

## William James (1842-1910)

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### Biography

The American William James was motivated to philosophize by a desire to provide a philosophical ground for moral action. Moral effort presupposes that one has free will, that the world is not already the best of all possible worlds, and, for maximum effort, according to James, the belief that there is a God who is also on the side of good.

In his famous, often misunderstood paper 'The Will to Believe', James defended one's right to believe in advance of the evidence when one's belief has momentous consequences for one's conduct and success, and a decision cannot be postponed. One such belief is the belief in objective values. Generally, a belief is objective if it meets a standard independent of the believer's own thought. In morals, objective values emerge from each person's subjective valuing, whatever their psychological source, when these valuing become the values of a community of persons who care for one another. Still, even in such a community there will be conflicting claims, and the obligations generated by these claims will need to be ranked and conflicts resolved. James' solution is to say that the more inclusive claim – the claim that can be satisfied with the lesser cost of unsatisfied claims – is to be ranked higher. This is not to be mistaken for utilitarianism: James is not a hedonist, and it is not clear what he means by the most inclusive claim.

A concern for others makes sense only if there are others who inhabit with us a common world. Pragmatism, which he co-founded with C.S. Peirce, and radical empiricism provide James' answer to those who would be sceptics concerning the existence of the common-sense world. Pragmatism is both a theory of meaning and a theory of truth. As a theory of meaning it aims at clarity; our thoughts of an object are clear when we know what effects it will have and what reactions we are to prepare. As a theory of truth, pragmatism makes clear what is meant by 'agreement' in the common formula that a belief is true if it agrees with reality. Only in the simplest cases can we verify a belief directly – for example, we can verify that the soup is too salty by tasting it – and a belief is indirectly verified if one acts on it and that action does not lead to unanticipated consequences. Contrary to a widespread misunderstanding, this does not mean that James defines truth as that which is useful; rather, he points out that it is, in fact, useful to believe what is true.

James rejects the dualism of common sense and of many philosophers, but he is neither a materialist nor an idealist, rather what he calls a 'pure experience' (for example, your seeing this page) can be taken as an event in your (mental) history or as an event in the page's (physical) history. But there is no 'substance' called 'pure experience': there are only many different pure experiences. You and I can experience the same page, because an event in your mental history and an event in mine can be taken to be events in the same physical history of the page; James

may even have been tempted to say that a pure experience can be taken to belong to more than one mental history.

According to James, pragmatism mediates the so-called conflict between science and religion. James took religious experiences very seriously both from a psychologist's perspective and as evidence for the reality of the divine.

## **1. Life**

William James, brother of the novelist Henry James, Jr, was the oldest child of Henry James, Sr, a man of independent means, who in early manhood experienced a major psychological crisis. Under the influence of the writings of the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, Henry Sr came to see redemption in self-surrender, allowing an in-flowing of divine love that led to a concern with social justice, an interest in Fourierist socialism, and a large number of writings and public lectures. William experienced a similar crisis in 1870, but for him the return to normality was stimulated by reading the French philosopher Charles Renouvier; it consisted not in self-surrender but in affirming his belief in free will and in the resolve to acquire intellectual habits that would lead to daring acts of thought. However, James shared his father's concern for social justice. The effects of this experience are to be seen in many of James' writings, from the long discussion of the will and the emphasis on habit in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), and the often misunderstood essay 'The Will to Believe', to his widely read *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909).

After an unorthodox but rich education at home and in Europe, William found it difficult to decide on a career. Eventually he earned an MD, but never practised. In 1873 he taught a course in physiology at Harvard, where he was to continue to teach until his retirement in 1907. In 1875, James set up the first psychological laboratory in America and taught his first seminar in psychology; in 1878 he married and, in the same year, published his first articles in philosophy. James taught both psychology and philosophy, advancing to a full professorship, and in 1890 published the monumental, justly renowned two-volume *Principles of Psychology*; in abridged form, it became a widely used text.

From 1879 on James presented single lectures before a variety of audiences, some of which were published in 1897 in *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. In its preface, James announces that he regards all claims concerning matters of fact as hypotheses subject to revision in the light of subsequent experience, and extends this empirical attitude to metaphysical hypotheses. *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* appeared two years later. He concludes the preface to that volume, after condemning American imperialism, 'Religiously and philosophically, our ancient national doctrine of live and let live may prove to have a far deeper meaning than our people now seem to imagine it to possess'.

James retired in January 1907 having just given the Lowell lectures. These were published under the title *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* and brought together virtually all of James' philosophical concerns. While the term 'pragmatism' was first introduced by James' friend C.S. Peirce in 1878 and reintroduced by James in a lecture given at Berkeley in

1898, after which it became widely used, it is fair to say that in Pragmatism this philosophy receives its full elaboration, at any rate as it is understood and embraced by James (see §5 below). The central idea is James' account of truth; its acceptance, James thought, would bring about a revolution in epistemology. Instead it met with misunderstanding and opposition to which James responded in 1909 in *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to 'Pragmatism'*, a collection of articles, the first of which was written as early as 1884 but several of which were composed specifically for that volume.

William James died on the 26 August 1910. There were several posthumous publications, in particular *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912) which contains James' most technical philosophy (see §7). While James claims in the preface to *Pragmatism* that the doctrine of radical empiricism is logically independent of that of pragmatism, John J. McDermott is surely correct when he claims that one will misunderstand James' views in the works published in his lifetime unless one takes his radical empiricism into account (introduction to *Essays in Radical Empiricism*).

## 2. Psychology

Although he taught both subjects, James is one of those to be credited with the separation of psychology from philosophy. In the preface to *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), James attempts to distinguish sharply between metaphysics and psychology. 'I have kept to the point of view of natural science throughout the book. Every natural science accepts certain data uncritically.... Psychology, the science of finite individual minds, assumes as its data (1) *thoughts and feelings*, and (2) *a physical world* in time and space with which they coexist and which (3) *they know*. Of course, these data are themselves discussible; but the discussion of them (as of other elements) is called metaphysics and falls outside the province of this book' (1890: v–vi). Yet James cannot avoid metaphysics entirely and admits as much. Psychology, he holds, accepts the mind–body dualism of common sense but rejects the metaphysical dogma that there can be no mind–body interaction. For if mind and body are radically different, the biological evolution of mind can be explained only on the hypothesis that there have been 'mental atoms' as well as physical ones at the origin of the universe, and that the former must be able to form complex aggregates just as physical atoms do. But in *The Principles of Psychology*, James denies precisely this: 'We cannot mix feelings as such, though we may mix the objects we feel, and from *their* mixture get new feelings' (1890: 157). Moreover, feelings, sensations and thoughts cannot combine themselves; they form new wholes only from the perspective of an outside observer. Confusing one's own standpoint with that of the mental fact observed is, for James, the 'Psychologist's Fallacy' (1890: 196). Of course, James does not deny the existence of 'higher' states of mind, say, understanding a five-word sentence, but what he asserts is that understanding the sentence is a mental fact other than, and in addition to, the five facts of understanding each word separately. But on this James was to change his mind. In his presidential address to the American Psychological Association in December 1894, 'The Knowing of Things Together', he concludes that mental contents can be complex, that we can speak of the parts of a field of consciousness, though such parts are not separable. In the same lecture he also rejects the

dualism that had been a working assumption of *The Principles of Psychology* (see §6). Always, however, the mind is not a mere knower: we know in order to act.

Two chapters of *The Principles of Psychology* are of particular philosophical interest, namely, 'The Stream of Thought' (later called 'stream of consciousness') and 'The Consciousness of Self'. In the former, James offers five facts. (1) Every thought (taking thought to include feelings and sensations) appears to belong to some self. (2) No state of mind can recur in exactly the same way. Although we may experience the same object again, the sensation will be different the second time, for the condition of the brain will have been modified by the earlier sensation. (3) Introspection shows that consciousness does not jump from one discrete content to the next, but changes in a continuous manner. Even after interruptions, such as in sleep, we are aware of being the same person, and no sudden change in sensation comes as a total break; it is only a more rapid change. Another element in the continuity of consciousness is what James called 'fringe'. The fringe is what leads one's mind from thought to thought, rejecting this one and accepting another until one reaches a conclusion. Later James identified the 'fringe' with the subconscious, and that was to play an important role in his explanation of religious experience (see §4). (4) We take it that our thoughts refer to independently existing objects because many thoughts (both of one person and of different persons) appear to have the same object. (5) We pay selective attention to some parts of the field of consciousness, and over the millennia we and our ancestors have in this manner 'extracted' the everyday world out of 'the primordial chaos of sensations' 1890: 277) (see §5).

While we agree to a remarkable degree in what we find interesting, our own selves are for each of us of unique importance. James distinguishes several senses of self. The material self consists of one's body and at least some of one's material possessions. The social self, or rather the social selves, are the various personalities one presents to various others; these, to a large extent, dictate one's behaviour. One's spiritual self is not the whole of one's inner life but that portion of which we say that it *has* the thoughts, feelings, etc. that make up our stream of consciousness. Although James calls this self 'spiritual', he does not identify it with a continuous soul substance.

Introspection reveals only a stream of thoughts, of which the present one is the judgment that I am the same self I was yesterday, a judgment based on resemblance of present bodily feelings to past ones and on the continuity of this thought with its predecessors. The present thought appropriates (selectively!) past thoughts of the stream; it is the 'thinker'. It is pointless to appeal to a Kantian pure ego or a Cartesian soul, for no one has explained how such an entity would hold the stream of thought together (see Kant, I. §6; Descartes, R.).

### **3. Moral philosophy**

James' writings in moral philosophy, though sparse, provide the best entrance into his thinking. These writings fall into two categories: those that address directly some relatively concrete problem and those of a more systematic nature. The former range from letters to newspapers protesting against America's policy in the Philippines, to essays like 'The Moral Equivalent of War', suggesting a struggle against nature as a substitute for the senseless struggle of nations against nations, and 'The Social Value of the College-Bred', seeking to allay the ennui of young women who saw no use for the education they had acquired. 'What Makes a Life

Significant' and 'On a Certain Blindness of Human Beings' are essays that speak to a precondition of the moral life – the ability to appreciate what another's life is like, what makes it worth living or intolerable – and form a bridge to the ethical theory found in the essay 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life' (1891) and in various passages in *The Principles of Psychology*.

Leading a moral life requires, according to James, a purpose that gives the life significance, will, courage and determination, a belief in objective values and a belief in free will; here I shall concentrate on the last two items. In 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life', James distinguished three questions: (1) where do our moral ideas come from? (2) To what do they refer? (3) How do we weigh various goods and evils, various obligations against one another?

Our valuing has multiple psychological sources: some can be traced back to bodily pains and pleasures, others are the result of habituation or indoctrination, while still others are due to an inborn higher moral sensibility that varies somewhat from person to person. Examples of the last are the demand that like cases be treated alike and the abhorrence with which we respond to the thought of sacrificing an innocent child for the happiness of many. These subjective valuing become objective, that is, coercive, whenever there are creatures who care about one another or acknowledge the claims they make upon each other. Our sympathetic instincts are not only the source of our higher moral sensibilities, but the basis of objectivity in ethics. Conflicts of claim are, however, unavoidable; how are they to be resolved?

Moral agents encounter conflicts of serious claims in moments of crisis. In *The Principles of Psychology*, James emphasizes the loneliness of such moments and also their momentous nature. What one chooses in such a moment is not so much what one is to do as what sort of person one is to become, and what guides one here is the inner voice of one's higher moral sensibilities. That voice, according to 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life', will tell us to 'seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see' (1897: 209). Analogously, moral philosophers are to fashion out of the values they find in the world the most inclusive coherent system. And to this task they are to bring no value of their own (this is how the philosopher differs from the ordinary moral agent) other than these 'logical' values of coherence and inclusiveness. But this, surely, is an impossible task. Since there is no common unit to which all goods can be reduced and yet all goods cannot be jointly realized, moral philosophers must appeal to their own moral sensibilities in weighing one ideal against another. The impossible task seemingly given to moral philosophers is perhaps an ironic description of what other philosophers have attempted, rather than a task for us, or James, to accomplish. Ethics, like physics, is for James an empirical science. It rests on claims actually made, and what the most inclusive realizable good will be depends both on that and on the nature of the universe; finally, since we are fallible, we must be prepared at all times to revise our judgments in response to complaints from those whose demands have gone unmet. When James demands that we pursue ideals that can be realized at least cost to other ideals, he does not simply say that in our own lives we must be prepared to sacrifice lesser goods for greater ones, nor that a minimal sympathy and a minimal sense of justice suggest that we are at times to sacrifice our own lesser goods to the greater goods of a

larger community. He articulates here his commitment to democracy and liberalism, to tolerance of anything other than intolerance, and his struggle against that blindness in human beings mentioned above.

The moral life consists not only of moments of crisis; for the most part, guided by our aspirations that give it significance, it runs along in quite habitual ways. James provides a series of maxims on how to acquire and keep good habits, for good habits are what make up a moral character. There is nothing so repulsive, he thought, as a sentimental character who never acts forthrightly.

All the above assumes that we can and do choose among alternatives that make a real difference to the world. As a psychologist, James simply records that deliberation usually comes to an end when one has only one idea of one action before one's mind; action follows. But when one's moral impulses conflict with more habitual or instinctive ones, countervailing reasons and motives tend to be still before the mind; one has a sense of effort and we speak of moral victories. What has been said so far is compatible both with the hypothesis of free will and its denial. Indeed, neither logic nor empirical evidence can decide the question, and since for James it seems to have momentous consequences, he opts for free will, for a universe of alternative possible futures. James rejects both a facile optimism that believes nothing in the world needs fixing and a pessimistic resignation that believes nothing can be fixed. Indeed only in an open world are there objectively good and bad actions, and only someone believing in such a world will be able to lead the strenuous moral life. Additional moral energy, James holds, flows from the belief that the help of a God makes the victory of good over evil possible.

#### **4. Religion**

The question of the nature of God and of His existence occupied James' thought throughout his life. Although he was not a conventional Christian and quite anticlerical, he was a deeply religious person. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he wrote with regret regarding mystical states, 'my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely' (1902: 299). Yet twice in his life he suffered the sense of utter worthlessness and despair, indeed panic-fear, that often precedes a religious experience.

James took seriously the question whether, or to what extent, religious experiences provide evidence for the existence of the divine. In reply to positivistic scientists who claim a priori that religious experience is non-veridical and impugn it by pointing to its organic bases, he notes that all experience has an organic basis, and maintains that a religious experience's 'spiritual value' depends on its 'immediate luminousness', on how it fits into the rest of our beliefs and on its 'moral helpfulness' (1902: 33). All our conceptual systems are fashioned by us to deal with experience from the perspective of some interest or sets of interests; we have no reason to think that only one of them agrees with reality. In particular, both science and religion (better: particular sciences as well as particular religious beliefs and practices) are 'genuine keys to unlocking the treasure-house of the universe to him who can use either of them practically', and the use of one does not exclude that of the other (1902: 110).

After a rich and detailed survey of religious personalities and religious experiences, James then turns to the questions of spiritual value and practical moral consequences.

*What I then propose to do is, briefly stated, to test saintliness by common sense, to use human standards to help us decide how far the religious life commends itself as an ideal kind of human activity. If it commends itself, then any theological beliefs that may inspire it, in so far forth will stand accredited. If not, then they will be discredited, and all without reference to anything but human working principles.*

(1902: 264)

James' conclusion is well modulated. In a world in which not everyone is a saint, saintly turning of the other cheek will lead to the victory of evil. Yet both the faith of saints in a kingdom of heaven already here and the utopias of socialists and anarchists 'help to break the edge of the general reign of hardness and are slow leavens of a better order' (1902: 285).

There remains the question whether the religious person's sense of a divine presence is objectively true. Because mystical experiences are intensely private and vary from person to person, and because the arguments of philosophers and theologians are unconvincing, James concludes that any attempt to demonstrate the existence of a deity is hopeless. Philosophy can distinguish, however, between a common religious core and the various 'over-beliefs' found both in institutionalized creeds and in the faith of individuals. The core is objectively true and consists in an awareness that one's conscious self is part of a wider self. That wider self is understood as the source of one's higher moral ideals and of one's religious experiences, but may be merely one's subconscious. However, James' own over-beliefs include a belief in a God who is not only the source of our highest ideals but can produce real changes in us. He makes the victory of good over evil possible but (here James differs from most religious persons) not certain. This over-belief is a hypothesis and entails predictions – in a world with such a God, miracles will happen, and a different conduct is required than would be in a godless world; for, James speculates, it may well be that our efforts aid God in His tasks as He aids us in ours. Finally, James notes, religious experience requires neither that the deity be infinite nor that there be only one.

## **5. Pragmatism**

James' major contributions to philosophy are pragmatism and radical empiricism. Pragmatism for James consists in both a theory of meaning, which he ascribes rightly to C.S. Peirce, and a theory of truth, which he ascribes too generously to John Dewey and F.S.C. Schiller (see Truth, pragmatic theories of §2).

James gives in one paragraph two formulations of the Pragmatic Maxim: '... to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance'. And, virtually quoting Peirce,

*To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve – what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all.*

(1907: 26)

This maxim must not be confused with the verifiability criterion of meaning of the logical positivists (see Meaning and verification). Neither Peirce nor James used the maxim to reject metaphysics, although, as noted in §2, James used it to point out that the metaphysical hypothesis of a substantial soul merely reasserts, but fails to explain, one's sense of being a continuous self. Again, unlike the logical positivists, James includes among sensations all kinds of feelings and emotional reactions; 'experience' would have been a less misleading choice of word. Thus, as mentioned in §4, religious hypotheses have meaning for James: believing them makes a difference to one's moral energy, and some religious experiences are, for those who have them, overwhelmingly evidential. Finally, unlike the logical positivists, James, as discussed in §3, takes it that value judgments, in particular moral judgments, are true or false, not mere expressions of the speaker's state of mind, nor mere attempts to sway an audience (see Emotivism; Prescriptivism).

As a form of empiricism, pragmatism emphasizes the fallibility of all knowledge claims, but unlike other empiricisms it does not conceive of the mind as a passive receptacle. Rather, guided by our interests and the concepts we already have, we pay selective attention to our sensory inputs. Since human beings have, through evolution and through upbringing, to a very large extent identical interests, we have come to share a conceptual framework, the framework of common sense. Our common conceptual scheme makes our common lives possible, though we tend to notice our disagreements rather than the larger-scale agreements in which they are embedded. But we could not even disagree, nor would our disagreements matter, if we did not live in a common world, if any one person's beliefs and actions did not have practical consequences for others.

We move, with greater or lesser ease, between conceptual systems: in addition to those of common sense and of religion, there are multiple scientific frameworks. These ways of ordering experiences were developed in response to pressing interests and are modified or rejected if they fail to be useful. Seen in this light, scientific theories are not transcriptions of reality but rather 'instruments' that summarize old facts and lead us to new ones. They are true in so far as the new facts we are led to expect do in fact materialize, or, as James would prefer to say, they *become* true in so far as they become verified. Does he really mean that there are no unverified truths? According to James' student and biographer, Ralph Barton Perry, while he often defends the existence of an unexperienced reality, he fails to explain what this existence consists in ((Perry 1935: 591–2).

James points out that all our knowledge of the world is a product of the world and the human mind. Most of us take the basic concepts of common sense to correspond to reality, while physicists and some philosophers say this rather of the concepts of relativistic quantum physics. But these and any other conceptual frameworks are all equally human contributions to our knowledge. There is no reason to think that one of these will emerge as ultimately triumphant, nor that all of them will prevail as our knowledge grows. Some philosophers find this idea, the idea that the trail of the human serpent is over every knowledge claim, distressing, as if we 'made up' the world. But we only make up the concepts, and whether our beliefs using these concepts are true depends on the world.



Pragmatists accept the traditional view that truth is an agreement between our beliefs or propositions and reality but try to clarify the notion of agreement by asking how agreement is verified. I can see (verify directly) that there is a clock on the wall. But my belief that it tells the time correctly is taken 'on credit'; it will be verified if I act on it and that action does not lead to surprises, for example, a missed appointment. The vast majority of our beliefs are verified even more indirectly. Yet truth is tremendously important. Our existence in the world is precarious; true beliefs lead us to avoid dangers and take advantage of opportunities, while false beliefs may prove fatal. Thus true beliefs are useful and good to believe, but that does not mean that any belief that proves temporarily useful or makes us feel good is true. Not only must any one of our beliefs harmonize with the whole body of beliefs already held – past experience and logic between them leave very little play to the mind – but our new beliefs must prove themselves not merely at the present moment but for the indefinite future. Both common sense and scientific beliefs may have to be modified radically in response to future experiences.

Although James held that the truth is useful to believe, critics who accuse him of identifying truth with usefulness are careless readers. The misreading is, perhaps, encouraged by a hasty reading of his essay 'The Will to Believe' as well as by its unfortunate title. There are certain times when one has to decide to believe 'ahead of the evidence'. We must decide to trust a new acquaintance before we have any basis for trust, else the opportunity of forming a friendship will be lost for ever. What characterizes such situations is that the alternatives before us are equally 'live' for us (we can see ourselves making either choice), that the choice is 'momentous' (much hangs on it; we would not care to toss a coin), and that there is no time to wait for further evidence (waiting is making the choice; in the example, it is to lose the opportunity for friendship). In such cases, and only in such cases, James insists that we have the right to believe. He exercised that right when he chose to believe in free will; as do scientists who commit themselves to investigate as yet untested hypotheses and political reformers who stake their lives on realizing their programmes. It is perhaps worth mentioning that beliefs thus chosen are nevertheless subject to the same verification/falsification processes as are any other beliefs.

## **6. Radical empiricism**

Radical empiricism, found primarily in the posthumously published *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912), is James' ontology, his theory of perception and his theory of intentionality. Although James claimed, rightly, that one could be a pragmatist without being a radical empiricist, pragmatism must be able to explain how it is that we live in a world about which we can communicate, which we can change by joint actions, and which any one person's action can change for everyone. The question is urgent because philosophy since Descartes tends to lead to 'a congeries of solipsisms, out of which in strict logic only a God could compose a universe even of discourse' (1912: 37–8). Beliefs in the existence of other minds and of bodies are instinctive, noninferential beliefs, part of the common-sense framework within which we infer what another thinks or what kind of bodies there are. These common sense beliefs do not, however, survive philosophical criticism unaltered. James holds that there is 'one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed' but 'there is no *general* stuff of which experience at large is made' 1912: 4, 14). This is not simply a rejection of mind–matter dualism,

even talking of a ‘stuff’ out of which everything is made is misleading; pure experience – the ‘primal stuff’ – has no essential properties. While the word ‘experience’ tempts one to understand radical empiricism as a version of Berkeleyan idealism, the view resembles rather a neutral monism, but that it is a label James would have abhorred (see Neutral Monism). In all his writings James emphasized pluralism: a plurality of possible futures, a plurality of irreducible values, a plurality of useful conceptual schemes, a plurality of pure experiences.

Radical empiricism attempts to answer two related questions: how is it that what I take to be my percept of this page of this book is indeed *of* this page (and not of any one of the thousands of exactly similar pages of this book elsewhere), and how is it that my percept and your percept are of the same page when, as we normally say, we are looking at the same page? Analogous questions arise with respect to objects merely thought about. When I see a pen, the experience (call it E) taken in itself, apart from all conceptualization – to the extent that that is possible – is what James calls a ‘pure’ experience, and the crucial claim made by James is that E is as much an event in the pen’s history as it is an event in mine. If we take E with what James calls its ‘energetic associates’ – with how the pen came to be here and what happens to it hereafter – we have the pen, and if we take E with my prior and subsequent thoughts, feelings, etc. we have my stream of consciousness. This is, first of all, a direct realism. I do not have a sense datum (idea, impression, representation) from which I infer (or ‘construct’) the pen: I see the pen. And I see its surroundings, I handle it, etc. That is how the mystery of how I can ‘mean’ this pen rather than any one of the thousands of virtually identical other pens is answered. But who does the ‘taking’? It can only be a later item in the stream of consciousness, but just what that item would be is unclear.

To say, as James does, that the context defines the referent when you and I are talking about some absent person presupposes that we live in a common world – that we experience, for example, the same pen as you hand it to me. But how is this possible? No experience of mine is an experience of yours. My-seeing-the-pen is an experience of mine, hence it is not an experience of yours. How then can the-pen-being-seen-by-me be the-pen-being-seen-by-you? James responds that thinking of the pen as my percept (or yours) is a later experience; it is not the ‘pure experience’ that James calls ‘the pen’. *That* pure experience may be appropriated by you as well as by me. As if he realized that this answer might not convince his readers, James adds that ‘the decisive reason in favour of our minds meeting in *some* common objects at least is that, unless I knew that supposition, I have no motive for assuming that your mind exists at all...and for me to speak of you is folly’ (1912: 38). And, he continues, these objects would be there even if one or more of our minds were destroyed. Indeed, James agrees with common sense that the earth existed before there were any sentient beings and that there will be stars after the last human being has vanished. Once again we are driven to wonder what James can mean by an unexperienced reality. We can easily grasp the idea of a pure experience that does not ‘belong’ to a physical object (for instance, a hallucination), but what can we make of the idea of a pure experience that is not experienced at all? James himself, perhaps due to this difficulty, toyed with the idea of panpsychism, but this appears to be an unnecessary concession to idealism.

## List of works

James, W. (1975–88) *The Works of William James*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 17 vols.

(This edition includes all previously published as well as many previously unpublished writings by James. Several of his writings are, however, readily available in paperback. References in the text are to the editions listed below.)

James, W. (1878) 'Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence', in *Essays in Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1978.

(The first statement of James' view that the mind is not a passive recipient but actively contributes to what is known.)

James, W. (1890) *The Principles of Psychology*, New York: Dover, 1950, 2 vols.

(A monumental work; when it was published and for many years thereafter, it was widely used as a text in psychology courses. Today it is of interest for its many philosophical reflections.)

James, W. (1891, 1897) 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life' and 'The Will to Believe' in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York: Dover, 1956.

(A collection of essays almost all of which were originally delivered as lectures to student audiences. This is one of James' most accessible books, and the second essay mentioned is one of his best known.)

James, W. (1895) 'The Knowing of Things Together', in *Psychological Review* 2; repr. in *Essays in Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1987.

(This volume contains 21 essays from 1876–1910 covering a wide range of topics.)

James, W. (1898) 'Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results', Appendix to *Pragmatism*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1975, 255.

(In this lecture to the Philosophical Union at the University of California, Berkeley, James reintroduced Pragmatism twenty years after Peirce's original essays on the subject.)

James, W. (1899) 'What Makes a Life Significant' and 'On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings', in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1983.

(The talks to teachers cover topics discussed in *The Principles of Psychology* that are of particular interest to school teachers, but the two essays mentioned are of enduring human interest and do not presuppose any knowledge of either philosophy or psychology.)

James, W. (1902) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: Collier Books; repr. London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1961.

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(A series of eight lectures for educated laypersons; an exuberant presentation of the essentials of pragmatism as James understood it.)

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(The essay was published in various journals and magazines in 1910 and reprinted in *Memories and Studies* (ed. Henry James, Jr) in 1912. The volume contains twelve essays on various topics.)

James, W. (1912) *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1976.

(This volume, first published posthumously, contains James' most sustained attempt to deal with epistemology, ontology and the theory of intentionality. It is difficult reading, but intellectually highly rewarding.)

### **References and further reading**

Barzun, J. (1983) *A Stroll with William James*, New York: Harper & Row.

(An easy-to-read, loving introduction to James, the man and the thinker.)

Bird, G. (1987) *William James*, London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

(A volume in the *Arguments of the Philosophers* series; an excellent and very readable introduction to James.)

Edie, J.M. (1987) *William James and Phenomenology*, Bloomington, IN, and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.

(An approach to James' philosophy from a phenomenological (Husserlian) perspective.)

James, H. (1920) *The Letters of William James*, Boston, MA: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2 vols.

(These letters, edited by James' son Henry, provide an opportunity to become acquainted with William James, the man, as well as offering some insights into his philosophizing.)

Levinson, H.S. (1981) *The Religious Investigations of William James*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

(A thorough but readable examination of James' inquiries into religious matters.)

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(A thorough and thoroughly enjoyable biography of the family, from William James' grandfather to his children.)

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(A monumental scholarly study of all of James' writings. A worthy successor to Perry (1935).)

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(Perry uses hundreds of unpublished letters by James and scores addressed to him as well as many manuscripts (then unpublished) in this masterly account of James' life and thought.)

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(A brief, thoughtful, appreciative yet critical exposition and discussion of James' main ideas.)

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(Eighteen informative and provocative articles on various aspects of James' thought provide a thorough but accessible introduction to his thought. An extensive bibliography is provided.)

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(An excellent, quite technical, sympathetic but critical examination of the views of these important philosophers.)

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(A thorough study of James' *The Principles of Psychology* for advanced readers.)