and, until some blatant contradiction stares us in the face, we accept our ideas as true. We remain satisfied with what we have in the way of truth. Yet satisfaction is not the only guide to the truth of an idea; it is merely one of its guides.

We have then two corroborating views of truth. In the first place truth is a property of ideas, a property which leads to successful working on their part; in the second place "working" must be interpreted in the sense of leading to successful action. Since action must be performed in the sensible world, and since this world is

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 82.
\textsuperscript{23} Meaning of Truth, pp. 156-157.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 234.
‘real,’ we can say that the idea that works best is the one which approximates particular acts to reality.

We have been using the terms “reality,” “object,” “experience” without defining them with any precision. Our next task, then, must be that of giving some definiteness to these concepts, for they indicate the kind of world in which the individual lives. James, as we have seen previously, is an individualist in the sense, at least, that his philosophy is directed to the individual. Since, therefore, the individual is related to his world and must make adjustments to it as well as seek his ‘satisfactions’ from it, it becomes imperative to inquire into James’ cosmological views. The discussion of the next section will lead logically also to our third and concluding section on ideals, since ideals must find their place with the totality of the universe and, maybe, make a difference in its structure.

II

Monism has always exercised a peculiar appeal, and many have tried to find the principle of unity in the universe. But in the search for unity, unconsciously or consciously, it was fore-ordained or given in the nature of things. The unity of the universe was ready-made. Pragmatism does not favor such a view, even though it recognizes its ‘validity’ for those who cannot endure the strenuousness of the universe. And while monism may confirm our strenuous moods, “Pluralism actually demands them, since it makes the world’s salvation depend upon the energizing of its several parts, among which we are.”

Pragmatism is in favor of a multiverse, and significantly, the title to one of James’ books is A Pluralistic Universe. Undoubtedly there are arguments for a monistic view but

Pragmatism, pending the final empirical ascertainment of just what the balance of union and disunion among things may be, must obviously range herself upon the pluralistic side.

With its empirical bent, pragmatism finds more disunion than union in the multiverse. Things seem to be related and things are related, but the fact that they stand in no ascertainable relation to each other is also a patent datum of experience. Of course, part of the demand for unity in the universe is the demand of the scientist, who is anxious to show the universal reign of causal law. But James saw that the scientist with his belief in the reign of law could make a universe just as much “once given” as could idealists like Royce and Bradley. A universe such as monism demands and which science finds congenial would be a universe in which the relation among the parts was strictly determined from the beginning.

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26 Pragmatism, p. 161.
27 "Pragmatically interpreted, pluralism or the doctrine that it is many means only that the sundry parts of reality may be externally related. Everything you can think of, however vast or inclusive, has on the pluralistic view a genuinely 'external' environment of some sort or amount. Things are 'with' one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything or dominates over everything. The word 'and' trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes. 'Ever not quite' has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe of attaining all-inclusiveness," A Pluralistic Universe, p. 321.
In a pluralistic universe things are not "tight"; they are loosely joined, allowing room for possibilities. James finds it more congenial to common sense which "laughs when it can, and weeps when it must, and makes, in short a practical compromise, without trying a theoretical solution." 28 In a pluralistic universe, choice is possible. It possesses, not only the dimensions which we see, but also something akin to the fourth-dimension of the mathematician. So much, then, for the physical universe. It is a collection of particulars that give just as much justification for unity as can be empirically warranted and found in the content of experience. But experience is always the final arbiter.

Since we are forced to make some distinction between being and being real, it is now the place to ask what James means by reality. Or, if we hold that everything within experience is real, what about those things which are never experienced? Or, again, if the visions of a mystic are real, how do they differ from the reality of a tree or a stove?

The first criterion will show James' subjective bent. When we ask him for the meaning of the term "real," he will be likely to ask us, "Real for what?" or "In what connection?" The fact that an object appears is not enough to constitute its reality. This may give "metaphysical reality" or reality for God, but the essential thing is what is reality for us? An object to be real to us "must not only appear, but it must be both interesting and important. The worlds whose objects are neither interesting nor important we treat simply negatively, we brand them "unreal." 29 In a further elaboration of this view in the Psychology, James states that the reality of an object depends on its relation to our emotional and active life. This gives some anticipation of his later pragmatic treatment. "Whenever an object so appeals to us that we turn to it, accept it, fill our mind with it, or practically take account of it, so far it is real for us, and we believe it." 30 James goes on to give sanction to Hume's thesis that to believe in a thing is to have an idea of it in a lively and active manner. Thus we may say that one criterion of reality lies in the interest, enthusiasm, and activity with which the subject views it. But we cannot ignore objective factors either. The real world is a combination of both objective and subjective factors, physical facts and emotional values; and if we withdraw from or stress either element too much "the kind of experience we call pathological ensues." 31

We have been trying to divorce consideration of questions of the nature of reality from the manner in which it is apprehended, and this is a false division. For an empiricist whatever appears in experience must possess reality. There is a real world to which we react in most of our waking moments; this is the reality on which we act physically. But on the other hand

The further limits of our being plunge . . . into an altogether other dimension of existence, from the sensible and merely under-

28 Collected Essays and Reviews, p. 17.
30 Ibid., p. 295.
31 The Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 151.
standable' world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose. So far as our ideal impulses originate in this region (and most of them do originate in it, for we find them possessing us in a way for which we cannot articulately account), we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong.32

We enter into this mystical world, which James insists is real, through our over-beliefs. The world of conscious discrimination is only one of the worlds in which the individual lives. There is the world of the subconscious or the sublimal, and it is just as real as the world of our conscious states. Alongside the physical world, there is the world of values; and values must find a place within the scheme, for their importance is no less than that of the physical objects which we manipulate. So James exhorts us to be open-minded enough to account for the possibility of such realms of experience, even though we may not ourselves experience them.

No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. . . . Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.33

If this be true, then the scientific analysis of the world must be incomplete.34 Science, with its sentiment for rationality, not only gives us a universe which it must conceive as causal; it also give a falsified universe, a universe indifferent to the hopes, aspirations, and interests of finite individuals. Science does not deal with the personal and the private. Though it cannot give an account of the subjective aspects of experience, no total view of the universe can leave them out.

In spite of the appeal which this impersonality of the scientific attitude makes to a certain magnanimity of temper, I believe it to be shallow, and I can now state my reason in comparatively few words. That reason is that so long as we deal with the cosmic and the general, we deal only with the symbols of reality, but as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term.35

Whenever we come into contact with the physical universe, whenever we think about it, this contact and this thinking are supplemented by the "inner state." Thus the objective part must forever remain alien in some degree at least to us. But the subjective part, the inner state, is our very experience itself, its reality and that of our experience are one.

32 Ibid., pp. 515-516.
33 Ibid., p. 388.
34 James was deeply influenced by Bergson's polemic against modern science, for Bergson held that science falsified reality.
A conscious field plus its object as felt or thought of plus an
attitude towards the object plus the sense of a self to whom the
attitude belongs—such a concrete bit of personal experience may
be a small bit, but it is a solid bit as long as it lasts; not hollow,
not a mere abstract element of experience, such as the ‘object’ is
when taken alone. 36

In fact, these private experiences furnish the standard by which
all experience is to be measured. Call it egoistic if you will. “The axis
of reality runs solely through the egoistic places—they are strung upon
it like so many beads.” 37

James was glad to quote the famous phrase from Renan, “Le coeur
a ses raisons que la raison ne connait pas.” The scientist is a
metaphysician, presenting one view of the universe, a rational view, it
must be admitted. But it is one which has been selected because it
satisfies the scientist’s prejudice for or interest in rationality. In other
words scientific theories must give subjective satisfaction. When
scientific theories clash we choose the one which gives the most
satisfaction. “. . . all the magnificent achievements of mathematical
and physical science—our doctrine of evolution, of uniformity of law,
and the rest—proceed from our indomitable desire to cast the world
into a more rational shape in our minds than the shape into which it
is thrown there by the crude order of our experience.” 38

Systems are not the immediate results of experience, for it comes
to us in a continuous plenum. What we experience comes to us all
joined together; we break this continuum into discrete essences and
treat them. When we think this plenum we break it up. 39 And the
mystery of the connection between this abstract system and the plenum
is that when we use these systems, such as algebra and arithmetic, they
have a certain amenability to experience. Although “once removed
from experience,” they have gone through the “second stage” of the
mind of which we have previously spoken. They satisfy interests,
needs, the volitional aspect of the individual; and they have their
justification in that sphere. Whenever science goes from experience,
it must return to it. The thought must wear the garb of the mind, the
thinker. He may speculate as much as he wishes, he may ascend to
the empyrean “and commune with the eternal essences,” 40 but he must
return to concrete experience.

We must accept the conclusion, then, that the real world is the
world of experience, but we must use the term experience to include
any type of mental phenomenon. The real is what interests the in-
dividual, for every kind of mental phenomenon must pass through
the mind and receive its stamp. But this is not the type of “form of
the understanding” or “form of sensibility” which Kant was talking
about. It is a form created and generated by the interests and desires

36 Ibid., p. 499.
37 Ibid., pp. 499-500.
38 The Will to Believe, etc., p. 147.
40 The Will to Believe, p. 143.
of the individual. Whatever type of consciousness the individual may have, there must be a type of external reality, seen or unseen, to answer to it. It must be a multiverse in which the demands of the moral life can be met—and the moral life in which there can be genuine choices and preferences demands a universe which is constantly growing and expanding, and in which the presence of human beings makes a difference. We have then a pluralistic universe, "a restless universe, in which no single point of view can ever take in the whole scene; and to a mind possessed of the love of unity at any cost, it will, no doubt, remain unacceptable." 41 But such is the nature of the real world in which we must live and strive to realize our ideals.

III

I trust that the last section has given us some insight into James' conception of the nature of the universe in which we live. At this time we have to see what place ideals have in the total scheme of things. Life makes demands upon the universe. The world of particulars, of different degrees and kinds of reality, is a congenial environment for the realization of our ideals. In this section we shall ask (1) what are ideals, (2) how and why they originate, (3) what place they occupy in the life of the individual, and (4) what is their efficacy.

The distinguishing marks of an ideal are two: (1) it must be consciously intellectually conceived. It must bear some signs of brightness of outlook, and (2) it must be novel to the person who holds it. However, ideals are not merely subjective. They must issue in action. The more ideals a man has, usually as a result of his education which enlarges his horizons, the more we expect of him in the way of conduct. He must undergo privation and sacrifice, receive scars and blows to realize his ideals.

It is quite obvious that something more than mere possession of ideals is required to make a life significant in any sense that claims the spectator's admiration. Inner joy . . . it may have, with its ideals; but that is its own private sentimental matter . . . it must back its ideal visions with what the laborers have, the stern stuff of manly virtue; it must multiply their sentimental surface by the dimension of the active will, if we are to have depth, if we are to have anything cubical and solid in the way of character. 42

The clamor for novelty, for significance, the cry for realization cannot go unanswered. The marriage of virtue and novelty makes for progress in the world. We have already seen that science, taken in the narrow sense of the term, can give no account of ideals. In fact, the progress of science has given men an account of the material universe which leaves almost no room for ideals. Science has diminished man's importance. It has made him feel that he must submit; he can no longer be a law-giver to the universe, but must obey

41 Ibid., p. 177.
42 Talks to Teachers, etc., pp. 293-294.
its implacable commands. For science, ideals are delusions, by-products of physiology. It seeks to explain the higher by the lower.43 But science presents only one phase of man’s mental life. When the scientist discards his logic with its loquacity, he is convinced that the entire story is not told.44

Logic and science are incompetent to give an account of the deeper realities of life. And unless logic meets the demands of feeling, it will be impotent. It may be clever, it may have reason on its side; but life is bigger than logic and greater than reason, and morality has as many demands as science. As James states the matter: “In the end it is our faith and not our logic that decides such questions of the moralistic view and I deny the right of any pretended logic to veto my own faith.” 45 It is feeling which dictates in the larger and deeper aspects of life. “To feel ‘I am the truth’ is to abolish the opposition between knowing and being.” 46 The goal of the philosopher, according to James, is to give a world-view which will escape the vicissitudes of the vulgar weltanschauung, and at the same time answer the needs of our emotional and feeling life. “The right conception for the philosopher depends on his interests. Now the interest which he has above other men is that of reducing the manifold in thought to simple form.” 47

Besides judgments concerning the actual, there are judgments of worth, of value—emotional judgments. These are judgments which say that things should be other than they are. They are judgments involving preferences and repugnances.

Common sense estimates mental excellence by a combination of all these standards, logic, fancy, wit, taste, decorum, beauty morals, and yet how few of them correspond to anything that actually is—they are laws of the Idea, dictated by subjective interests pure and simple.48

We have previously spoken of the second stage of mental activity. This stage is no mere recording mechanism or function. Its business is not with cognition alone, but with volition. And volition and interest are synonymous for James. Inner interests bring subjective satisfaction as well as connect with the world of reality. The scientist is interested in harmony, and his demand for ideal statements has revealed harmonies “hidden between all the chinks and interstices of the crude natural world.”

43 Pragmatism, pp. 16-17.
44 “But it [science] will fail to convince or convert you all the same, if your dumb intuitions are opposed to its conclusions. If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits. Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of the result; and something in you absolutely knows that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it.” Varieties, p. 73.
45 Pragmatism, p. 296.
46 Collected Essays and Reviews, p. 134.
47 Ibid., pp. 88-89.
48 Ibid., p. 46.
Hardly a law has been established in science, hardly a fact ascertained, which was not first sought after, often with sweat and blood, to gratify an inner need. Whence such needs come from we do not know; we find them in us, and biological psychology so far only classes them with Darwin’s ‘accidental variations.’ 49

What a man takes as his ideal is his own private concern, his individual prerogative. Each man can determine his own “categorical imperative,” each to be tested in the fire of experience. He need not bow to the nature of things nor compromise with them. Rather his ideals are postulates concerning the nature of things, and he will accept whichever postulate is most satisfying to his needs.50 And we must emphasize—for the thought recurs again and again in James—that feeling is the standard by which we accept or reject any theory or hypothesis. These are typical statements:

“The theorizing faculty . . . functions exclusively for the sake of ends that . . . are set by our emotional and practical subjectivity.” 51

“Our judgments concerning the worth of things, big or little, depend on the feelings the things arouse in us.” 52

. . . “We have nothing to replace it [Spencer’s formula] by except our several individual hypotheses, convictions, and beliefs.” 53

The nature of ideals is such that they cannot all be realized by the individual; hence, a conflict arises among them. Some of the ideals which he accepts have proved their worth in the course of the historical process of the human race—survival, physical well-being, undistorted cognition; some of them must wage a war for their survival. Our demands cannot be accounted for by any one principle, any more than all the facts of the physical world can be subsumed under one single law or explanation. “The various ideals have no common character apart from the fact that they are ideals. No single abstract principle can be so used as to yield to the philosopher anything like a scientifically accurate and genuinely useful causistic scale.” 54 The best the moral philosopher can do is to reply that “the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand.” 55 All values are thus subjective in the sense that they arise solely out of the demands of the individual, and have no common standard by which they can be measured. Naturally men live in a “mental climate” which acts and reacts upon their beliefs. The beliefs and practices of one age, say, towards women, the holding of property, the attributes of the diety, etc., are discarded in a later day.

With particular reference to man’s ideals concerning the diety James states:

49 Will to Believe, etc., pp. 55-56 V. Ibid., p. 61; also Psychology, Vol. II, p. 315 ff.
50 Essays, pp. 60-61.
51 Will to Believe, p. 117.
52 Talks to Teachers, p. 229.
53 Essays, p. 65.
55 Ibid.
the original factor in fixing the figure of gods must always have been psychological. The deity to whom the prophets, seers, and devotees who founded the particular cult bore witness was worth something to them personally. They could use him. He guided their imagination, warranted their hopes, and controlled their will—or else they required him as a safeguard against the demon and a curber of other people’s crimes. In any case, they chose him for the value of the fruits he seemed to them to yield. So soon as they conflicted with the indispensable human ideals, or thwarted too extensively other values; so soon as they appeared childish, contemptible, or immoral when reflected on, the deity grew discredited, and erelong neglected and forgotten. It was in this way that the Greek and Roman gods ceased to be believed in by educated pagans.  

Since the world is so constituted that there is a hiatus between the actual and the ideal, we must select the ideals which bring the largest amount of satisfaction on the whole; where our ideals conflict with those of other persons—and in case ours triumph—we should do as little violence as possible to those of others. The course of history itself has revealed this fact. We have attempted to find the most inclusive ideal, the one which included the largest number of claims. The aim of the moral philosopher is precisely that of formulating those ideals which will include the largest possible number of persons. This is no mere speculative problem to be decided theoretically; it is the practical one of reconciling the conflict of interests.

When religion is divorced from its theological and institutional setting, we find the most evidence for the individualistic approach which has been characteristic of the thought of James. Religion is feeling, a feeling for something greater than man, a feeling for God and immortality, a feeling for a cosmic purpose in the universe. But James always insists that ideals, whatever their nature, must have a cash-value in terms of concrete satisfactions to the individual who holds them in terms of providing a more satisfactory, fuller, and richer life.

Religion is personal in its appeal and personal in its results.

The pivot round which the religious life . . . revolves, is the interest of the individual in his private personal destiny. Religion, in short, is a monumental chapter in the history of human egoism.

. . . Religious thought is carried on in terms of personality, this being, in the world of religion, the one fundamental fact.

James quotes Leuba to the effect that God is neither known nor understood, but used. Thus the function of religion is to be used. And the use of God as an hypothesis depends on the efficacy of the

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56 Varieties, p. 329.
58 The Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 491. (Italics added.)
59 Ibid., p. 506.
hypothesis to meet the everlasting ruby vaults of our own human hearts.  

The world of reality must answer to the strenuous mood, and if there were no principle of reality, man would invent one.  

But the belief in God answers still another need. Religious belief brings relief to the tensions of the soul, gives man a period of happy relaxation, and relieves him of the necessity of thinking in terms of fear of the distant future.

But life is no mere looking for ease; it is adventure; the future is not certain; there is a place for novelties. The one indisputable fact about the universe is that things happen here.

It is then perfectly possible to accept sincerely a drastic kind of universe from which the element of 'seriousness' is not to be expelled. Whoso does so is, it seems to me, a genuine pragmatist. He is willing to live on a scheme of uncertified possibilities which he trusts; willing to pay with his own person, if need be, for the realization of the ideals which he frames.

The world is a world of possibilities, and fool he would be who demands certainty before acting. Our spirit demands of our intellect that it frame hypotheses congenial to it, and the intellect replies in tones of promise. Our moral life is a life of war, a war which demands not only that we frame our ideals, but that we wage war constantly to see them realized. Our moral life demands a "cosmic patriotism."

IV

Our investigation has taken us through all the principal works of James and as a result we can make this conclusion. All the concepts, categories, aims, ideals have their origin in the individual, are related to him only. No intermediary of any sort, social or institutional, stands between him and reality. But more than that, the individual both in his judging of existence and of value is guided solely by his own interests. Philosophy, for James, is directed to the individual, originates in the individual, and serves individual purposes. Our contention, then, of the introductory paragraphs is borne out. James' views are individual both in the sense of being subjective and in the sense of being personal.

If one inquire how the moral aspects of man's nature find their realization, through what techniques, by what means, in cooperation with what agencies, James has no answer. The natural environment is not particularly hostile; we do not gain victories over it. Rather the environment is neutral material, obeying laws of its own, but, nevertheless, laws formulated by a mould imposed by mind. Of the cultural environment—taking culture in the sense of the ensemble of

40 Ibid., p. 331.
41 The Will to Believe, p. 213.
42 Ibid., p. 47.
43 Pragmatism, pp. 297-298.
44 Ibid., p. 121.
45 The Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 45.
the modifications of nature by man in the interest of his purposes—James makes no statements at all. What are the ties which join man to nature? What role does his biological endowment play? How has this endowment been modified by contact with social situations, political and economic forms and structures? What is the relation of man to man? All these queries go unanswered.

On the positive side, James' philosophy will always have a wide appeal, for he has humanized the approach to the perennial conundrums of philosophy and given a method for their solution. In this depersonalized age, the age of the organization man, James reasserts the importance of the individual. After studying James, no man need feel himself unwanted in a seemingly hostile world.