



**William James**  
The Varieties of Religious  
Experience

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THE VARIETIES OF  
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

WILLIAM JAMES was born in New York City in 1842, the eldest of five children. His brother, the novelist Henry James, was the second-born. James's father was a lecturer on philosophical and religious subjects with a particular interest in the work of Emanuel Swedenborg, and much of William's childhood was spent travelling in Europe and around the east coast of America. Having initially harboured ambitions to be an artist and after periodic struggles with listlessness and depression, James eventually settled on a scientific career; he took his medical degree in 1869 and became an instructor in physiology and anatomy at Harvard in 1874. Increasingly focusing his attention on the emergent science of psychology, James taught the subject for many years before publishing his magisterial *Principles of Psychology* in 1890 to great acclaim. In the following years, as professor of both psychology and philosophy at Harvard, James became known as a writer and thinker across many disciplines, often drawing together his expertise in psychology with his interest in religion and the religious sensibility. He gave the Gifford Lectures on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* at Edinburgh University in 1901–2, which also contained the first significant reference to the philosophy of pragmatism in a popular context. James's commitment to philosophy dominated the later years of his life, in which he particularly developed his ideas about pluralism and what he called 'radical empiricism'. He retired from official academic duties at Harvard in 1907 but continued to travel, write, and lecture until his death in Mount Chocorua, New Hampshire, in 1910.

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WILLIAM JAMES

*The Varieties of  
Religious Experience  
A Study in Human Nature*



*Edited with an Introduction and Notes by*

MATTHEW BRADLEY

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## INTRODUCTION

### *'Popular Science' and the Gifford Lectures*

Collecting some of the many lectures and articles he had been writing since the mid-1880s into a volume for publication in 1896, William James began the book—called *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*—with some prefatory comments on the essays within defending the legitimacy of religion and religious faith. Some readers, James says, will be upset with him, particularly those rationally minded readers who take the view that people in general are quite credulous enough on the subject of religion without being encouraged by a professor of philosophy at Harvard. He was being characteristically modest, of course; they would also be reading the words of a trained physician, the author of a hugely respected textbook on psychology, and a formidable public intellectual. Nevertheless, James is sympathetic to the general point:

I quite agree that what mankind at large most lacks is criticism and caution, not faith. Its cardinal weakness is to let belief follow recklessly upon lively conception, especially when the conception has instinctive liking at its back. I admit then, that were I addressing the Salvation Army or a miscellaneous crowd it would be a misuse of opportunity to preach the liberty of believing as I have in these pages preached it.<sup>1</sup>

After he died in 1910, the idea that James's good heart had led him into precisely this position was certainly the keynote of many a tribute or memoir. Not all of them went so far as G. K. Chesterton in saying of James that it was his 'glory that he popularized philosophy', but 'his destruction that he popularized his own philosophy',<sup>2</sup> but even less astringent commentators seemed often to praise the man as a prelude to burying the work. His Harvard colleague and old sparring partner George Santayana said of James's writings on religion that,

<sup>1</sup> William James, *The Will to Believe and other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 7. All quotations from James's works throughout this Introduction will, unless otherwise stated, be taken from the Harvard *Works of William James*, gen. eds. F. H. Buckhardt, F. Bowers, and I. K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, Mass., 1979–83). See Select Bibliography for full details.

<sup>2</sup> Collected in Linda Simon (ed.), *William James Remembered* (Lincoln, Nebr., and London, 1996), 264.

from the best of motives, 'the tendency and suasion in them seems to run to disintegrating the idea of truth, recommending belief without reason, and encouraging superstition'.<sup>3</sup> Others bemoaned James's personal credulousness, the time he was perceived to have wasted defending the rights of all manner of unlikely sounding creeds, and as a prominent member and sometime president of the Society for Psychical Research writing up the dubious doings of spiritualists like Leonora Piper and other pedlars of the shop-soiled supernatural. It seemed that the openness of mind that was James's chief personal virtue was also to be deplored as his chief intellectual vice. By these lights, the legacy of William James's benevolence was rather to decrease the sum total of 'criticism and caution' around the subject of religion and belief, rather than the reverse.

Very few of these tributes, written mostly by academics or professional intellectuals, cited *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as James's most important book, although most recognized it as his most popular. The *Varieties* was closely based on twenty lectures given by James at Edinburgh University in 1901–2, part of a series paid for through a fund left in 1887 by the Scottish justice and sometime writer on the philosophy of religion, Adam Lord Gifford. In his will, Gifford could not have been clearer about who his new lectures were for. Shared between the universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, St Andrews, and Glasgow, he directed that they should be 'public and popular, that is, open not only to students of the Universities, but to the whole community without matriculation'.<sup>4</sup> Their subject was to be natural theology, that field of study which aimed (and aims) to examine religious questions without resorting to the supernatural or divine intervention as explanations. 'I think that the subject should be studied and known by all, whether receiving University instruction or not,' said Gifford. No tests of faith were to be imposed on Gifford lecturers, and in the will his commitment to scientific rigour was just as clear as his populist aspirations: 'I wish it [the study of religion] considered just as astronomy or chemistry is.' The *raison d'être* of the Gifford Lectures was thus to provide a platform for thinking about religion that combined intellectuality and popularity; 'criticism and caution' aimed squarely at the 'miscellaneous crowd'.

As he settled into the rhythm of delivering the first lectures in

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 97.

<sup>4</sup> Repr. in Stanley Jaki, *Lord Gifford and His Lectures* (Edinburgh, 1986), 66–76.

spring 1901, James noted with pride just how well he was doing with the crowd:

The audiences grow instead of dwindling, and in spite of rain, being about 300 and just crowding the room. They sit still as death and then applaud magnificently, so I am sure the lectures are a success. Previous Gifford lectures have had audiences beginning with 60 and dwindling to 15.<sup>5</sup>

Neither did James intend the flow of knowledge between the academic and the popular to be simply one-way. On the contrary, the rich vein of religious experiences reported by individuals ranging from an ex-highway robber who founded a New York mission (pp. 159–60) to a Scottish army officer who renounced his wild ways after an encounter with a supernatural light (pp. 173, 209) forms both an important evidential centre for James's lectures and the core of their method—that is, the examination of personal testimony. James ends the very first lecture by stating that the *Varieties*' chief claim to novelty will be in 'discussing religious experiences in a wider context than has been usual in university courses' (p. 28). Nevertheless, for some tastes James was doing rather less well with regard to 'criticism and caution'. The *Athenaeum* complained that 'the Gifford lectures are so far "popular" that they are not academic', and in its review characterized the *Varieties* volume (published in June 1902) as 'more or less, a work of "popular science"'.<sup>6</sup> This is suggestive, because it stops short of saying that what James is doing in the *Varieties* is not science. The *Athenaeum* does not characterize James's defence of religious experience as a battle of 'faith versus science' or 'belief versus knowledge'; James is taking on, in their words, 'an argument of popular science on the side opposed to his own'.

Long before the *Varieties*, James had established himself as a champion of popular science as a lecturer to many clubs and societies outside university circles. He was also a regular contributor to the periodical *Popular Science Monthly* (now *Popular Science*). Nevertheless the analysis of religious belief displayed by this 'side opposed to his own', and against which he writes the *Varieties*, is perhaps more readily recognizable to us as the predominant analysis in discourses of popular science today. This is what James calls the 'medical-materialist'

<sup>5</sup> *The Correspondence of William James*, ed. I. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth Berkeley, 12 vols. (Charlottesville, Va., 1992–2004), ix. 493.

<sup>6</sup> Review of the *Varieties* in the *Athenaeum*, 19 July 1902, 82–3.

position (p. 19). In James's summation, medical materialists argue at base that 'Alfred believes in immortality so strongly because his temperament is so emotional', that 'William's melancholy about the universe is down to bad digestion', and that 'Eliza's delight in her church is a symptom of her hysterical constitution' (p. 17). Such thinking, as James puts it, 'snuffs out Saint Teresa as an hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate' (p. 19). In other words, religious belief is a symptom of some mental lack or wider anxiety, a set of ideas or feelings that arise, essentially, out of a psychological dysfunction. Today, the strong brand of scientifically flavoured populist atheism most memorably presented by Richard Dawkins under the head of 'The God Delusion'<sup>7</sup> reconfigures these ideas into wider sociological and evolutionary contexts; so in Dawkins's account what he calls the 'meme' for religious belief is a survival mechanism that has become dangerously distorted through persisting long after it has ceased to provide any evolutionary advantage. But *The God Delusion* is—from the title down—heavily indebted to this late nineteenth-century idea of religion as a form of pathological weakness or psychological disorder. 'Individuals in asylums think they are Napoleon or Charlie Chaplin,' as Dawkins puts it at one point; 'religious experiences are different only in that the people who claim them are more numerous'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Dawkins's account of religion as a misdirected energy flowing destructively out of an unhealthy and unconscious response to situations long past seems semantically and conceptually to owe far more to psychoanalysis than it does to evolutionary biology.

It is important to remember that James offers his alternative to this view as a scientist of formidable credentials. Thinking in broad terms about what he was going to do for the lectureship in December 1899, James wrote to his friend Fanny Morse, envisioning that

In a general manner I can see my way to a perfectly bully pair of volumes, the first an Objective Study of the 'Varieties of Religious Experience,' the second, my own last will and testament, setting forth the philosophy best adapted to normal Religious needs.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> After Dawkins's best-selling book of the same name, *The God Delusion* (London, 2006). For evidence that this debate is an ongoing concern of the Gifford Lectures, see Terry Eagleton's Edinburgh Gifford lecture of 1 Mar. 2010, 'The God Debate', and Roger Scruton's Gifford series at St Andrew of the same year, entitled 'The Face of God'.

<sup>8</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 113.

<sup>9</sup> *Correspondence*, ix. 105.

The second of these never materialized, so what we mostly have in the *Varieties* is what James conceived to be the ‘Objective Study’, a survey of religion’s material (or as James puts it ‘existential’) manifestations and causes. He even worries out loud in the first lecture that he has concentrated so much on what he calls the ‘purely existential point of view’ of religion that some in the audience will think it ‘a degradation of so sublime a subject’, and ‘may even suspect me . . . of deliberately seeking to discredit the religious side of life’ (p. 14). ‘Psychology is the only branch of learning in which I am particularly versed’ (p. 12) he avers at the very beginning of the *Varieties*, and he had come to the discipline of physiological psychology by way of a rigorous training in the physical sciences of physiology and anatomy. Indeed, reading his 1890 textbook *The Principles of Psychology*, it is quite shocking to hear the famously good-hearted James talking so casually about the effect on a live frog’s nervous system of severing its cerebellum and *medulla oblongata* from its spinal cord. He was always a champion of Darwin’s ‘triumphant originality’,<sup>10</sup> and so accepted are Darwinian theories in the *Varieties* (James, of course, being of the first generation to grow up with Darwin as a fact of life) that he very casually refers to how they have ‘revolutionized’ the idea that only an intelligent creator could have designed the world (p. 333), and asserts that religions only ever prove themselves by a kind of natural selection, ‘the elimination of the humanly unfit, and the survival of the humanly fittest, applied to religious beliefs’ (p. 255). And while James in the *Varieties* is speaking as a scientist, he is *not* speaking as a believer in a conventional sense: ‘Those of us who are not personally favored with such specific revelations must stand outside of them altogether’, as he says at one point (p. 389); in the Postscript, he talks about ‘my own inability to accept either popular Christianity or scholastic theism’ (p. 395).

What James primarily takes issue with in the ‘medical materialist’ position is the presumption, widely held in this brand of popular science then as now, that the ‘diagnosing’ of a religious experience—the establishment of it as the result of some physical or psychological cause—is the end of the affair. To spot a cause, he argues, is not to establish an object or indeed a belief’s essential character, let alone its worth. In the *Varieties*, James is the first to recognize that pathological mental abnormalities lie at the heart of much religious experience.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Great Men and Their Environment’, *The Will to Believe*, 167.

As he says, ‘a religious life, exclusively pursued, does tend to make the person exceptional and eccentric’ (p. 14). However, when he cheerfully and unselfconsciously refers to the founder of Quakerism George Fox as a ‘psychopath’ (p. 15), and later calls John Bunyan ‘a typical case of the psychopathic temperament’ (pp. 125–6), the contemporary reader forcibly realizes James’s point. A central tenet of the *Varieties* is that value judgements lurk in even the most apparently empirical of assessments. We are invited in the book to judge the gallery of the religious geniuses that James has gathered—his mystics, his saints, the religiously minded both unhealthy *and* healthy—by a different scale of values, or at the very least to acknowledge and interrogate the values by which we are judging them. We now readily detect in the once-popular scientific term ‘degenerate’ a difficult mixture, a value judgement very clearly intermingling with a claim to scientific classification or objectivity. We are perhaps a little less alert to its presence in Dawkins’s present-day use of ‘delusion’, but as James would undoubtedly have recognized—and what the *Varieties* can still show us—the tension exists in it, and in much scientific language, no less equally.

### *Portrait of the Young Man: James’s Early Life*

In the ninth *Varieties* lecture, James tells an anecdote of his father, Henry James Sr., reading out the news of the founding of the Gifford lectureship to a youthful William over the family breakfast table (p. 154). Even if the story had been true, which it wasn’t—William was actually 45 when the Gifford bequest was first made public in 1887—it would have been an event of fairly little note in the James household. William James was born in New York City on 11 January 1842, the first of five children (his brother Henry James the novelist was the second), into what became an extremely intellectual household. His father was a noted writer and lecturer on religious and philosophical matters, and he and his young family came into regular contact with many leading thinkers of the day on both sides of the Atlantic, chiefly Ralph Waldo Emerson, who met Henry in 1842 and agreed to become godfather to the infant William. As Henry became ever more committed to the ideas of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg and ever more eccentric in his explication of them, young William watched his father become increasingly isolated and frustrated. When he edited Henry Sr.’s work for publication after

his death in 1882, it was his father's inability to conform that William stressed: 'I have often wondered what sort of figure my father might have made, had he been born into a more theological age.'<sup>11</sup> He also alluded to the fact that Henry Sr. was not a prophet honoured even in his own philosophical country, thanks to his habit of finding in 'various elements in Swedenborg's teaching an extremely different accentuation and perspective relation to each other, from anything other readers have been able to find'.<sup>12</sup> Others agreed: having read Henry's 1869 book *The Secret of Swedenborg*, the novelist William Dean Howells famously declared: 'he kept it'.<sup>13</sup>

William James thus grew up in an atmosphere of fervent and often very unorthodox debate, particularly with regard to religious matters. Ralph Barton Perry, a pupil of James's at Harvard and his first biographer, reported from a contemporary eyewitness this account of the James family at play:

The father would propound some provocative idea, and throw it into the midst of his brood in order that they might sharpen their teeth on it and, in their eagerness to refute him or one another, exercise themselves in the art of combative thinking.<sup>14</sup>

This unusual home life was compounded by Henry Sr.'s almost addictive propensity for moving his family around Europe and America, and William's early education was mostly formed of a bewildering array of home tutors and a blur of different day and boarding schools. Unsurprisingly, when William came to choose a career at age 16 he was uncertain, but inspired by some drawing classes he took while living in Newport, Rhode Island, he decided to train as an artist.

This early interest in the figure of the artist is still traceable in the *Varieties*. From the outset, James outlines his notion that the 'primordial' form of all religion comprises '*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*' (p. 32, James's italics). Whether it is St Teresa, St John of the Cross, or even the 'psychopathic' George Fox, in a hundred myriad guises it is this

<sup>11</sup> 'Introduction to *Literary Remains*', *Essays in Religion and Morality*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 59.

<sup>13</sup> Attributed to Howells by Charles Eliot Norton, *Letters of Charles Eliot Norton* (Boston, 1913), ii. 379.

<sup>14</sup> R. B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1935), i. 172-3.

figure—the man or woman meditating in personal communion with what they consider the divine—who is the central protagonist of the drama James repeatedly enacts in the *Varieties*. Institutional religion is for James something like a fall from grace; the religious genius attracts followers who form themselves into ecclesiastical institutions ‘with corporate ambitions of their own’, which in turn act to ‘contaminate the originally innocent thing’ (p. 258). In the last of the lectures to examine a specific type of religious experience, Lectures XVI and XVII on ‘Mysticism’, James explicitly casts the mystical experience as the highest form of religious experience, its ‘root and centre’ (p. 290). It has, James says, ‘long since [been] branded as pathological, though private practice and certain lyric strains of poetry seem still to bear witness to its ideality’ (p. 295).

Neither is it an accident that James finds one of his best examples of the limitations of the ‘medical materialist’ position in Max Nordau’s infamous 1895 diatribe against art, *Degeneration*. Nordau saw almost all the significant productions of modern art (including the music of Wagner, the plays of Ibsen, and the paintings of all the Impressionists) as being chiefly valuable for the diagnostic insight they gave into their originators’ degenerative pathology.<sup>15</sup> Reviewing the book in 1895, James had written sardonically that for Nordau, mysticism and degenerate art both show ‘the tendency to see in everything more than appears on the surface’ before retorting that ‘This is much like saying that in a healthy mind thoughts should have no atmosphere, no overtones, no fringes—an opinion to which few would subscribe’.<sup>16</sup> Even in his own day, Nordau’s ideas were at the lunatic outposts of ‘medical materialism’, but for James (ever alert to the potential for extreme examples to illuminate normative assumptions of thinking), this only highlighted the fallacy of judging any phenomenon on the basis of its psychological or pathological origin. If we don’t see this as a sensible criterion for judging aesthetic experience, why do we persist in seeing it as valid for judging almost all other forms of experience?

Ultimately James turned away from the idea of an artistic career, uncertain about his chance of achieving any significant or lasting success. Instead he plotted what looked like a radical change of course in 1861 to the Lawrence Scientific School to study chemistry, which led to comparative anatomy and physiology, and then to enrolment at the

<sup>15</sup> M. Nordau, *Degeneration* (London, 1895), 17.

<sup>16</sup> In ‘Degeneration and Genius’, *Essays, Comments and Reviews*, 508.

Harvard Medical School three years later. For many of his student years however, and in the years immediately afterwards, James was beset by crippling poor health and severe depression. This reached a crisis, probably around 1870, in a famous depressive ‘attack’ which he wrote up in ‘The Sick Soul’ lecture of the *Varieties* disguised as the testimony of a French correspondent. A ‘horrible fear of [his] own existence’ conjoins with a mental image of

an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches . . . He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. *That shape am I*, I felt, potentially. (p. 128)

This vision is often interpreted as James confronting his fear of determinism,<sup>17</sup> an idea that was certainly giving him much anxious pause in the late 1860s and early 1870s (in a later essay he blackly described the deterministic universe as one in which ‘what ought to be is impossible—in other words, [as] an organism whose constitution is afflicted with an incurable taint, an irremediable flaw’<sup>18</sup>). Yet in this doppelgänger figure we also have a fearful expression of James’s favoured type of genius, shown up as a grotesque parody. Aesthetic sensitivity becomes here what medical materialists like Max Nordau always said it was, a particularly repulsive kind of mental degeneracy. Personal religious experience may appear as communion with the divine at the point at which it occurs and to the person who experiences it, but here James plays out what he still fears it might be—the disturbed distraction of a diseased mind.

Beyond the covert use of this nightmarish vision, James’s depressive tendencies<sup>17</sup> are well marked in the *Varieties* (is it an accident that casting about for a random name for somebody ‘melancholy about the universe’ in the first lecture he opts for ‘William’? (p. 17)). A famous distinction is drawn in the *Varieties* between the psychological types of the ‘once-born’ and ‘twice-born’. Originally coined by the writer F. W. Newman, the ‘once-born’ are people who see their relationship to the universe as a fundamentally benevolent one, the

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. R. A. Putnam, Introduction to Putnam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (Cambridge, 1997), 3; L. Simon, *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James* (New York, 1998), 126–7.

<sup>18</sup> *The Will to Believe*, 126.

‘twice-born’ those who suffer a ‘wrongness or vice in [their] essential nature’ which must be overcome by ‘a supernatural remedy’ (p. 109). With a telling use of the personal pronoun, James says of the ‘twice-born’ in ‘The Sick Soul’ chapter that ‘We need a life not correlated with death, a health not liable to illness, a kind of good that will not perish, a good in fact that flies beyond the Goods of nature’ (p. 113). James never got a positively identifiable moment of ‘supernatural remedy’, but his appointment as an instructor at Harvard in 1873, and the development of his writing and lecturing career, began to put the more morbid symptoms of his ‘twice-born’ unease, and certainly his artistic ambitions, increasingly into the past. Furthermore, his marriage in 1878 (and the start of his family the following year) brought further security, and it was a much more personally and intellectually confident James who carved out an intellectual niche for himself at Harvard in subsequent decades.

### *Willing to Believe: The Road to the Varieties*

It took James a long time to produce his first book-length work, but when it finally arrived in 1890 (twelve years after he initially agreed to write it) *The Principles of Psychology* more than justified the delay in both its quality and its size, and it remains one of the few textbooks in any scientific field still read over a hundred years after its publication. The *Principles* is chiefly concerned with belief only in the sense of cognition, i.e. how and why we choose to prioritize certain sorts of sensory information over other sorts; why, for example, we might choose to believe that a memory is a memory, not an imaginary thought. Religion is barely mentioned, but the chapter of the *Principles* entitled ‘The Perception of Reality’ contains early stirrings of James’s later attitudes. For James, even this fundamental cognitive distinction ultimately comes down to unreason: ‘Belief, the sense of reality, feels like itself—that is about as much as we can say.’<sup>19</sup> James’s best-known contribution to the lexicon is probably the phrase ‘stream of consciousness’, an organicist metaphor used in the *Principles* to counter overly mechanistic or abstracted models of mental activity. However, here too we find ideas that were to prove key to James’s later interest in religious belief:

<sup>19</sup> *Principles of Psychology*, 916.

To begin at the bottom, what are our very senses themselves but organs of selection? . . . We notice only those sensations which are signs to us of *things* which happen practically or æsthetically to interest us, to which we therefore give substantive names, and which we exalt to this exclusive status of independence and dignity. But in itself, apart from my interest, a particular dust-wreath on a windy day is just as much of an individual *thing* and just as much and little deserves an individual name, as my own body does . . . Thus my table-top is named *square*, after but one of an infinite number of retinal sensations which it yields, the rest of them being sensations of two acute and two obtuse angles: but I call the latter *perspective* views and the four right angles the *true* form of the table, and erect the attribute squareness into the table's essence, for æsthetic reasons of my own.<sup>20</sup>

What James went on to argue more explicitly in 'The Will to Believe' essay, and which then underpinned the *Varieties*, was a natural outgrowth of this cognitive point that *selection and volition* are the principles by which we perceive the world. In James's terms, it is our 'passional tendencies and volitions',<sup>21</sup> our emotions and our feelings in other words, that govern the way we perceive and thus the way we believe. Our grounds for belief in anything, from whether a table is 'essentially' a square to whether or not there is a personal God, are almost always non-rational. They are pre-weighted by what we want, what we think will be useful to us, and what we have been taught to notice or prioritize by our society and by our culture. How can we claim that any belief is based on a disinterested observation of the facts, if those 'facts' are in reality the end product of a process of highly selective perceptual choices? The centrepiece of 'The Will to Believe' is James's declaration that we each have 'the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will'.<sup>22</sup> We may not always be correct in our chosen hypotheses about the world, but we would certainly be incorrect to hold that emotional volition can be ignored as a factor in our choosing of them. In the *Varieties*, James acknowledges that the rationalistic part of our minds is the part that gets all the prestige, but points out that it is more often than not quite powerless:

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

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 273–4.

<sup>21</sup> *The Will to Believe*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 32.

that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it. (p. 63)

James is cautious in the *Varieties* to say that he is not making a judgement about whether the non-rational *should* hold sway in religion, just that it does. But underlying his argument is the idea that using our emotional inclinations as a basic guide to what to believe cannot be considered per se to be an error. Since it is a universal that lies behind even the most basic cognitive belief-building, by the terms of James's argument, even the most dyed-in-the-wool rationalist unconsciously does the same every day.

### *The Style and Structure of the Varieties*

James was certainly mindful of the importance of emotional volition when writing and delivering the *Varieties*. As one might expect from a man who only two years previously had published a book on pedagogical methods,<sup>23</sup> he carefully cultivates a persuasive lecturing persona. He is gently flattering, talking to his Scottish audience of 'our own sad Carlyle' (p. 37) and stressing Scotland and America's shared commitment to the idealist tradition (p. 87); he is informed but informal, reserving his most colourful adjectives for some of his most difficult concepts (a knotty piece of Kant is dubbed 'uncouth' on p. 49); and he is at all times careful to show himself infinitely attentive to his audience's attention. He seems to worry constantly that he risks 'tiring' his audience, or boring them, or 'jar[ring] upon the[ir] nerves' (p. 89). For all the pathological and extreme religiosity that James surveys in the *Varieties*, throughout he adopts the manner of the civil and sensible arbiter, the firm but open-minded man of sense. It is tempting but unsafe to assume that the persona of the *Varieties* is an uninflected index of its author's personality; no one believed more in the necessity of emotional influence to securing assent.

The structure of the lectures likewise smoothes James through some potentially very difficult territory. Having so trenchantly taken religion's part against the 'medical materialists' in the first lecture, for example, James makes the potentially explosive claim in the second that the religious emotion has no particular claim to special notice. There is no unique affect for religion, 'no ground for assuming a

<sup>23</sup> *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (1899).

simple abstract “religious emotion” to exist as a distinct elementary mental affection’. Indeed, ‘there . . . seems to be no one elementary religious emotion, but only a common storehouse of emotions upon which religious objects may draw’ (p. 30). James makes clear that as far as he is concerned it is personal religion that is ‘the primordial thing’ (p. 32), more authentic than the ‘second-hand’ institutions and churches, but he nevertheless insists that this personal religion is still an emotion like any other; the only difference is that its object is what men consider to be divine. Draining the controversy out of this drastic recasting of what ‘religion’ *means*, mostly through a careful tone and some intelligent juxtaposition, is a measure of James’s skill in creating—and then regulating—the emotional temperature of his listeners and readers.

James’s next move is to establish how much we rely on things we cannot see or touch, and then to chart a number of different iterations of the ‘religious emotion’ in its widest and most accessible forms over the next five lectures. First there is ‘healthy-mindedness’, described simply as ‘the tendency which looks on all things and sees that they are good’ (p. 74). His survey of this happy band of individuals picks up an idea first discussed in ‘The Will to Believe’, and which reads as a very modern concern: the idea that the position of the inquirer into any fact affects the fact of the fact itself. The example in the ‘Will’ is asking the question ‘Do you like me or not?’ If one stands aloof and waits for the objective evidence, none will ever come: ‘whether you do or not depends, in countless instances, on whether I . . . am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation’<sup>24</sup> (exactly the dynamic James aims at achieving with his audience in the *Varieties*). His lengthy defence of the American mind-cure movement (‘positive thinking’ therapy) is the final stage of his interest in healthy-mindedness: ‘Live as if I were true, she [mind-cure] says, and every day will practically prove you right’ (p. 97). However, it is important to note that for James, mind-cure’s ‘belief . . . in the conquering efficacy of courage, hope, and trust’ (p. 79) is only ever a hope and aspiration, and in the end must be a too limited view of the world, at least from the philosophical point of view. Certainly, his personal experience with mind-cure was patchy; the first correspondent to give an account of overcoming her own ‘bedridden invalidism’ through the

<sup>24</sup> *The Will to Believe*, 23.

power of positive energy (pp. 84-5) in this chapter was Suzie Champneys Clark, who in earlier years treated James for his insomnia. By 1900 he had come to the conclusion that her treatments were 'of absolutely no use to me' and, he further opined, 'nor do I think I am "suggestible" enough to be a good subject for any wonder-cures whatever'.<sup>25</sup>

Much more imaginative energy goes into describing the thought processes of those melancholic 'sick souls' with which James's younger self identified so closely:

Our civilization is founded on the shambles, and every individual existence goes out in a lonely spasm of helpless agony. If you protest, my friend, wait till you arrive there yourself! To believe in the carnivorous reptiles of geologic times is hard for our imagination . . . Yet there is no tooth in any one of those museum-skulls that did not daily through long years of the foretime hold fast to the body struggling in despair of some fated living victim . . . Crocodiles and rattlesnakes and pythons are at this moment vessels of life as real as we are; their loathsome existence fills every minute of every day that drags its length along . . . (pp. 130-1)

Dramatic and disturbing, 'The Sick Soul' chapter is the point at which the idea of the *Varieties* as an 'Objective Study' seems most under pressure. It is certainly a turning point in the volume. From this point, James moves from the examination of these fairly broad-brush notions of religious emotion to some of the more rarefied and extreme manifestations of the religious consciousness.

### *Philosophy and the Varieties*

In 'The Divided Self', James pleads at one point: 'Let me quote from some typical discordant personality, with melancholy in the form of self-condemnation and sense of sin' (p. 135). His first testimony is the classic case of St Augustine in the *Confessions*. Augustine is in the possession of what he calls 'two wills'; one is carnal and seeks to give rein to the full range of his sensual appetites, and one is sensual and seeks to reform. His second is from a relatively obscure Nova Scotian Evangelist, Henry Alline, who similarly oscillates between what he calls 'carnal mirth' (p. 137) and intense spiritual anguish and guilt. This use of anecdotal testimony from all quarters is typical of James's

<sup>25</sup> *Correspondence*, ix. 270.

procedure throughout the *Varieties*, and lies behind much of the criticism of James as insufficiently critical and cautious. In the *Varieties*, Whitman rubs shoulders with Christian Scientists, Tolstoy collides with Bunyan, and the internal struggles of a converting French Jew compete for attention with a Quaker concern about the religious rightness of removing one's hat. However, lying behind what seems on the surface to be a bafflingly eclectic jumble of individual tales in the *Varieties* is one of the philosophical keys to James's methodology and his thought: *radical empiricism*.

Before the *Varieties*, James had clarified this phrase in 'The Will to Believe'. Radical empiricism was radical chiefly because it was pluralist, i.e. it believed that 'there is no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact'.<sup>26</sup> In practice we find this idea forwarded in the *Principles* that it is our choice to see a square as somehow 'essentially' a square. It also heavily informs James's comments on evil in the *Varieties* (p. 107), and indicates his future development of pluralistic ideas. However, radical empiricism also changed; in his 1909 work *The Meaning of Truth*, James set out a new definition that was radical because of its vast extension of our notions of what experience *is*.<sup>27</sup> The best intimation of how this project might conceivably be seen as 'radical' comes in the *Varieties* in James's assertion that an individual feeling may not be a full or significant fact, but it must always be more significant than an abstraction, because 'it is of the *kind* to which all realities whatsoever must belong' (p. 378). As he memorably puts it, 'A bill of fare with one real raisin on it instead of the word "raisin" . . . might be an inadequate meal, but it would at least be a commencement of reality' (p. 379). In *The Meaning of Truth* he goes further still: the relations we draw between things, which we usually hold as abstractions, as well as our encounters with those things themselves, are located in lived experience, and moreover these relations are constantly being renegotiated and reformed because, as James puts it, 'our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view'.<sup>28</sup> Thus what might appear as a slightly eccentric series of connections in the *Varieties* is in fact part of James's broader development of the radical empiricist project.

<sup>26</sup> *The Will to Believe*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> *The Meaning of Truth*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 35.

If, as he said elsewhere, ‘the connection *is* the thinking’,<sup>29</sup> James’s method forces us to experience these new connections, which are in themselves new modes of thinking. A phrase like ‘Saint Augustine and Alline both emerged into the smooth waters of inner unity and peace’ (p. 138) might sound incongruous when we read it in the *Varieties*, but James’s idea is that located in that very incongruity is a reshaping and a remaking of our ideas about both.

In the *Varieties* we find James on the trajectory from experimental psychology to empiricist philosophy. In the mid-1890s, he had written to fellow psychologist Théodore Flournoy declaring that ‘the results that come from all this laboratory work seem to me to grow more and more disappointing and trivial’ and that ‘what is most needed is new ideas’.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, David Lamberth has powerfully argued that the *Varieties* sees James struggling to contain the roots of his later philosophical preoccupations within the narrower discourse of scientific psychology.<sup>31</sup> As he explains it, James came to believe that psychology could (a) never get beyond the analysis of the single individual and (b) never satisfactorily explain the relation between physical changes in the brain and the mental experiences that we feel ourselves to have. These were central limitations which increasingly frustrated James, and which he aimed at resolving through his radical empiricism and through philosophical pragmatism—the movement with which his name will for ever be associated. James defines ‘the principle of pragmatism’ quite late in the day in the *Varieties*, although its influence interpenetrates the volume as a whole. As C. S. Peirce has formulated it, James relates, pragmatism is the idea that ‘Beliefs, in short, are rules for action’ (p. 338), that ‘Our conception of these practical consequences is for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all’ (p. 338). This is a vast extension of something James calls in the first lecture ‘the empiricist criterion’, summed up in a half-quotation ‘By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots’ (p. 24). In other words, what we believe about a thing is always based on the practical effects of that thing as we have come across it in lived experience.

<sup>29</sup> *Talks to Teachers*, 87.

<sup>30</sup> *The Letters of William James* (London, 1920), ed. Henry James, 54. This letter is only calendared in the *Correspondence*, viii, 590.

<sup>31</sup> D. Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge, 1999), 139.

And as James builds towards an examination of the more extreme manifestations of religious sensibility—conversion, saintliness, and mysticism—it is the pragmatic method (judging always by the fruits) that dominates his survey.

It is easy to forget that for all James's open-mindedness, he is unafraid of making often quite severe value judgements and strictures on the saints and mystics that he surveys, even when he has come to what he sees as the highest forms of religious experience. St Teresa, for example, is taken to task for her 'voluble egotism' (p. 267), James's judgement being that 'there is absolutely no human use in her, or sign of any general human interest'. Even more censured is St Louis of Gonzaga, who serves 'as a type of excess in purification' (p. 269). As James tells it, so sensitive to potential impurity was Louis that he instructed his maids through a door, and was profoundly uncomfortable even having dinner with his mother. James writes that 'I can find no other sorts of fruit than these of Louis's saintship', and sums up his story as 'on the whole repulsive' (pp. 271–2). Under the pragmatic principle, the way we judge saints and mystics is through the effect they have, and the influence they wield. James's value judgements in his survey of the saints and the mystics are very explicit, a reflection of his determination to illustrate the truth of his proposition that value judgement is inherent in all knowledge, and turn it into a pragmatic strength.

### *Over-Belief*

Over-beliefs are described by James in the *Varieties* as 'buildings-out performed by the intellect into directions of which feeling originally supplied the hint' (p. 329). In other words, they are propositions that we consent to believe without having sufficient rational grounds. For James, feeling is the primary, the point at which we truly 'catch real fact in the making' (p. 380): over-beliefs, the way we structure and 'add on' to that feeling, are what come after. But as James declares, 'the most interesting and valuable things about a man are usually his over-beliefs' (p. 389). The *Varieties* finishes with James tentatively offering what he freely admits is his own 'over-belief'; an unseen region that exists beyond our usual frame of perception, and which we can communicate with intermittently through our subconscious (p. 390). James took the term from Matthew Arnold, who used the

German word *Aberglaube* extensively in his 1873 meditation on Christianity and the Bible, *Literature and Dogma*:

Our word 'superstition' had by its derivation this same meaning, but it has come to be used in a merely bad sense, and to mean childish and craven religiosity. With the German word it is not so; therefore Goethe can say with propriety and truth: '*Aberglaube* is the poetry of life'—*der Aberglaube ist die Poesie des Lebens*. It is so. *Extra-belief*, that which we hope, augur, imagine, is the poetry of life, and has the rights of poetry. But it is not science; and yet it tends always to imagine itself science, to substitute itself for science, to make itself the ground of the very science out of which it has grown.<sup>32</sup>

Here we see the genesis of James's comment in the *Varieties* that 'Among the buildings-out of religion which the mind spontaneously indulges in, the æsthetic motive must never be forgotten' (p. 348). Arnold's *Literature and Dogma* was chiefly a response to biblical criticism, the nineteenth-century study of early Christian texts that exposed those texts' materiality, partiality, and *origin*. Establishing such distastefully prosaic facts as, say, that one or more Gospels may have been substantially duplicated from another, or that miracle stories might have been inserted to help a struggling cult on its way to prominence, was too much for the struggling faith of many. But Arnold's redefinition of Christianity as 'morality touched by emotion' (passingly glossed by James on p. 337 of the *Varieties*), his attempt to rescue and recast his Christian belief because it is something to which he is emotionally attached but no longer intellectually certain of, rather prove James's point. When James closes his 'Conclusions' lecture with the question: 'Who knows whether the faithfulness of individuals here below to their own poor over-beliefs may not actually help God in turn to be more effectively faithful to his own greater tasks?' (p. 393), he is drawing together the thought of an entire generation. The keynote of religious thought in the later nineteenth century is the struggle to redefine religion on more subjectivist and emotional grounds. All religion suddenly seemed like 'over-belief': the problem was how to convert it into something meaningful. Arnold was one of the first to adumbrate it, and it is a problem that James comes to relatively late, but whose solution—the abandonment of origins as a criterion of judgement altogether and a

<sup>32</sup> *The Collected Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vi (Ann Arbor, 1968), 212–13.

replacement of them with *fruits*—is one of the most extreme and effective.

James first met Sigmund Freud in 1909, at Clark University's twentieth anniversary celebrations.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps more than any other single figure, Freud links the medical materialism of the late nineteenth century with that of the present day. In his younger days one of the first to systematically investigate the unconscious pathological origins of behaviour, in latter years he wrote of religion as one of a number of 'mass delusions' designed by man 'to procure a certainty of happiness and a protection against suffering'.<sup>34</sup> For Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), the sense of 'something more' is the product of our ego's shrinkage in childhood, a wistful reminder of a time before we discovered that there is a fundamental divide between ourselves and the rest of the experienced world.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the idea of feelings as a reliable guide to reality fits in with nothing we know of individual psychology, which as a rule always serves its user and not the truth. These remain the key orthodoxies of much 'popular science' today.

James also comes to the conclusion in the *Varieties* that our 'something more' is filtered to us via our subconscious self, but is clear that everything he says beyond that is over-belief. James personally believes that there are 'divine facts' even if we cannot access them, and that 'the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must have a meaning for our life also' (p. 392), but he is careful to point out that he cannot know this for an experienced fact. James found Freud's theories in general 'very deep and suggestive' but thought him 'too prone to hasty generalizations'.<sup>36</sup> Reading James, we are reminded how abstract from the varieties of our experience these 'generalized' ideas are. Freudian psychoanalysis and neo-Darwinism may utterly convince our rational selves, but they can never be as real to us as our delusions. As James says, 'The axis of reality runs solely through the egotistic places,—they are strung upon it like so many beads' (p. 378). The shortfall between the variety of our experience

<sup>33</sup> Noted in *Correspondence*, xii. 320.

<sup>34</sup> S. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, xxi (London, 1961), 81.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 65, 68.

<sup>36</sup> *Correspondence*, xiii. 362.

and the thin partiality of our attempts to explain it is simply too large; rarer still is the occasion when such attempts actually change our behaviour, or yield us any rules for action.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James penetratingly examines not only the emotional fundamentals of religious belief, but also the emotional fundamentals of all belief. We can still, in an age of 'medical materialism' even more publicity-hungry and influential than the type James took on, learn through the *Varieties* how provisional, how emotional, how contingent but how fundamentally *enriching* are the foundations on which all of us build our notions of the world around us—and beyond.

## NOTE ON THE TEXT

THE first edition of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was published by Longmans, Green, and Co. on 9 June 1902, to coincide with James's final Gifford lecture. It sold extremely well, and in August a second edition went to press, for which James took the opportunity to make a number of revisions. This second edition was the basis of all subsequent impressions until 1935 (thirty-eight impressions from the original in total). The text of the present edition of the *Varieties* is based on the eleventh impression, the last known to incorporate textual revisions from James himself. The *Varieties* is famously built on a vast array of citations and testimony, not all of which James was exact in quoting or referencing. To correct these (many) changes would be to significantly alter James's text, but to provide a note with details would increase the scholarly apparatus out of all proportion and turn a reading edition into a critical one. Therefore my policy has been to stay as close to James's original text as possible. For extensive details of the textual changes, readers are directed towards the Harvard *Works* edition of the *Varieties* (see Select Bibliography) to which this edition owes a considerable debt. However, some alterations have been made to the present text; a very small number of minor spelling and grammatical errors have been silently corrected, full points have been deleted after contractions such as 'Dr', and 'Mr', and single quotation marks replace double ones. Asterisks in the text signal an editorial note at the back of the book; all footnotes are by James.

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*Web Resources*

- [www.giffordlectures.org](http://www.giffordlectures.org)—official website for the Gifford Lectures, containing some transcripts and links to video and audio of more recent series.
- <http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/houghton/exhibits/james/>—web version of the exhibition 'Life is in the Transitions: William James, 1842–1910' curated by Linda Simon at the Houghton Library at Harvard in 2010.
- <http://www.wjsociety.org/>—home of the William James Society, including access to *William James Studies*, the online journal of the Society, at <http://williamjamesstudies.org/>.

*Further Reading in Oxford World's Classics*

- Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology*, ed. Laura Otis.

## A CHRONOLOGY OF WILLIAM JAMES

- 1842 (11 Jan.) Born in New York City to Henry James, son of a wealthy New York entrepreneur, and Mary James (née Walsh), daughter of a New York family of Irish extraction.
- 1843 (15 Apr.) Brother Henry James Jr. (the novelist) born; (Oct.) James family moves from New York to London. Henry Sr. makes contact with a number of British intellectuals, including Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill.
- 1844 (Jan.) Henry Sr. moves the family from London to Paris; (Apr.) Henry Sr. decides to return to England, and settles in Windsor. Henry Sr. meets J. J. Garth Wilkinson and becomes interested in the writings of Swedenborg; family returns to America, living nomadically between Albany and Manhattan.
- 1845 (July) Brother Garth Wilkinson James ('Wilky') born.
- 1846 (Aug.) Brother Robertson James ('Bob') born.
- 1848 Family settles in a house on Fourteenth Street, Manhattan, near Washington Square; (Aug.) sister Alice James born.
- 1855 Family travels to Europe, moving between England, France, and Switzerland.
- 1857 Moves to Boulogne; William and Henry attend the Collège de Boulogne.
- 1858 (June) Returns to America, first spending time with relatives in New York and then settling in Newport, Rhode Island; studies painting with William Morris Hunt.
- 1859 Family travels to Europe, settling in Geneva; attends Geneva Academy.
- 1860 Decides on a career as a painter; (July) family leaves Geneva, traveling through Europe before sailing back to Newport; (Oct.) re-enrols at Hunt's art school.
- 1861 Gives up on the idea of painting as a career; (Sept.) enrolls in the Lawrence Scientific School, studying chemistry; meets C. S. Peirce.
- 1863 Transfers from chemistry to comparative anatomy and physiology.
- 1864 (Feb.) Enters the Harvard Medical School; family moves from Newport to Boston.
- 1865 (Apr.) Accompanies the naturalist Louis Agassiz on an expedition to Brazil.

- 1866 (Mar.) Returns from Brazil, and briefly serves as an intern in Massachusetts General Hospital before resuming study at the Medical School.
- 1867 (Apr.) Travels to Germany after a spell of depression and ill health; visits the baths at Teplitz in Bohemia and attends lectures at Berlin University.
- 1868 (Nov.) Returns to America to resume his medical studies; continues to suffer with ill health.
- 1869 (June) Gains medical degree.
- 1870 (Mar.) Death of Minny Temple (cousin).
- 1872 (Aug.) Appointed instructor in physiology in the Harvard Department of Natural History.
- 1873 Delays taking up the appointment to journey in Europe.
- 1874 Returns from Europe and takes up post; also teaches anatomy.
- 1875 First holiday in the Adirondack Mountains; joins a collective to buy land and establishes Putnam Camp in the Keene Valley, a beloved holiday spot for the rest of his life.
- 1876 Offers the first American university course in physiological psychology; meets Alice Howe Gibbens through a mutual friend.
- 1877 Course in physiological psychology transferred to the Department of Philosophy; meets Josiah Royce.
- 1878 (Feb.) Lectures at Johns Hopkins University; (May) engaged to Alice Howe Gibbens; (June) contracted to write a book on psychology by Henry Holt and Co; (July) marries Alice Howe Gibbens.
- 1879 (May) Birth of son Henry James.
- 1880 (June) Leaves for a short trip to Europe, meeting a number of British philosophers and intellectuals for the first time, including Shadworth Hodgson and Alexander Bain; (Sept.) returns to Cambridge.
- 1882 (Jan.) Death of mother Mary James; (June) birth of son William James; James's sabbatical year leaves an opening for Josiah Royce to come to Harvard; (Sept.) sails for Europe alone; (Dec.) death of Henry James Sr.
- 1883 (Mar.) Returns to Cambridge; (Nov.) death of brother 'Wilky' James from a heart condition.
- 1884 (Jan.) Birth of son Herman James; publishes the *Literary Remains* of Henry James Sr.; becomes a member of the Society for Psychical Research; (Dec.) founding of the American Society for Psychical Research; sister Alice moves to England.

- 1885 (July) Death of Herman James from pneumonia; meets Leonora Piper; appointed professor of philosophy at Harvard, Royce takes the vacant assistant professorship.
- 1886 (Sept.) Buys second property near Mount Chocorua in New Hampshire.
- 1887 (Mar.) Birth of daughter Margaret Mary (Peggy) James.
- 1889 (June) Sails for Europe, and visits sister Alice; attends the International Congress of Physiological Psychology in Paris, and meets Théodore Flournoy; moves into a largely self-designed house at 95 Irving Street, Cambridge.
- 1890 *The Principles of Psychology* published; amalgamation of the English and American branches of the Society for Psychical Research; serves as vice-president; (Dec.) birth of son Alexander Robertson James ('Aleck').
- 1891 Abridges the *Principles* for publication as *Psychology: The Briefer Course*.
- 1892 *Briefer Course* published by Henry Holt; (Mar.) death of sister Alice James from breast cancer; (May) sabbatical year spent on a trip in Europe, accompanied by Alice and the rest of the family for the first time.
- 1893 (Aug.) Returns to Cambridge.
- 1894 Serves a two-year stint as president of the Society for Psychical Research.
- 1897 *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Psychology* published; nominated for the Gifford Lectureship at Aberdeen but turns it down, holding out for Edinburgh; (May) delivers the Decoration Day (Memorial Day) oration at the University of California; (Nov.) Ingersoll Lecture on Human Immortality delivered in Chicago.
- 1898 (June) Strains heart while walking in the Adirondacks; (Aug.) travels to California; lecture on 'Human Immortality' published.
- 1899 (July) Departs for Europe; *Talks to Teachers* published; Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh, now arranged for spring 1901, delayed due to continuing ill health.
- 1900 Continues to assemble material for the Gifford Lectures while travelling in Europe.
- 1901 (May) James begins delivering his first series of Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh; (Aug.) returns to America; finishes writing the second series of Giffords.
- 1902 (Apr.) Departs for Britain to deliver the second series; (June) returns to Cambridge; *The Varieties of Religious Experience* published.

- 1905 (Apr.) Three-month European trip.
- 1906 (Jan.) Becomes visiting professor at Stanford University; made president of the American Philosophical Association; (Apr.) San Francisco earthquake—uninjured; (Sept.) returns to Harvard; delivers the *Pragmatism* lectures at the Lowell Institute in Boston.
- 1907 (Jan.) Retires from active duties at Harvard; *Pragmatism* published.
- 1908 Delivers the Hibbert Lectures on ‘The Present Situation in Philosophy’ at Manchester College (now Harris Manchester College), Oxford; (Oct.) returns to New Hampshire.
- 1909 Publishes the Hibbert Lectures as *A Pluralistic Universe*; (Sept.) *The Meaning of Truth* published.
- 1910 (May) Travels to Europe alone; (19 Aug.) returns to Chocorua; (26 Aug.) dies; buried with his parents in Cambridge Cemetery.

THE  
VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS  
EXPERIENCE

A STUDY IN HUMAN NATURE

BEING  
THE GIFFORD LECTURES ON  
NATURAL RELIGION DELIVERED AT  
EDINBURGH IN 1901-1902

BY  
WILLIAM JAMES, LL. D., ETC.

CORRESPONDING MEMBER OF THE INSTITUTE OF FRANCE AND  
OF THE ROYAL PRUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES,  
PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY AT  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

To

E. P. G.\*

IN FILIAL GRATITUDE AND LOVE

## PREFACE

THIS book would never have been written had I not been honored with an appointment as Gifford Lecturer on Natural Religion at the University of Edinburgh. In casting about me for subjects of the two courses of ten lectures each for which I thus became responsible, it seemed to me that the first course might well be a descriptive one on 'Man's Religious Appetites,' and the second a metaphysical one on 'Their Satisfaction through Philosophy.' But the unexpected growth of the psychological matter as I came to write it out has resulted in the second subject being postponed entirely, and the description of man's religious constitution now fills the twenty lectures. In Lecture XX I have suggested rather than stated my own philosophic conclusions, and the reader who desires immediately to know them should turn to pages 386–393, and to the 'Postscript' of the book. I hope to be able at some later day to express them in more explicit form.\*

In my belief that a large acquaintance with particulars often makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas, however deep, I have loaded the lectures with concrete examples, and I have chosen these among the extremest expressions of the religious temperament. To some readers I may consequently seem, before they get beyond the middle of the book, to offer a caricature of the subject. Such convulsions of piety, they will say, are not sane. If, however, they will have the patience to read to the end, I believe that this unfavorable impression will disappear; for I there combine the religious impulses with other principles of common sense which serve as correctives of exaggeration, and allow the individual reader to draw as moderate conclusions as he will.

My thanks for help in writing these lectures are due to Edwin D. Starbuck, of Stanford University,\* who made over to me his large collection of manuscript material; to Henry W. Rankin, of East Northfield, a friend unseen but proved, to whom I owe precious information; to Théodore Flournoy, of Geneva, to Canning Schiller, of Oxford, and to my colleague Benjamin Rand, for documents; to my colleague Dickinson S. Miller, and to my friends, Thomas Wren Ward, of New York, and Wincenty Lutoslawski, late of Cracow, for

important suggestions and advice. Finally, to conversations with the lamented Thomas Davidson and to the use of his books, at Glenmore, above Keene Valley, I owe more obligations than I can well express.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY,  
March, 1902.

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## LECTURE I

### RELIGION AND NEUROLOGY

It is with no small amount of trepidation that I take my place behind this desk, and face this learned audience. To us Americans, the experience of receiving instruction from the living voice, as well as from the books, of European scholars, is very familiar. At my own University of Harvard, not a winter passes without its harvest, large or small, of lectures from Scottish, English, French, or German representatives of the science or literature of their respective countries whom we have either induced to cross the ocean to address us, or captured on the wing as they were visiting our land. It seems the natural thing for us to listen whilst the Europeans talk. The contrary habit, of talking whilst the Europeans listen, we have not yet acquired; and in him who first makes the adventure it begets a certain sense of apology being due for so presumptuous an act. Particularly must this be the case on a soil as sacred to the American imagination as that of Edinburgh. The glories of the philosophic chair of this university were deeply impressed on my imagination in boyhood. Professor Fraser's *Essays in Philosophy*, then just published, was the first philosophic book I ever looked into, and I well remember the awestruck feeling I received from the account of Sir William Hamilton's class-room therein contained. Hamilton's own lectures were the first philosophic writings I ever forced myself to study, and after that I was immersed in Dugald Stewart and Thomas Brown.\* Such juvenile emotions of reverence never get outgrown; and I confess that to find my humble self promoted from my native wilderness to be actually for the time an official here, and transmuted into a colleague of these illustrious names, carries with it a sense of dreamland quite as much as of reality.

But since I have received the honor of this appointment I have felt that it would never do to decline. The academic career also has its heroic obligations, so I stand here without further deprecatory words. Let me say only this, that now that the current, here and at Aberdeen, has begun to run from west to east, I hope it may continue to do so. As the years go by, I hope that many of my countrymen may be asked to lecture in the Scottish universities, changing places with Scotsmen lecturing in the United States; I hope that our people may become in

all these higher matters even as one people; and that the peculiar philosophic temperament, as well as the peculiar political temperament, that goes with our English speech may more and more pervade and influence the world.

As regards the manner in which I shall have to administer this lectureship, I am neither a theologian, nor a scholar learned in the history of religions, nor an anthropologist. Psychology is the only branch of learning in which I am particularly versed. To the psychologist the religious propensities of man must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution. It would seem, therefore, that, as a psychologist, the natural thing for me would be to invite you to a descriptive survey of those religious propensities.

If the inquiry be psychological, not religious institutions, but rather religious feelings and religious impulses must be its subject, and I must confine myself to those more developed subjective phenomena recorded in literature produced by articulate and fully self-conscious men, in works of piety and autobiography. Interesting as the origins and early stages of a subject always are, yet when one seeks earnestly for its full significance, one must always look to its more completely evolved and perfect forms. It follows from this that the documents that will most concern us will be those of the men who were most accomplished in the religious life and best able to give an intelligible account of their ideas and motives. These men, of course, are either comparatively modern writers, or else such earlier ones as have become religious classics. The *documents humains* which we shall find most instructive need not then be sought for in the haunts of special erudition—they lie along the beaten highway; and this circumstance, which flows so naturally from the character of our problem, suits admirably also your lecturer's lack of special theological learning. I may take my citations, my sentences and paragraphs of personal confession, from books that most of you at some time will have had already in your hands, and yet this will be no detriment to the value of my conclusions. It is true that some more adventurous reader and investigator, lecturing here in future, may unearth from the shelves of libraries documents that will make a more delectable and curious entertainment to listen to than mine. Yet I doubt whether he will necessarily, by his control of so much more out-of-the-way material, get much closer to the essence of the matter in hand.