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by

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I

William James is less well known for his work as a moral, social, and political philosopher than his younger friend and disciple, John Dewey. In these areas, unlike Dewey, he offers us sketches rather than treatises, concatenated essays rather than books. By stages, however, I have found that he not only anticipates Dewey in certain ways, but that in the end his insights are deeper, and his sentiments surer. However, this is not said in depreciation of Dewey.

Better to set James in contrast to his friends Peirce and Royce, with respect to whom he was, in most ways, their dialectical opposite. They were communalists, he an individualist; they were utopians, he an anti-utopian realist; they hungered for something they both called “the great community;” his own universalism and humanitarianism was always fused with an eradicable love of the individual. In this respect, James reminds one of Justice Brandeis in his dislike of bigness. He loved small things, human and otherwise, and cared more, perhaps, for the part than the whole. Throughout this part of his work, James continues to exemplify his tough-mindedness as well as his tender-heartedness, his pessimism as well as his very qualified optimism. He was, as he put it, a “meliorist,” a progressive, and, above all, a liberal. Although he was not without interest in certain forms of socialism, James could never be a socialist. And he seems to have been completely unaffected by Marx and Marxism. In this part of his thought, he remained a dualist, and his mind always worked, in its own free-wheeling way, dialectically. Most important of all, James was always a finitist, interested in practicable reforms, and in the gradual amelioration of the lot of his fellow human beings.

II

Let me begin by saying something about James’ views in the sphere of theoretical, or philosophical, ethics. Here we have mainly to rely on one notable essay, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” In it, he makes no sharp distinction between moral theory and moral practice, and his ethical theory is plainly a by-product of his practical moral and social sentiments.

To begin with, one is struck by the fact that, unlike his younger friend and colleague, Ralph Barton Perry, he insisted that moral principles are to be distinguished from those of science. Here also he is to be distinguished from Dewey. In fact, he remains closer to John Stuart Mill, as that great moral philosopher conceives of ethics (as distinct from science) in the last chapter of his Logic. Moreover, his point of view is, in certain ways, close to those of Hume. In the somewhat misleading, though by now conventional lingo of G.E. Moore, James is an “anti-naturalist.” The significant point, as Moore contended, is that it is always a mistake to infer, directly, moral conclusions from factual premises. Science, which is concerned with the explanation and prediction of matters of fact, provides the data on which practical decisions and choices are made; but it cannot logically lead us directly to those decisions. We must decide for ourselves what we ought to do. This implies
that we have live options and, within limits, an area of freedom. In the language of Jean-Paul Sartre (James himself is often described as an American existentialist), that is to say, man may be said to be born or, more dramatically, "condemned" to be free. In a Laplacian universe, the moral life has no meaning.

Given his admiration for Mill, one might guess that James was a utilitarian: according to which all significant, or worthwhile obligations are intended to produce some good. This, however, does not mean that James defined, or would have defined, the "ought" in terms of the "good." Human beings may have obligations, or be bound by moral or quasi-moral imperatives, which are not aimed at some good (rightly or wrongly). In fact, James made no sharp distinctions between an imperative and an impulse. Impulses, and hence imperatives are directed to the production of a good, only gradually, in consequence of experience, and upon reflection. Thus, any individual may feel bound by an imperative merely by habit. In short, the early moral life of human beings is largely a matter of what sociologists call "acculturation."

How does James conceive of good and the good life? He tells us, as regards good itself, that something is good if, and only if, it serves to satisfy some desire. Here, it may be worthwhile to compare and contrast his position with that of Perry. Now, according to Perry, in his doctrine, as developed in his impressive General Theory of Value, something is good so far as it is the object of someone's interest. It need not, accordingly, provide satisfaction. James' view is different. As he puts it, the object of a desire is worthless unless it affords some actual satisfaction. The question remains whether James is a hedonist: does he equate satisfaction of desire with pleasure. This is a long and complicated problem, but as I read him, the satisfaction of desire need not result in certain supposed sensations of pleasure, if such there be. He means what he says: something is desirable if, on achieving it, we are, as we say "satisfied." "Das ist genug," as the Germans would say.

More important is James' immediate remark that there often, if not always, occurs, a conflict of desires or as he puts it, "wills." James' position regarding conflict is of great interest. He hopes, to be sure, that conflicts of will may be overcome. Like Hegel, he also regards conflict as a source of the zest, passion, and power of our lives. Out of conflict we develop will power, strength of character, the ability to pursue some way of life suitable to ourselves and, one may hope, other people. In this regard, James is a promethean. But there remains the other side. Conflict is not ultimately valuable for its own sake. Conflict ought to be overcome from his (moral) point of view. Thus he tells us: "Sacrifice all wills not organized or that go against the whole."

Herein lies one of the central tensions in James' moral philosophy. Tension, conflict, opposition are the breeders of progress, and he, like Mill, regards man as, par excellence, the progressive animal. Self-improvement, like social improvement, depends upon conflict, as well as its overcoming. All the same, he remains a holist: that is to say, conflict should result, by stages, in individual and/or social harmony. It is not a good in itself. This will have to serve as an introduction to James' ethical theory.

III

Let us now turn to the practical moral philosophy which is inseparably related to James' ethical theory, and which provides its ground. As Perry remarks, again
and again, James was the exemplum of an individualist, and, indeed, his individualism, conceived as an ideology, goes deep. He was always sympathetic, and pled for sympathy to the needs and desires of particular individuals and social groups. This attitude perhaps is most poignantly shown in his essay "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings." Let me quote one or two choice passages, by way of illustration. In the second paragraph he begins by saying "Now the blindness in human beings, of which this discourse will treat, is the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves" (629). The points that James is making are two: (a) Few have any difficulty sympathizing with people like themselves: men, say, with men, women with women, older people with other older people, adolescents with their peers, blacks with blacks, whites with whites, and so on. It is far more difficult for a man to sympathize with a woman going through menopause, an experience which he knows about not by acquaintance but only by description; it is hard for an old fogey like myself to feel, not to mention show, sympathy for the unspeakable longings of my young son and daughter. Even the most well-drilled advocate of equal rights, if he is a white, has difficulty in feeling intimately the sense of humiliation which many blacks still feel in the presence of whites; and as I have found, it is hard for some stern feminists to understand or feel for men who love women and want, with not much ado, to take them to bed. There are, of course, many exceptions, but they merely reinforce the rule. (b) The other point is no less interesting. Here let me quote again from James: "Take our dogs and ourselves, connected as we are by a tie more intimate than most ties in this world; and yet, outside of that tie of friendly fondness, how insensible, each of us, to all that makes life significant for the other!!...." (630) The dog we conceive as a "creature," not as a person. Does he possess rights? We may come to think so, as I do. Yet in practice, and James, throughout this essay is concerned only with our lives as "practical beings" who have limited functions and duties to perform, we may overlook such rights.

The point may be carried further. Sympathy is possible only where, as we say, there is empathy, a prior sense, that is of likeness. To sympathize with my dog I must, in a way, be capable of feeling like a dog — and who can do that, save, so to say, when he is hung over. I myself happen to abhor, am even afraid, of moths. I swat, or flail at them, instinctively. Damn them and damn their creator. What harm have they ever done me? None that I know of. Here is a case, even if a somewhat ridiculous one, of the blindness regarding creatures, of which James is speaking. Many other examples of such blindness abound in the essay. One is especially fine. Like Rousseau or, better, Thoreau, I find myself sick unto death of town or city life, and so go out into the country in order to redeem my heritage of our forefathers who lived, simply and naturally, on the land. Then we pass a mountaineer who is clearing the land in order to bring it under cultivation, and so pass out of a state of nature. Here says James, "I instantly feel (his word is "felt") that I (have) been losing the whole inward significance of the situation. Because to me the clearings spoke of naught but denudation" (631).

Now James generalizes: "Wherever," he says, "a process of life communicates an eagerness to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant" (631). There is the capital point, which he makes throughout the essay. The message is clear: Not only is the individual life of any person meaningful to him, it is our task to make it significant to ourselves, however different we may be from him (or her).
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This is the great boon and blessing of those sympathetic ones, of whom James himself is such an effective and exemplary instance.

Of what importance is all this so far as ethics is concerned? The answer is plain. Morally speaking, James is making a plea for pluralism, and hence of respect for the moral attitudes of people unlike ourselves. This does not mean that we must follow them in refusing to eat meat on Friday, in getting ourselves circumcized, or in developing sexual practices which seem to us, not merely strange, but unnecessarily restrictive. We too are individuals and must also be, as Emerson, a favorite of James, true to ourselves. Moral faddism, like ethical attitudinizing, is nauseating. “Trust thyself,” said the Concord sage, “every heart vibrates to that iron string.” Would that this were true! We may also be blind to the virtues of our own life styles and tastes. Said Tristam Shandy: let anyone ride his hobbyhorse down the king’s highway at his own gait — so long as he does not command me to get up and ride behind him. James, as I recall, does not develop this side of the great point he has in view, but it is implicit everywhere in his writings on the topic.

James’ ethical pluralism—not to be confused with the various facile ethical relativisms that abound in our time — is all of a piece with this metaphysical pluralism, as expounded in his A Pluralistic Universe. James was, temperamentally, a pluralist. But he was also a pluralist by reflection and settled conviction. There is more, however, to the story, as we shall soon see. For James, although a rugged individualist, was by no means a ragged one.

At this point, let me suggest what may lie at the root of James’ passion for democracy. James had little use for simple minded majoritarianism. As again we shall see, he also believed in social classes and in not abandoning one’s own station in society and life, and the duties that go with them. In his view, what lies at the core of any acceptable democratic society is “the democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality” (Perry 266). Here, following Perry, it is useful to compare James’ moral point of view with those of his friends and friendly antagonists, Peirce and Royce. Peirce and Royce were enraptured by the idea, or ideal, of a great, expanding community, which, they believed, would come about in the fullness of time. James, the realist, regarded this aspiration or purpose, as pure hogwash. He did not oppose community — far from it. But any community, or communalism, with which he could identify himself would first have to respect the individual, with all his eccentricities and differences.

Here begins, in full earnest, the dialectic of which I have already spoken. Royce, too, as a follower of Hegel, was a dialectician. But the dialectic of history which he, like his master, was an advocate, was, in the end, inevitablistic, leaving little room for individual freedom and choice. James also knew that scientific laws are real, that history, too, has its own necessities, which limit the options of individuals and social groups. He also accepted these as facts. But he not only believed in free action, he also believed that by resolute determination, individuals and groups alike can modify their environments and their lives according to their hearts’ desire — always, of course, within realistic limits. Wherein lies the truth? The answer lies in the dialectic itself. The world, and man as a central being in the world, is malleable, subject to mutation, including mutations brought about by the determined decisions and actions of ordinary human beings. On the one side is the inescapable reality of man’s institutional life; on the other is the no less inescapable fact of the individual’s inability, or refusal, to be an institutional man. Of course, man’s insti-
institutional life is based upon his likeness to others. But no institution can wholly dominate its members. They have their own individual rows to hoe, and they will hoe them willy-nilly. Of course James lived before the era of totalitarianism, but by extrapolation, I am sure he would have said that, whereas totalitarianism may exist as an ideology, a fully totalistic society will never occur—so long as there remains one lonely soul who refuses to comply, who breaks the rules, or who, however secretly, smokes pot, eats parsnips, goes swimming in the nude, or pisses on the sidewalk. Says the totalistic, “Keep off the grass.” Says the individualistic, “Just for that, I’ll walk over the grass.” Says the totalistic, “You belong to the state, and must follow its dictates.” Says the Jamesian, “Just because you command me to do so, I’ll break your blood laws and rules, and get away with murder, if I can do so.”

I beg the reader not to be put off by my examples. James was not preaching, nor am I, a kind of systematic rebelliousness or wanton disregard for institutions, including the state. So far as I know, he was, as a rule, a law-abiding citizen, paid his debts, and did his duty, not merely because it was required of him, but because his moral sense committed him to do so. But he held that no institution and no society can fully determine the inward feelings, and values, of individuals. Our night thoughts are our own, and they are precious both to ourselves and occasionally to others, especially when we do not forget them in the heat of the day.

Ultimately, James was at the same time a qualified individualist and qualified communitarian, and there, for the time being, we must let the matter rest. “Damn the absolute,” he once said to Royce. “Nothing is absolutely true, nothing is absolutely good or evil. The universe, including the ethical universe, is not completely full.”

In bringing this section to a close, let me say something about James’ defense of tolerance, which is merely a corollary of the gospel already outlined. For many moral and social philosophers, toleration has primarily an instrumental value. Nor would James deny, as a pragmatist, the utility of tolerance. But I think he would also have said that tolerance is intrinsically valuable as well, that it is good, or right, per se to be tolerant, to respect the idiosyncrasies, including the idiosyncratic convictions, of those with whom we do not agree. Put it in another way: I am commanded by the Christian gospel to love my neighbor. But I cannot love my neighbor, if I do not also love his freedom to go his own way, so long as he does not interfere unnecessarily with my freedom and my individuality. We may all be created in the image of God. But there are many such images, each of which has its own inviolable right to be and to propagate. John Locke, an early defender of the gospel of toleration, set rather strict, and to us, curious, limits to what a well-ordered society may properly tolerate. According to him, toleration should not be extended to atheists, Catholics, and Moslems, though for different reasons, which we need not go into here. In James’ view, if I may speak for him, such limits are, in principle outrageous. Doctrinal atheism is largely harmless. What matters is a sense of the holy. There are few atheists who do not have a sense of the holy, however much they may try to disguise the fact. Bertrand Russell, whom James admired and who admired James, was formally an atheist. But few men have been so imbued, and fruitfully imbued, with a sense of the holiness of human life, of human love, of peace, and of the contemplation of beautiful ideas and works of art. On this score, certainly, Russell was James’ man. James, who believed, or tried to believe, in a finite god, could not conceivably have been a Catholic, and I imagine that Catholic-
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ism in most respects was, for him, a repugnant institutional religion. Yet I cannot imagine that James would refuse to tolerate Catholics — so long as they acknowledged his right not to become one. As for Moslems, whom Locke said could not be tolerated because of their strange customs and folk-ways, I have no doubt that James would have been charmed by them, and would have defended their right to exist in the United States, and to practice their rituals and rites without molestation.

IV

Let us now say something about James' relations with Santayana, whom I have elsewhere suggested was, despite his disguises and affectations, a philosophical pragmatist, for they are pertinent to a fuller view of James' moral philosophy and practice. Santayana shared James' sense of the diversity of moral attitudes and practices, and so long as they did not interfere with his own curious latinate aristocratic mode of life, and his desire to live in hotels in Rome, far from the madding crowd, whose company he did not enjoy, he was tolerant of them and preached a detached and amused tolerance which, despite their differences, was not wholly foreign to that of James himself, who, for all his love of democracy, was, as we shall see, a committed member of the educated class, and who probably would not have delighted in the company of most American Indians in his own day. After all, James was a Brahmin, to the manor born. He was not fastidious, as Perry tells us, about most things. But he did not delight in boors, in the uncouth, in drunkenness, or, to bring the point closer to Santayana's door step, homosexuality. I think he would have regarded Wittgenstein as a brilliant freak and would have avoided him, save at meetings of the Aristotelian Society. But these differences of taste were not what deeply divided James from Santayana. What did divide them, is the fact that Santayana always remained a fastidious spectator, never an activist. He could sympathize with outlandish peoples and be charmed by their curious customs, but only in imagination. He was neither by temperament nor conviction, a participant. He always sat in the grandstands and would have fainted if invited to play ball himself. James, on the contrary, was always an actor and an activist. He wanted to change the world, to improve it, not merely by his writings but by his participation in the social and civic life of the community. In short, James was a reformer who always associated himself actively with other reformers. Santayana, to be sure, was well aware that the moral life requires us to make decisions, and he made many decisions. But he wanted others to stay off his grass, and wanted his privacy respected. He was usually very charming when young Americans, including young American philosophers, called on him in Rome. According to his lights, he was also generous both of his time and his money. But an active moral and social being he was not. On this score, James may be better compared with other public men among the philosophical gentry, including Russell, Mill, and my own favorite philosopher, David Hume, who, in his charming autobiography, said that he would be content to be remembered simply as a member of "the party of humanity." That, by and large, was James' view, and, like Hume, belonging to the party of humanity, required something more than writing about it.
We have now come to terms with another central aspect of James' thought and conduct as a practical moralist, which many of his admirers as well as his critics have found harder to take. This concerns his doctrine of the importance of struggle, risk, as well as a kind of romantic courage, not to mention his advocacy, a la Teddy Roosevelt, of a certain martial view of life. Here we find his views best stated in the sequel to "What Makes Life Significant," a remarkable essay entitled "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," and in a later paper "The Moral Equivalent of War." Here again, he begins by preaching the gospel of tolerance. But shortly the theme changes. The following passage, which I quote in extenso conveys his attitude far better than I can do by paraphrase:

"I soon recognized that it was the element that gives to the wicked outer world all its moral style, expressiveness and picturesqueness,—the element of precipitousness, so to call it, of strength and strenuousness, intensity and danger. What excites and interests the looker-on at life (pace Santayana), what the romances and the statues celebrate and the grim civic monuments remind us of, is the everlasting battle of the powers of light with those of darkness: with heroism, reduced to bare chance, yet ever and anon snatching victory from the jaws of death. (648).

Again speaking of the other side of this doctrine of struggle and heroism, he cries, "The price must be paid!" And he fully knew what the price might be: death itself.

Undoubtedly, this doctrine, along with the manner of its expression, has its morbid side, and we must never forget, in discussing James' ethics, his own fits of morbidity, his proneness to the James' family's malady — the dark nights of the soul. One is reminded here of the fact that Henry James, Sr. lost an arm by shoving his hand into a fire — evidently merely to prove a point. So our admiration for James' cult of struggle and risk, and of the necessity for hard sacrifices, must remain qualified. On the other side, precisely the same attitude gave immense strength to members of the Resistance during World War II and to many others who have had to cast their lot, however forlornly, against oppression and tyranny in their own lives and societies. With qualifications, then I myself am, were I not such a coward, James' man. As the old saw has it, nothing ventured nothing gained. And sometimes, as Socrates made clear when he drank the hemlock, it is better to die than to submit to tyranny. It is always tyranny, in all its devilish forms, against which James protests and demands that we protest, not with our words only but by sacrifices that could bring us great bodily harm, mental anguish, as well as the loss of our friends and allies. The same spirit animated Sartre and, in part, led to his break with Camus.

Let us conclude this discussion on a rather more amiable note. Later in the essay "What Makes a Life Significant," James enters into an extended discussion of Tolstoy, whom he greatly admired. He tells us that readers of that great novelist will share a feeling similar to that of Tolstoy, "with its abhorrence of all that conventionally passes for distinguished, and its exclusive vilification of the deification of the bravery, patience, kindliness, and dumbness of the unconscious natural man." Tolstoy, as James remarks, had his own crisis of melancholy. But what came of it, in his case, was a commitment to democracy, by which Tolstoy meant a "leveling
philosophy," a love of the common people, their folk art, and their moral attitudes.

Now we tum to the more controversial and famous essay "The Moral Equivalent of War." As Perry tells us, flatly and without qualification, James was a pacifist, a man of peace, who hated war, especially of an imperialistic kind. How could such a man advocate "the martial spirit," admire many of the so-called military virtues, and make a virtual fetish of the moral equivalent of war? The answer is at once difficult and important. Says Perry, "The martial spirit was implied in James' moral dualism. Good is good and evil is evil, and it is the part of righteousness to love the one and to hate the other with equal whole-heartedness." Just so. He wanted to develop the moral virtues of the military man, without his own characteristic faults and blindesses: that is to say, we must be courageous, be ready to sacrifice our lives in the good fight or battle, be resolute, keep the faith. James never included among these virtues the following or orders. Perhaps he was himself blind to the fact that the good soldier follows the orders of his superiors and that a military society is the paradigm of a regimented society. We must not, however, forget that James sublimates the martial virtues, and does not, so far as I can see, praise soldiers simpliciter. Just the contrary.

James' celebration of the moral equivalents of the virtues commonly ascribed to the good soldier was, as Perry reminds us, closely related to his tendency to neurasthenia. He was prone to illness, something of an hypochondriac, who would then be driven to a revulsion of feeling which would require him to get up from his sick bed, actual or psychological, and do something. James' celebration of the martial spirit remained the other side of his own deep personal need for achievement; he could never rest on his laurels, many though they were. Each day is a new day, and we must confront it, despite all our desire to sit back and take a well-earned rest, bravely and heroically.

At this point, let me say a word about James' important views of habit. Now habits, in themselves, are neither good nor bad. It is their effects, or consequences that make them so. All of us are creatures of habit, like it or not. The important thing is that bad habits may be broken and good ones cultivated. For our purposes, what matters is James' contention that if we resolutely try to break a bad habit and cultivate a good one, and continue to do so for only a week, we are likely to find that the new habit stays with us and the old one remains no more than a bad memory. The point is, that the strenuous, or heroic, life may become habitual, so that we do not have to gird our loins each time we find ourselves in danger in order to make an heroic leap. James' ethics continually reflect his psychology, just as his psychology, in many ways, is a product of his moral insights.

I will conclude this section simply by remarking upon James' interest as a psychologist on what happens to human beings when placed in stress, and his moral advocacy of living as well as one can and even at some danger to one's health and peace of mind under a sense of pressure. A minor example will serve to illustrate the point. I myself learned through James from Perry that if one would make a practice (habit) of getting along with four or five hours of good sleep a night, one could get monumental amounts of work done that are denied the stay-abeds. James' contention, in fact, is that most people sleep a good part of their lives away, when it would be perfectly possible for them, were they willing to do so, to be awake and alive for 19 or 20 hours a day, doing good work of one sort or another.

What James is talking about here is developed saliently in various papers in-
cluding especially "The Energies of Men." There are, he contended, vast reservoirs of energy of which most individuals are unaware and never manage to tap — whether it is a matter of getting along on less sleep, or fighting against momentary fatigue, writing another sentence when one thinks the last one is the last one can write for a week. Whether it is a matter of eating less and getting more strength from what one does eat, whatever — it is all the same. Like Thoreau, in short, James wanted to drive life into a corner, even if, in so doing, he (or she) might fall apart in the process.

Was James reckless? It is hard to say. He certainly did drive himself almost to death on many occasions, and he paid a high price by so doing. But how much he accomplished as teacher, writer, friend, and man of the world! How much do we owe him, not only for his achievements, but also for his example. Here again, for the sake of comparison, J.S. Mill comes to mind. Like James, Mill was subject to periodic nervous break-downs; he, too, knew the bitter taste of melancholy, weariness, failure. But how much the world owes him, just as it owes so much to James. There are not many of us who can follow in James' very large footsteps, and I am not suggesting that we should try. There are the immense dangers, psychologically, that must be paid by the over-achiever, in morals as in anything else. Still, on balance, I am convinced that this side of James' moral philosophy is profoundly healthy-minded and sane.

VI

Every side of James' thought has a side contrary to it. And despite his strenuous advocacy of the strenuous life, he also preached, with great insight, the "gospel" of relaxation. (I find it amusing, as well as touching, that James' doctrines and theories are so often called "gospels" by him.) His point is both psychological and moral, and it is particularly well put in the concluding paragraph:

The need of feeling responsible all the livelong day has been preached long enough in our New England.... The way to do it (to be relaxed as well as responsible) paradoxical as it may seem, is genuinely not to care whether we are doing it or not. Then, possibly, by the grace of God, you may all at once find that you are doing it, and, having learned what the trick feels like, you may (again by the grace of God) be enabled to go on. (p. 258, essays)

Early in the essay he tells us that the path to cheerfulness, if we are not cheerful, is simply to sit up cheerfully and to look and act as if cheerfulness were there already. Assume a virtue if you have it not as the Bard said, and it is James' point here. So it is with kindliness, amiability, and other sentiments that form the parts of what we call good nature. Even if the day ever dawns in which it will not be need- ed to fight the old heavy battles against Nature, it will still always be needed to furnish the background of sanity, serenity, and cheerfulness to life, to give moral elastic- ity to our disposition, to round off the wiry edge of our fretfulness, and make us good-humored and easy of approach" (243). Weakness is too much a part of life to be what doctors call "irritable weakness." The way to overcome weakness of the sort James had in mind is to practice the gospel of relaxation, to take it easy, as we say nowadays. Then we can return to the serious business of life, reassociate our martial efforts to do the right thing with that overplus of energy which all of us
need to win the battle of life. But morality and psychology go together, and the gospel of relaxation is an integral part of what he calls “mental hygiene.”

VII

It is time to turn to the social and political aspects of James’ ethics. Here, again, we find his dualism and dialectical pitting of opposites at work. On the one side, once more, there has to be that militant self-assertiveness of which we have already spoken. On the other, there is the “sentiment” of humanity. For James, the latter sentiment (and it is of great interest that he calls it a “sentiment,” just as he speaks of the sentiment of rationality, reminding us at the same time of Hume) comes about from a hatred of cruelty, a care for the underdog, and the disreputable. As Perry tells us, James was often criticized for a certain indiscriminateness in his choice of friends, and there is a touching story about his amiable picking up of an astonished undergraduate whom he took home, gave a cup of tea and chewed the rag with for an hour or two. How many of his colleagues would have done that? Perry, for one, certainly, who picked me up, more or less in the same way.

James, as I have remarked early on, was never a utopian. He was a progressive and liberal, hoping only, by slow and often painful stages, to ameliorate the lot of his fellow human beings. He was, in his own time, a muck-wump, an anti-imperialist, and internationalist, and, most remarkable, a pacifist.

But, like charity, the sentiment of humanity begins at home, and one must start by being kind to the members of one’s family, one’s friends, and, when possible, one’s enemies. Internationalism is all very well, but all too many internationalists are indifferent to the miseries they find on their own doorstep. Once more, in politics, as in morals, James reminds us in effect of the curse of bigness, and it was the bigness of the United States of America that bothered him most. Perhaps the most mature statement of his own conception of his political role is to be found in an address entitled “The Social Value of the College Bred.” For all his advocacy of democracy, James never aspired to a classless society. Like Mill, among others, he accepted class distinctions as an inevitable and, indeed, beneficial part of social life. It is the business of the educated classes, and especially the college bred, to guard the “tone” of society. Like Mill and Matthew Arnold in the generation before him, he preached a doctrine of what Arnold called “the saving remnant.” Mankind, nations, cities, towns, and families alike must have, and should have, their leaders, the choice spirits who may hope to uplift their fellows, by their example, by their works, and by their writings. “We ought to have our own class consciousness,” said James, and this holds true not only of the educated classes but also of those under-dogs who form what Marx, somewhat indiscriminately, called the proletariat.

Let me conclude by saying something about James’ activities as a reformer. During the 1890’s James was much concerned with the educational problems of the members of the Harvard faculty. Here, he was, as we might expect, a libertarian and individualist. And his scientific training disposed him to favor the liberalization of the curriculum at the expense of the ancient languages, for example. He also was well aware that there remains an inerradical distinction between two sorts of students... The one sort of man is born for the theoretic life, and is capable of pressing
forward indefinitely into its subtleties and specialties... The other class of men may be intelligent but they are not theoretical.... These excellent fellows need contact of some sort with the fighting side of life, with the world in which men and women earn their bread and butter and live and die...

By stages, however, James’ activities extended far beyond Harvard Yard. He used his influence, as Perry tells us, against bills before the state legislature designed to require the examination of medical practitioners — and, as I should add, we should never forget that James was himself a medical man before he was a psychologist, and a philosopher.

President Grover Cleveland’s Venezuela message, dispatched in December, 1895, resulted in a crisis which impressed James, apparently for the first time with the danger that lurked in “the fighting instinct.” Later he replied, against Teddy Roosevelt’s bully-boy conduct of our foreign affairs, by saying “We are evidently guilty of lese-majeste...” He was leery of the misapplications of the Monroe doctrine, which all too often, then as now, has been employed in the series of our own imperialistic ends.

As Perry says, James saw imperialism as an outlet for blind passion masked by a profession of benevolence. We should be missionaries of civilization, and to bear the white man’s burden, painful as it often is. (It should not be forgotten in this connection that James was an admirer of Rudyard Kipling.) In April, 1899, Roosevelt made his famous speech on “The Strenuous Life,” which, fascinatingly, evoked a long reply from James in which he accused Roosevelt and the whole imperialistic group of “abstractness.”

James’ active participation in the anti-imperialistic movement came to a close in his address before the Anti-Imperialist League in Boston in the fall of 1903. He said, among other things,

I think we have candidly to admit that in the matter of our Philippine conquest we...have failed to produce much immediate effect....

‘Duty and Destiny’ have rolled over us like a Juggernaut....

Three years later, despite his criticisms of Roosevelt, however, James surprisingly supported the election of Roosevelt to the presidency of Harvard.

James’ standard of international politics was always an application of his gospel of individualism. Tolerate differences and enjoy them. And to this he added his usual corollary that intolerance is intolerable. He was fond of saying that he “went in for small nations and small things generally. Damn great Empires! including that of the Absolute.... Give me individuals and their spheres of activity.” It should be added, at the same time, that James’ Americanism was never seriously shaken. In this instance, as in so many others, he remained instinctively loyal to his own, whether family, friend, institution or country. And his patriotism ran with two of his fundamental moral attitudes. He continually charged that Europe was relatively corrupt. America, so he contended, was less highly institutionalized, less subject to control by impersonal corporate entities than Europe. The other attitude, or sentiment, which re-enforced James’ patriotism was his repugnance to the decadent and the effete — his preference for the simple, the natural, the vigorous, and the forward-looking.

The last of the causes that enlisted James’ support, as Perry says, was Mental Hygiene! But that is a story for which we have no space here.
William James as Moral and Social Philosopher

I should like to conclude by mentioning the fact that James was never a classifier or a supporter of rigid classifications, institutional or otherwise. I think it fair to say that, for him, morality is merely the active practical side of religion, in part I do believe that, although individual feelings initiate the religious life, we humans do need religious institutions, along with their rituals and rites and holy books, to give focus and solidarity to the religious life. But, like James, I find my idea of a universal church beyond my hopes in this world. My sentiments are protestant and pluralistic in this domain as in others. Like James, again, any god or divine being worthy of worship must be finite, in order to cope with the problem of evil. Like Peirce, I also believe that theology is a necessary adjunct of religious life. But I find none of the proofs for the existence of God, including Peirce's credible. For my part, the business of theology is not to demonstrate the existence, or reality, of divine being, but to defend the right to believe. Too many of us renounce our religious faiths when we find that the existence of god cannot be proven. And for the last time, let me stress the heart has reasons that the intellect knows not of. But Peirce himself believes this. Why then should he attempt to provide an argument of the existence of God?

One last word. I am convinced that the tension between Peirce's philosophy of religion and that of James is a healthy one. The truth probably lies somewhere between them. As for John Dewey, my own opinion is that he is the weakest in his discussions of the varieties of religious experience. The religious life transcends the moral life, just as it transcends the aesthetic life, the scientific life, etc. God, if god there be, must be conceived as transcendent, which is not the same thing as transcendental. And the reason for this is that religious experience itself transcends, or encompasses, all the other forms of experience of which human beings are capable.