WILLIAM JAMES’S EARLY RADICAL EMPIRICISM: 
PSYCHICAL RESEARCH, RELIGION, AND 
THE “SPIRIT OF INNER TOLERANCE”

A Dissertation 
Submitted to 
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment 
of the Requirements for the Degree 
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by 
Ermine L. Algaier IV 
July, 2015

Examining Committee Members:

Lucy Bregman, Advisory Chair, Temple University, Department of Religion
Terry Rey, Temple University, Department of Religion
Joseph Margolis, Temple University, Department of Philosophy
Eli Goldblatt, External Member, Temple University, Department of English
©
Copyright
2015

by

Ermine L. Algaier IV
All Rights Reserved
ABSTRACT

In December of 1896 William James (1842-1910) penned the preface to The Will to Believe & Other Essays in Philosophy, announcing his novel philosophy of radical empiricism. Nearly one hundred and twenty years later, the metaphysical themes of his mature radical empiricist writings (e.g., his 1904-05 writings posthumously published as Essays in Radical Empiricism) continue to dominate the interpretations of the secondary literature. “William James’s Early Radical Empiricism: Psychical Research, Religion, and the ‘Spirit of Inner Tolerance’” offers a revisionist reading that prioritizes the epistemic, moral, and social elements of James’s early radical empiricism in light of his concerns expressed in the 1896 preface. By focusing on a close textual analysis that aims to historically and thematically resituate James’s radical empiricism within the context of his major and minor work in the 1880s through the late 1890s, I argue for a supplemental interpretation that emphasizes James’s epistemic sensitivity to the plight of the perceived “irrational” other.

This project demonstrates that not only is James’s early radical empiricism concerned with epistemological matters of fact and perspective, but also their social and moral implications. It suggests that an alternative narrative is uncovered if we attend to particular historical, philosophical, and religious themes that reveal themselves as focal points of James’s work in the 1890s, particularly in the year 1896. By historicizing his 1890s defense of the epistemic underdog I develop the narrative that James’s early radical empiricism embraces all experience and that this is illustrated by his genuine interest in the point of view of the believer, the marginalized, and the “irrational” other.
For you, you, and especially You.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This projected originated in the classroom. During my time at Temple University I was fortunate to teach “Death and Dying” on ten separate occasions. After my initial semester, I made the decision to bring in James’s 1897 Ingersoll Lecture on Human Immortality. The next semester I paired it up with his essay “The Will to Believe.” Every semester thereafter I committed myself to carefully rereading these texts, as well as additional sources of secondary literature, in order to deepen my understanding and to develop my lectures notes. Around the third or fourth time teaching these texts together I began to get a sense of the project that lay before you.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the ongoing encouragement and help of my committee. To my adviser, Lucy Bregman, I cannot thank you enough for all that you have done for me. To Terry Rey, I am externally grateful for his keen eyes and excellent copy-editing skills. Also, because of Terry, I will never look at research in the same way: my love of archival work has grown beyond measure. To Joseph Margolis, I am deeply indebted for his kindness, support, and for imparting to me a glimpse of the joy that can be had in a lifetime of scholarship. To Eli Goldblatt, I am grateful for your excitement and willingness to join in on the fun.

Throughout the course of my education I have been very fortunate to work with an eclectic, inspiring, and profoundly gifted group of people. Eleven years out from my undergraduate education and I am still in awe of my undergraduate faculty at Youngstown State University: Linda “Tess” Tessier, Bruce Waller, Brendan Minogue, and Tom Shipka. Despite the fact that nowhere in these pages will you find direct
evidence of my many years of training in East Asian religion and philosophy, Rohit Dalvi, Bill Allen, Monte Hull, Shigenori Nagatomo, and Marcus Bingenheimer have all distinctly informed my thinking and research.

Special thanks goes to James Pawelski for his invaluable insights, delightful conversations, genuine support, and willingness to help me search for the proverbial gold nugget; to Colin Koopman for his generous comments and shared excitement for all things Jamesian; to Kyle Bromhall, Tess Varner, John Girodano, Justin Bell, and all my other SAAPers for warmly welcoming me as one of their own; and to Linda Jenkins for her gracious wisdom and gentle mothering of me through every stage of my education at Temple University.

My education has been shaped academically as well as existentially by many people and in many ways. In particular, I am fortunate to have shared many meals and enlightening conversations with Steven Edelman, Anne-Marie Gincley, Jina Ashline, Blaine Warner, Christy Schuetze, Karen Schnitker, Adria Godfrey, Elissa Kranzler, Kime Lawson, Patricia Kolbe, Kin Cheung, John Krummel, Adam Valerio, Amy Defibaugh, and Sean Blucker.

I am deeply indebted to all the staff, librarians, and archivists that have assisted me while researching this project. In particular, I would like to thank Fred Rowland as well as the members of Paley Library’s intra- and inter-library loan offices, the staff members at Houghton library, Harvard University Archives, Brancroft library, the Rockefeller Archive Center, and the American Society for Psychical Research.

I would also like to acknowledge the generous financial support of The Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, the William James Society, and Temple
University. On account of the various grants, scholarships, and prizes that I received, I have been able to present drafts of this project at a number of different venues and to meet an exceptional community of like-minded scholars.

I could not have done this without the enduring love and support of my family, closest friends, and partner. Unfortunately, there is absolutely no way that words can capture the depth of my gratitude toward Ed and Beth for putting up with the fact that they spent an uncanny amount of time listening to me talk about James: y’all will just have to learn to deal with the fact that you can never get that time back. Most importantly, I shall save myself the embarrassment of fumbling through words with the hope of articulating the depth of my love and respect for Hannah and her willingness to be my partner on this absurd journey; with all of my being, I thank you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABBREVIATIONS</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation: Textual, Contextual, and Methodological Influences</td>
<td>xviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Methodological Caveats</td>
<td>xxiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Note on Primary Texts</td>
<td>xxvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Selective Overview of Relevant Literature</td>
<td>xxviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outline of Chapters</td>
<td>xxxiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. EARLY RADICAL EMPIRICISM AND THE “SPIRIT OF INNER TOLERANCE:” A “DEFINITE PHILOSOPHICAL ATTITUDE”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   Introduction                                                                 | 1    |
   The 1896 Preface of *The Will to Believe*                                   | 5    |
   A Manifest Reading of the Preface                                            | 9    |
   The Methodological Commitment                                                | 9    |
   The Limits of Reason and the Perspectival Critique                           | 11   |
   Approaching the Attitude of the 1896 Preface                                 | 15   |
   “A Tolerably Definite Philosophical Attitude”                                 | 18   |
   James’s Re-defining of Philosophy                                            | 25   |
   Early Radical Empiricism: a Latent Image                                     | 28   |
   The “Spirit of Inner Tolerance”                                              | 29   |
   Fringe Sensitivity, the Epistemic Underdog, and Rationalizing the Irrational | 34   |
   Concluding Remarks                                                           | 42   |

viii
2. EARLY RADICAL EMPIRICISM AND REFLEX ACTION: THE “LOOP-LINE” OF EXPERIENCE .................................................................44

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................44

The Significance of Physiology for James’s Thought .................................................................47

The 1866-67 Medical Notebook ..................................................................................................48

Teaching Physiology and the New Psychology at Harvard, 1870s -1890s ........................55

Reflex Action Writings (1881-1890) ...........................................................................................63

Tracing James’s Physiological, Psychological, and Philosophical Interpretation of Reflex Action ........................................................................................................................................67

Reflex Action and Physiology: the Reclassification of Action .................................................68

Reflex Action and Psychology: the “Loop-line” of Experience ..............................................72

Reflex Action and Philosophy, Part I: “the Given” .................................................................77

Reflex Action and Philosophy, Part II: Remodeling “the Given” ...........................................81

Reflex Action and Radical Empiricism .....................................................................................86

Radical Empiricism, “the Given,” and Rationality .................................................................87

Concluding Remarks: the Reality of Relations ........................................................................95

3. THE “SPOOKY” SIDE OF JAMES’S PLURALISM .................................................................99

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................99

Defending the “Spooky”: Heterodox Facts and Rationalities ..................................................102

James as Psychical Researcher ..................................................................................................110

Philosophy and Psychical Research .........................................................................................113

Spiritualism and Psychical Research ........................................................................................117

A General Overview ..................................................................................................................117

Bowditch, Chevillard, and Table-Tipping .................................................................................124

Automatic Writing and the “Spiritual Monad” Experience .....................................................127

Mediumship and the Hope of Discovery .................................................................................130

Mental Healing and the Mind-Cure Movement ......................................................................134

James as a Patient and Defender of the Mind-Cure Movement .............................................136

Measurements and Exposure: the Problem of Formal Study ................................................143

Cautionary Tales: the Case of Perry, James, and Phrenology .................................................148

*The Skull and the Brain* and “The Phrenological Conception” ............................................149

Perry’s (Mis)reading of Hyde’s *How to Study Character* ....................................................152

Concluding Remarks ..............................................................................................................156
4. THE RELIGIOUS HYPOTHESIS RECONSIDERED .................................................................161

Introduction ..........................................................................................................................161
Defining Religion in “The Will to Believe” and “Is Life Worth Living?” .........................166
Target Audiences and Pedagogical Contexts ....................................................................170
Diversifying Religion as “Anything…in that Line” ..........................................................177
Contextualizing “What Psychical Research Has Accomplished” (WPRHA) .....................183
 Historicizing James’s 1890s Conception of Mysticism ....................................................185
WPRHA and the “Unseen Order” ......................................................................................192
Concluding Remarks: Meliorism and Epistemic Fairness ................................................196

5. THE 1897 INGERSOLL LECTURE ON HUMAN IMMORTALITY ...........................203

Introduction ........................................................................................................................203
The 1897 Ingersoll Lecture: a Manifest Reading ...............................................................206
Historical Background of a Radical Empiricist Reading ....................................................210
 George Howison’s Critique and the Association of Radical Empiricism .......................212
Target Audiences: the Blind Monist and the Epistemic Underdog ..................................219
 Speaking Against Dogma: Evidence for James’s Perspectival Critique .......................220
 Immortality as a Logical Possibility: a Radical Empirist Critique ..................................226
Speaking Up for Spirits: Defending the Epistemic Underdog ..........................................234
 Immortality as a Logical Possibility ..................................................................................235
The “Advantage” of the Transmission Theory: Making Sense of “Obscure and Exceptional Phenomena” .........................................................................................238
Concluding Remarks .......................................................................................................246

CONCLUDING REMARKS .................................................................................................248
 Summary Points of Interest ...............................................................................................248
The Merit of this Project ....................................................................................................254

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................256
 Research Archives .............................................................................................................256
 William James Bibliography .............................................................................................257
Other Sources ....................................................................................................................262
ABBREVIATIONS


- **P** *Pragmatism,* 1975
- **MT** *The Meaning of Truth,* 1975
- **ERE** *Essays in Radical Empiricism,* 1976
- **PU** *A Pluralistic Universe,* 1977
- **EPhil** *Essays in Philosophy,* 1978
- **SPP** *Some Problems of Philosophy,* 1979
- **WB** *The Will to Believe,* 1979
- **PP** *The Principles of Psychology,* 1981
- **ERM** *Essays in Religion and Morality,* 1982
- **TT** * Talks to Teachers on Psychology,* 1983
- **PBC** *Psychology: Briefer Course,* 1984
- **VRE** *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* 1985
- **EPsych** *Essays in Psychology,* 1983
- **EPR** *Essays in Psychical Research,* 1986
- **ECR** *Essays, Comments, and Reviews,* 1987
- **MEN** *Manuscript Essays and Notes,* 1988
- **ML** *Manuscript Lectures,* 1988
INTRODUCTION

We all, scientists and non-scientists, live on some inclined plane of credulity. The plane tips one way in one man, another way in another; and may he whose plane tips in no way be the first to cast a stone! As a matter of fact, the trances I speak of have broken down for my own mind the limits of the admitted order of nature. Science, so far as science denies such exceptional occurrences, lies prostrate in the dust for me; and the most urgent intellectual need which I feel at present is that science be built up again in a form in which such things may have a positive place. Science, like life, feeds on its own decay. New facts burst old rules; then newly divined conceptions bind old and new together into a reconciling law.

~William James, “What Psychical Research Has Accomplished”

Read out of context and these words, which were published in 1892 in the popular magazine *The Forum*, may be attributed to the whimsical musings of an armchair philosopher, an amateur scientist, or a religious radical. Instead, they are the carefully chosen words of one of America’s most celebrated intellectuals. The passage was penned by William James (1842-1910), the author of *The Principles of Psychology* who would go on to write *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *Pragmatism*, works that would profoundly revolutionize the respective fields of American psychology, religious studies, and philosophy.²

---


The point that James is making is that all of us have certain inclinations and that these underlying orientations lead us to particular sets of belief—philosophical, religious, or scientific—that differentiate our Weltanschauung from our neighbor’s. The metaphor of an inclined plane suggests that even when at rest, the entire drift of our thinking—whether lead by the intellect, or on occasions, by our sentimental nature—is such that we gravitate toward a particular direction. Whether our location is higher or lower on the plane makes no significant difference, but merely illustrates the accumulated force with which we gravitate toward our destination. Because of this we are each pulled one way rather than another. Whether we resist and apply force with the intention of moving in the opposite direction, or succumb to our natural inclination, is result of a series of choices that are based upon the historicity and psychology of lived experience.

James’s inclination led him to believe that a strictly mechanical interpretation of the order of nature was not enough. He was convinced that there exists behind the veil of the physical world an “unseen order” that makes itself felt through a variety of unconventional ways. His lifelong career as a psychical researcher, his interest in mind-cure, and his research into the varieties of religious experience have all left mixed impressions for contemporary scholars of religion and philosophy. Whether we agree or not, James firmly believed that as long as the various sciences (hard, soft and social) do not take account of these so-called “exceptional occurrences,” then they are missing out on a very peculiar, but important part of human experience.

In the pages that follow I attempt to capture a portion of James’s vision of the building up of the sciences, in particular what he and many of his contemporaries called
“the science of religion.”³ It is a narrative of how James’s early radical empiricism sought to break up and breathe fresh air into philosophy and its comportment toward religion and things deemed religious.⁴ This however, is but one aspect of the larger story in which James’s work is seen as “transgressing boundaries separating fields of knowledge, types

³ James Turner, Religion Enters the Academy: The Origins of the Scholarly Study of Religion in America (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), 56. The term “science of religion” derives from the work of Friederich Max Müller and gained currency in German and French scholarship. Turner devotes his book to the recovery of the American background of the study of religion. He writes, “In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a new humanistic discipline devoted to the study of religion took shape in the United States. To be sure, the academic discipline did not stem a continuing current of popular interest, on which drifted a motley flotilla of old fashioned, unscholarly texts. And while the university set a more professional standard, it could not agree on a name for the new studies. Many of the first scholars in this new discipline called their field ‘history of religions.’ ‘Science of religion’ also enjoyed some currency. In the course of the twentieth century, ‘science of religion’ largely fell out of use in North America, replaced by ‘religious studies’ or even simply ‘religion.’”

⁴ James defines “radical empiricism” in the preface to The Will to Believe as follows: “Were I obliged to give a short name to the attitude in question, I should call it that of radical empiricism, in spite of the fact that such brief nicknames are nowhere more misleading than in philosophy. I say ‘empiricism,’ because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of facts as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say ‘radical,’ because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis, and, unlike so much of the half-way empiricism that is current under the name of positivism or agnosticism or scientific naturalism, it does not dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all experience has got to square.” William James, “Preface,” in The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 6. Throughout his career James offers additional definitions of radical empiricism that build upon and further contextualize his thinking. While there are many competing interpretations within the secondary literature, this project aims to bracket James’s mature epistemological and metaphysical formulations in favor of teasing out overlooked epistemological, moral and social dimensions of his 1896 articulation.
of discourse, and groups of inquirers.”⁵ In the opening pages of the preface to The Will to Believe James announces his radical empiricism and declares that:

> There are the various “points of view” which the philosopher must distinguish in discussing the world; and what is inwardly clear from one point remains a bare externality and datum to the other. The negative, the alogical, is never wholly banished.⁶

These opening remarks exhibit an epistemic sensitivity to the slanderous appellation of “irrationality” as it is applied to the religious believer, the mystic, and the so-called alogical other. In the eyes of James’s early radical empiricism, this negative characterization functions as a cause for celebration through his championing of alternative voices: it signifies a radical reorientation to a philosophy which maintains that irrationality is the prarius, or starting point, of philosophical inquiry not its conclusion.⁷

This dissertation is a focused study of what I am calling James’s early radical empiricism.⁸ By characterizing it as his “early” radical empiricism, I am singling out the

---


⁶ James, “Preface,” 6.


point of view that James publically announces in the preface of *The Will to Believe*. My intention is differentiate his early account from his mature, technical philosophy as it appears in a flurry of articles during 1904-1905 and posthumously published as *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. I envision this dissertation as a project of recovery that examines certain overshadowed dimensions of James’s early radical empiricism that have been overlooked, discarded, or never fully developed.

The general thesis that characterizes this study is that what emerges from James’s work in the 1890s, particularly in the self-declared radical empiricist essays of *The Will to Believe*, is the story of James’s multifaceted defense of what I am calling the “epistemic underdog.” It is a tale of two perspectives guided by the “spirit of inner tolerance:” at one and the same time it is a narrative that seeks to diminish the dogmatic and universalizing vision of the epistemic majority, while simultaneously giving voice to the epistemic minority in its attempt to rationalize the so-called irrational. It attempts to of this dissertation, however, I am interested in teasing out elements of James’s initial description that have been overlooked or underestimated in the secondary literature.


10 The epistemic underdog/blind monist dichotomy is a heuristic device that I develop in order to illustrate what I believe to be the heart of James’s early radical empiricism. The epistemic underdog represents the minority point of view that exists on the fringe of the dominant paradigm which is associated with the blind monist. This dichotomy assists with the identification and location of contextual, relational, and competing knowledge claims, while also point toward underlying moral, psychological, and social tensions which arise when multiple systems of value are brought together. For a thorough discussion of these terms and their application to James’s work, see Chapter One, esp. “Fringe Sensitivity, the Epistemic Underdog, and Rationalizing the Irrational.”

11 The “spirit of inner tolerance” derives from James’s essay, “The Will to Believe.” There he speaks about a moral orientation that is grounded in respect for the democratic plurality of opinion. See William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *The Will to Believe*
capture the ways in which James actively, democratically, and pragmatically defends the perceived minority who are epistemically, socially, and psychologically repressed by the monolithic vision of what I am calling the “blind monist.” By paying careful attention to the fringe we see that James continually stands up for the rights of the epistemic underdog in the name of celebrating a genuine pluralism. To illustrate this dimension of my thesis I examine three aspects of James’s early radical empiricism that require more attention: (1) the socially-aware epistemic sensitivity of the radical empiricist attitude that is guided by the “spirit of inner tolerance;” (2) the psycho-physiological centrality of the role of reflex action in shaping a definite worldview; and (3) James’s interest in and investigations of the “spooky” corners of a genuine pluriverse.  

12 The study is divided into two parts. Part I develops the above themes, separately and in relation to one another, as historically and thematically continuous with a wider view of James’s interests and writings during the 1890s. Each idea, as I develop it, is discernible in the 1896 preface, can be traced back to James’s work from the late 1870s up to and through the 1890s, and is illustrated throughout The Will to Believe. Part II applies these themes to two separate arguments: first, I address James’s defense of the


12 Richard Gale uses the term “spooky” to refer to the metaphysical and fringe aspects of James’s thinking, particularly in relation to his notion of the self and of paranormal experiences, see Richard Gale, “John Dewey’s Naturalization of William James” in The Cambridge Companion to William James, Ruth Anna Putnam, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 49-68. My point of departure from Gale, who does not go into great detail as to the spooky aspects of James’s interest in psychical research and alternative religious experiences, is such that these interests are central to James’s thinking and that they, in particular, inform his early radical empiricism. As such, I suggest that we need not be embarrassed by this side of James, but that we must embrace it in order to better understand his work. For a more thorough discussion of the term and its referents, see the “Introduction” to Chapter Three.
religious hypothesis as presented in “The Will to Believe” and elsewhere in *The Will to Believe*; and second, I apply this orientation to James’s 1897 Ingersoll Lecture and his defense of the rationality legitimacy to believe in human immortality. My goal is to advance new readings of James’s radical empiricism by showing that they are historically and thematically continuous with his 1890s interests in the epistemic, moral, and social fringes.

Orientation: Textual, Contextual, and Methodological Influences

Given the wealth of literature that addresses the philosophical side of James’s radical empiricism, this project seeks to minimize those conversations in order to uncover overlooked aspects of his defense of religion and the epistemic fringe as they pertain to his early radical empiricism. In doing so, my goal is to focus on the historical and thematic continuity between James’s early radical empiricism and his work in psychical research during the 1890s. While sifting through the primary sources I found that the dichotomy of the blind monist and the epistemic underdog permitted me a chance to tease out particular religious elements of James’s radical empiricism that are, in my opinion, overshadowed by the technical treatment of his mature philosophy. Along these lines, the task of identifying and analyzing this dichotomy as it appears in the texts has enabled me to get a better glimpse of James’s epistemic, moral, and social concern for those standpoints deemed irrational.

Any composition is always going to be a mixture of direct and indirect influences that have shaped and informed the opinion of the author. It goes without saying that my work has been deeply influenced by the adept scholars who have animated Jamesian studies during the last one hundred and twenty years: this project would certainly not be possible without their insights and guidance of James’s corpus and the vast sea of secondary literature. As a way of paying tribute to this admirable group of scholars I want to draw attention to the specific texts and authors that have visibly shaped my understanding of James, his writing, and his historical context as presented in these pages.

Methodologically, I found that my unorthodox appreciation of James has forced me to take a predominantly internal-contextualist approach that focuses on the historical and thematic continuity amongst James’s writings, as opposed to a more strict external-contextualist approach that situates his thought within the wider historical, socio-cultural and political context at the close of the nineteenth century. To better explain this reasoning, I feel it pertinent to discuss how George Cotkin’s first-rate study *William James, Public Philosopher* has influenced my appreciation of the historical James. At the outset of the text Cotkin maintains that he offers “an avowedly contextualist reading of James and his philosopher.” He explains that his approach is:

> predicated upon the assumption that the personal, philosophical, and historical are emphatically connected...[and that]...the impetus of [his] book...is to return James to the context of his life and time: not in order to imprison him in the cell of a useless past, but to release him from the chains of present-day amnesia about his past.\(^{14}\)

In the course of his masterful book, Cotkin historicizes James within the social, cultural and political milieu of America at the turn of the century. To a limited extent, I envision my project as sharing a similar goal of “releasing” James from certain oversights about his past: however, my project differs with respect to its focus insofar as I narrowly attend to James’s first public announcement of his new philosophy of radical empiricism and its relation to religion and psychical research. My sense of the drift of Jamesian studies is that interest in his psychical research is on the rise, but that few scholars are looking at its relationship to his early radical empiricism and how the combination of these two lines of thinking help shape James’s writings on religion during the 1890s.

Whereas Cotkin’s historiography focuses predominantly on an externalist approach, my methodological point of departure goes in the opposite direction: I attempt an internalist reading that draws out and examines what I perceive to be the inter- and intra-textual relationship between James’s writings on early radical empiricism, religion, and psychical research.

A second major methodological influence is Francesca Bordogna’s seminal book *William James at the Boundaries: Philosophy, Science, and the Geography of Knowledge*. Through her work I have come to see how James’s sensitivity to the epistemic, social and moral implications of what it meant to be an “irrational” outsider when divisive lines were drawn, or continued to be drawn upon. Bordogna’s work serves as a model of meticulous scholarship. Her basic contention is that in James’s writings we find “an insistence on transgressing boundaries separating fields of knowledge, types of discourse, and groups of inquirers.” She goes on to explain that:

[James] was notorious for engaging fields, discourses, and practices that newly established scientific and philosophical orthodoxies pushed outside
the bounds of proper academic inquiry…. He questioned the social and epistemic barriers separating professionals from amateurs, and maintained ostentatious friendships with marginal and controversial figures, never missing a chance to advertise their feats in formal academic circles…James, in short, was a “serial” transgressor of boundaries.  

Bordogna’s text deftly examines how James’s activities at the “boundary” were not limited to “creating, maintaining, and protecting, but also debunking, blurring, cracking, and crossing the boundaries that separate disciplines, fields of knowledge, kinds of discourse, and social groups.”

Whereas Bordogna directs her attention to contextualizing James’s philosophical and scientific activities as a way of exploring the epistemic, moral, and social side of his pragmatism, my project brings into focus James’s early radical empiricism and what it does for the study of religion in terms of reinstating the vague to its proper place.  

As a way of illustrating these activities, I find it helpful to identify individuals, groups, and worldviews along the lines of the blind monist and the epistemic underdog dichotomy, one that routinely surfaces when reading James’s writings, particularly those from the mid 1890s.

\[16\] Bordogna, *William James at the Boundaries*, 4-5.

\[17\] Ibid., 7.

\[18\] This is a slight paraphrasing of James’s famous phrase where he writes that the purpose of *PP* is “In short, the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life.” For an excellent treatment of the reinstatement of the vague as it appears in *PP* and through his work, see William Gavin, *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992) as well as his more recent volume, *William James in Focus: Willing to Believe* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2013).
Another major influence that has significantly informed this project is Paul Stob’s *William James and the Art of Popular Statement*. Through the lens of “the art of popular statement” Stob’s rhetorical and sociological study presents James as an “intellectual populist,” a “reconciler of epistemological differences,” and ultimately an “intellectual champion of the people” who confronted the “aristocrats of the mind” and argued that “intellectual power should be returned to the people.” He explains that:

> It was not by chance that James attracted so many readers. He worked tirelessly to craft texts that would advance modern thought and prove compelling to general audiences. But the art of popular statement was not only integral to James’s books and essays; it was also integral to the lectures he delivered across the country year after year.

For the purposes of this dissertation, Stob’s major influence is the way that he drew my attention to the role that the audience plays in James’s writings and how important it was for him to craft the text for each audience. We know that James was widely published and that every book published in his lifetime, other than *Principles*, was based upon lectures that he had given to specific audiences. Furthermore, we know that James’s publications appear in a wider variety of formats from academic journals to the

---


20 Ibid., xvi. Stob argues that “[t]he art of popular statement was far more than an aside in James’s career. It was integral to the way he carried himself, to his interactions with colleagues, to his choice of venues for speaking and publishing, to the discursive style he adopted, to the conversations he influenced, and to the intellectual bonds he fostered with his fellow citizens” (xv).

21 Ibid., xiii. Stob goes on to explain the type of impact James had on his audience and how venues occasionally had to be relocated due to the sheer number of people that came to listen to James speak: “At the lectern, few scholars could match his passion, wit, and eloquence, and even fewer could attract the crowds that he did. James routinely spoke in packed auditoriums. On several occasions, organizers had to move his lectures at the last minute to larger venues to accommodate throngs of attendees.”
popular press and thus he was addressing very different audiences. In many cases when James republished an article he often altered the article to better appeal to the new audience. In others instances when he republishes an article in a book, James offers detailed remarks in the preface that redirect our attention to new contexts within which we can understand his arguments and ideas. Through these observations, plus the additional insights and contextualization that emerges in his professional and personal correspondence, one gets the sense that James was constantly thinking about his audience and how they would receive his ideas. Through continued reflection on this audience-centric orientation, chapters Four and Five offer new readings of “The Will to Believe” and the 1897 Ingersoll Lecture that specifically seek to identify and recontextualize James’s respective arguments as audience-specific.

Last but certainly not least, is the work of William Gavin. In his recent book, William James in Focus, Gavin develops a hermeneutic strategy of reading James’s text as parsed between manifest and latent images.22 The manifest content tends toward detailed descriptions of James’s radical and innovative ways of looks at the self, the world, and the dynamic relationship between. The latent content, he maintains, is “directive,” insofar as it leads back to experience. In this capacity, the latent content is partial, unfinished, and lacks the sense of certainty.23 Using this strategy, I argue that two images emerge from James’s 1896 preface. On the one hand, we find a manifest image of

22 Utilizing this strategy, Gavin argues that James’s will to believe “should not be relegated to specific domains” such as the “hard” sciences, as opposed to the “soft” sciences; “rather, it should be employed wherever choices between options are ‘forced, living, and momentous’” (xi).

23 Ibid., xii.
James’s early radical empiricism that is overtly concerned with methodology and criticism. On the other hand, a latent image of the text reveals a position that is deeply troubled by social and moral issues.

**Two Methodological Caveats**

I suspect that the most challenging hurdle will be to reconcile my methodological orientation and the way that I attempt, as much as possible, to bracket James’s later work on radical empiricism, pragmatism, and religion. It is crucial that the reader understand my first caveat that this approach is a *supplemental* interpretation. By no means am I attempting to supplant the scholarship on James’s radical empiricism that has come before me: *one cannot truly grasp the significance of James’s early radical empiricism without understanding his position within its historical and philosophical context.* Since there is an abundance of literature that addresses how James’s radical empiricism relates to the larger patterns of the history of philosophy, I opt to take a different route. My hope is that the reasoning for foregrounding certain themes and contexts while pushing others to the background will grow increasingly clear with the development and application of each theme.

My intention is to voice an alternative perspective that I find embedded in the pages of the 1896 preface and throughout *The Will to Believe,* one that helps to explain portions of the initial conception of his new philosophical standpoint. What I attempt is a *re-orientation* to James’s first public announcement of his radical empiricism. This entails that we see James’s thinking emerge in a different historical and thematic context. As such, my work primarily draws upon on the wealth of publications and
correspondence that precede, or are concurrent with, James’s announcement of his early radical empiricism, rather than looking toward his writings and ideas that come to the forefront of his thought after the turn of the century. My contention is that this approach brings together and sheds new light on The Will to Believe and his other writings during the 1890s.

A second caveat is my contention that James’s psychical research should not be isolated or viewed as totally separate from his radical empiricist philosophy, his psychology, and/or his interpretation of religion. In point of fact, I argue that in order to understand the complexity of James’s thought we must be willing investigate how James’s psychical research informed his thinking in other fields.

Jeremy Carrette’s most recent study, William James’s Hidden Religious Imagination, observes that James’s work is best viewed as an “evolving whole” and that it does disservice to James to interpret his relation thinking in terms of fixed categories.24 Much is lost, he argues, when we strictly identify James as being a “psychologist,” a “philosopher,” or a “scholar of religion.” Instead, Carrette suggests that James wore one hat:

all his ideas are fused from the earliest stages. The different parts are given emphasis through his “selective attention” and focus, through different contextual relations. He is always, jointly, scientist–psychologist–philosopher–scholar of religion. His ideas evolve and change and take on different dimensions in different texts, not least because he writes for different purposes.25


25 Ibid., 6.
My own reading of James is much aligned with Carrette’s view; at the same time, however, I feel that Carrette, like many others, neglects a crucial aspect of James’s thinking that carries significant weight. To overlook James as “psychical researcher” is to miss a critical relation that persists throughout James’s life and thought.

A Note on Primary Texts

In what follows I offer a close textual reading of James’s primary sources. In many cases, while working with a major text I draw from minor texts as a way of historicizing and developing the wider relationality of James’s thought. My sense is that some of these “minor” texts are just as important for understanding the nature, range, and scope of James’s writing and thinking, but that these texts have, for one reason or another, not made it into the routinely discussed cannon as it appears in the secondary literature. For example, Essays, Comments & Reviews has been an invaluable resource for understanding James in context. As Stob points out, James’s early reviews function as “sites of intellectual invention that allowed [him] to develop many of the ideas, arguments, and strategies of his subsequent work.” Through the “minor” writings, e.g.

---

26 To be fair, Carrette does offer some brief assessments of James and the role of psychical research for his thought as a whole. But, as he explains in an endnote, he does not address these issues in his present book although he does claim that he intends to do so in his forthcoming book, James on Religion. For readers like myself that greatly appreciate Carrette’s sensitivity to the text and the many voices that are hidden within it waiting for an attuned reader, I was surprised to see that that psychical research was not a major theme of William James’s Hidden Religious Imagination.


28 Stob, Popular Statement, xxv.
book reviews, critical notices, letters to the editor, as well as a variety of essays, James reveals an engagement with both major and minor voices in the field in an attempt to navigate his own thoughts, style, and voice.29

In addition, this project heavily relied upon, and greatly benefited from, close readings of other volumes of the authoritative *Works of William James*. Each volume features a meticulous set of corresponding “Notes,” compiled by Ignas Skrupskelis, which provide essential background information for understanding the persons, places, and texts cited in the primary documents. The careful reader also benefits from Fredson Bowers’s “The Text of the Essays,” which presents a history of each primary document, its authority, and a supplemental textual apparatus that details the James’s editing process. Thus, contained in each volume of *The Works of William James* is a wealth of background information and context that cannot be found elsewhere. While I primarily work with *The Will to Believe, Essays in Religion and Morality, and Essays in Psychical Research*, this project also relied on regular consultation of the last two volumes of the set, *Manuscript Essays and Notes* and *Manuscript Lectures*, for gaining a deeper understanding of James as a late nineteenth century American intellectual.30

29 For a thorough discussion of James’s early reviews and the impact that it had on his later career, particularly in terms of his rhetoric, see Stob, *Art of Popular Statement*, ch. 2, “Engaging Science and Society. “

A second important source of information for this project is the twelve volume set *The Correspondence of William James*. I found that continuous consultation of James’s private correspondence helps one gain a sense of perspective of his private and professional life by developing contexts that do not necessarily emerge in his professional publications. For example, James routinely sent copies of his books and articles to friends and colleagues. Often he would send a brief note that highlights some aspect or other of the text as a way of explaining his own reasoning or what he thinks the recipient would appreciate. Through these personal vignettes significant information may be culled about James’s post-publication thought in regard to a specific text, argument, or idea.

**Selective Overview of Relevant Literature**

Considering the nature and scope of this project, it is important to say a few words about existing studies on James’s radical empiricism and religion. Before articulating my own point of departure, I will briefly highlight the merit of previous studies. Afterward, I will make a few remarks about the state of the field in regard to the study of James and religion.

Nancy Frankenberry devotes a whole chapter of her *Radical Empiricism and Religion* to James whereby she examines the epistemological and religious significance of his radical empiricism through lens of three key texts: *Principles, Varieties*, and

---

Essays in Radical Empiricism.  

Focusing on James’s reinstatement of the vague, his notion of “the more,” and the idea of “pure experience,” she maintains that James’s radical empiricist contribution to philosophy of religion is grounded in a non-dualistic position that overcomes the duality of “god” and the “world,” while also rejecting the subject-object dichotomy that perpetuates the religious dimension as a subject-oriented experience.

David Lamberth’s William James and the Metaphysics of Experience both deepens and broadens our understanding of the integrative aspect of James’s philosophy of radical empiricism through its attention to metaphysical, pluralistic, and socio-religious elements of experience. Lamberth’s historical and systematic study meticulously traces the emergence and evolution of James’s radical empiricism throughout the last two decades of his life, arguing that his mature philosophy is best interpreted as “the integrated, radically empiricist, pluralistic panchist position” presented in A Pluralistic Universe.

While Frankenberry and Lamberth offer significant contributions to the study of radical empiricism and its meaning for religious studies, my position departs from theirs in that I solely focus on James’s early radical empiricism as it is presented in the preface to and text of The Will to Believe. In terms of historical frameworks, my study is more


33 Ibid., 88.

34 Lamberth, Metaphysics of Experience, 3.
akin to Hunter Brown’s *William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion*. Brown, in contrast to Frankenberry and Lamberth, offers a more narrow examination of radical empiricism and religion. His book is devoted to a careful study of James’s “The Will to Believe” with the overarching goal of recovering the significance of the notions of “liveness” and the “strenuous mood” for understanding James’s philosophy of religion and the religious hypothesis.

In contrast to all three elegant studies, one of my principle points of departure is that I focus on James’s early radical empiricism within the broader 1890s context of his interest in and engagement with psychical research and alternative modalities of religious experience. Lamberth is the only one of the three that recognizes the importance of James’s psychical research. He offers a few insightful comments, but readily admits that it does not play a significant role in his study. Frankenberry, respectfully so, admits that she is “not interested…in following James into his tentative statement of ‘over-believes.’” She explains herself by claiming that:

> All that James’s researches along these lines [e.g. pathology, psychical research, mysticism and religious experience] produced was a recognition of the ambiguous uses of such evidence and the tantalizing possibility that “we may be in the universe as dogs and cats are in our libraries, seeing the books and hearing the conversation, but having no inkling of the meaning of it all.”

Brown, in the complete opposite direction, prefers not to consider the question of alternative modalities of religious experience. For example, this point is discernible in

---


Brown’s treatment of what constitutes the “reasonableness” of the religious hypothesis.

He writes:

If one locates James’s philosophy of religion within the terms of immediate experience, it is readily apparent that he defended live theism because it is experienced by actual individuals and communities as reasonable, and because intellectual responsibility—and an empiricism worthy of the name—demand respect for such reasonableness. What is “evident” to an individual or culture is to a significant extent a contextual matter, that involves the foregoing constellation of historical, linguistic, cultural, temperamental, physical and other influences which cannot be ignored in the development of evidential standards that are practically meaningful. What is “evident” to the individual or community, however, is not entirely a contextual matter. James’s historicizing and contextualizing of inquiry intended to emphasize not only the fragmentary and provisional nature of all claims to truth, but to give a place in epistemology to the recalcitrance of experience in its actual historical occurrence—a recalcitrance which often flies in the face of “wayward personal standards.”

Despite his awareness of the importance of historical context, Brown appears to be unconcerned with the wider historicity of nineteenth century American religious experience. Hence, his interpretation explicitly champions what he calls “live theism” over the “non-theistic alternatives” on the grounds of “reasonableness.” Without explicitly taking Brown to task, significant portions of this study are devoted to the idea of conveying a more permissive conception of “liveness” and “reasonableness”—both of which were not only on James’s radar, but were crucial parts of his radical empiricist agenda.

Turning to the broader theme of book-length studies and edited volumes that focus on James and religion, I would like to similarly point out that very few take seriously James’s interest in the “unclassified residuum” as a category of, or at least

related to, religion and religious experience. While excellent studies in their own right Vanden Burt, Levinson, Ramsey, Croce, Suckiel, Taylor, Carrette, Slater, and Pihlström and Rydenfelt all neglect to carefully consider James’s engagement with psychical research and/or do not provide a substantial treatment of one or several aspects of the historical, socio-cultural, scientific, or theoretic context of James’s engagement with alternative religions in nineteenth century America. Meanwhile, Bixler, Barnard, Taves, 

39 James first uses the term “Unclassified Residuum” in “The Hidden Self.” There he references an undisclosed “scientific friend” as having coined the term. James goes on to describe the phenomenon as a “sort of dust-cloud of exceptional observations, of occurrences minute and irregular” (247). Here he is referring to a collection of persons and experiences that exist on the fringe of the dominant epistemic paradigm. Due to the unconventional nature of their experience, members of the “unclassified residuum” and the facts of their experiences are marginalized and overlooked. Throughout his work in the 1890s James argues for the epistemic respectability of this class of persons and experiences, urging us to look beyond our own perspectival biases and blindness. See William James, “The Hidden Self,” in Essays in Psychology, Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas Skrupskelis, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 247.


To be fair, it is important to note that each of these volumes has very different aims and agendas and they do expertly explore them in responsible ways. In other words, I am not saying that every study of James and religion must take into account the biographical, historical, and theoretical elements of his location and engagement with these particular fields of thought. All that I am pointing out is that few book-length studies of James and religion register the “unclassified residuum” as an integral portion of James’s thinking on the question of religion or things deemed religious.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter One contextualizes James’s early radical empiricism based upon a historical, philosophical, and thematic re-reading of the 1896 preface to \textit{The Will to Believe}. I suggest that underneath the methodological commitment to fallibilism is an attitudinal orientation that is suggested by his initial description of radical empiricism as a “tolerably definite philosophical attitude.” I argue that this attitude is tinged with a fringe sensitivity or awareness of the epistemic outsider. Focusing on this epistemic sensitivity to the social plight of the perceived “irrational” other, I examine how James’s early radical empiricism
is guided by the “spirit of inner tolerance” in its attempt to rationalize the irrational. I contextualize this reading by illustrating the blind monist/epistemic underdog dichotomy and how it may be fleshed out of the 1896 preface, *The Will to Believe*, and James’s other writings of the 1890s.

Chapter Two builds upon the radical empiricist attitude by reconstructing its psycho-physiological underpinnings as depicted in James’s revisionist theory of reflex action. The chapter opens with a brief historical and thematic account of his understanding of the physiology of the reflex arc model during his medical education and early years of teaching at Harvard. In preparation for making sense James’s translation of a physiological reflex arc model into a psychological and philosophical theory of mind, I provide a chronological overview of his reflex action writings. Next I examine James’s contention that *all* actions are reflex actions; that that triadic structure of the reflex action theory of mind (perception, conception, and volition) are interdependent and teleologically driven; and, lastly, how the reflex action theory of mind perspectivally remolds “the given.” I conclude the chapter by linking James’s defense of the epistemic outsider to his revisionist conception of reflex action and how (ir)rationality is a contextual function of real relations within the “loop-line” of experience.

Chapter Three probes the so-called “spooky” side of James’s pluralism and his interest in and engagement with heterodox facts and rationalities. It seeks to internally historicize his experiences with the “unclassified residuum” from the early 1870s up to 1897 as way of making sense of the “dark” side of his 1890s pluralism and his defense of the epistemic outsider. I examine his earliest relations with Spiritualism, psychical research, and the Mind-Cure movement as a way of concretely and historically
connecting the arguments of other chapters with the epistemic sensitivity of his early radical empiricism and his defense of the religious hypothesis.

Chapter Four focuses on the pluralistic nature of religion and the democratic right to believe as presented in James’s infamous defense of the religious hypothesis. I argue for a revisionist account that historically and thematically broadens the range and scope of James’s defense. My argument hinges upon the idea that when “The Will to Believe” is repackaged as the leading essay of *The Will to Believe*, then the essay is dramatically altered by the manner in which the text is brought into conversation with the content of the preface and the closing essay, “What Psychical Research Has Accomplished.” I begin by showing how his theistic treatment of religion and the religious hypothesis, as presented in “The Will to Believe,” are specifically crafted for targeted audiences. I argue that when the religious hypothesis is understood within a broader definition of religion, such as the “unseen order,” it applies equally well to his defense of the “unclassified residuum.” I substantiate this line of reasoning by historicizing James’s 1890s conception of mysticism and by identifying how he correlates the relationship between psychical research and his broader definition of religion.

Chapter Five offers a novel reading of James’s 1897 Ingersoll Lecture and his defense of the rational legitimacy of belief in immortality. Drawing upon the radical empiricist attitude and James’s “spooky” pluralism, I identify a manifest and latent image of the text. A manifest reading identifies and associates James’s critique of the production theory of consciousness with the dogmatic and universalizing vision of the blind monist. In response to the perceived problem of immortality and the associated irrationality of the epistemic underdog, James puts forward the transmission theory as a way of rationally
legitimizing the logical possibility of human immortality. I proceed to argue that a latent reading of the text brings to the foreground the pragmatic benefits of the transmission theory. According to James, it serves as an alternative metaphysical and epistemological framework that makes practical and rational sense of the “obscure and exceptional phenomena” of the “unclassified residuum.”
CHAPTER 1

EARLY RADICAL EMPIRICISM AND THE “SPIRIT OF INNER TOLERANCE:” A “DEFINITE PHILOSOPHICAL ATTITUDE”

Introduction
When we look toward James’s first public announcement of radical empiricism, it becomes clear that we need to be more critical as to how we discuss his ideas. In contrast to Edward H. Madden and other commentators, I am suggesting that we avoid using James’s later formulation (e.g., his 1904-05 technical writings) as a measuring stick for his 1896 articulation. That is to say, as we inquire into James’s early radical empiricism, we ought not assume that he is directly concerned with articulating a pluralistic metaphysics, with developing his notion of “pure experience” or seeking solutions to the already problematic epistemological relations of the subject-object dichotomy. A more critical reading is one which draws from the historical, thematic, and philosophical context of James’s work during the mid to late 1890s. When we take a wider view of what philosophy means to him, we shall see that his early radical empiricism is more pervasive than previously acknowledged.


43 The earliest of these essays, “The Sentiment of Rationality,” was composed nearly twenty years prior, while the most recent, “The Will to Believe” was written in 1896. Nevertheless, this should not deter readers from seeking out radical empiricist themes in these collected essays. The fact that James chose to compile these essays, not others, into a collection which is self-characterized as radically empiricist is itself a significant factor. The fact that Madden does not find such themes makes sense because it is clear that he was looking for themes that were part and parcel of James’s mature standpoint.
A close reading of the preface to The Will to Believe, which is where he first publically announces his new philosophical standpoint, shows that James was predominantly concerned with epistemological matters of fact and perspective and their moral and social implications. Secondly, we can see that his democratic, pragmatic, and pluralistic tendencies not only focus on individuals, but upon individuals within an environment—that is to say, a social context. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, at this time in his career, James seems to be preoccupied with fringe facts, or facts that lay outside of the epistemological norm.

In order to grasp the moral and social undercurrents of James’s early radical empiricism, we need to take a fresh look at his first public description of the idea: sometime in December of 1896, he composed the preface to The Will to Believe. There he provides his audience with three different ways of understanding his new philosophy. First, he describes his position as an attitude, then as a method, and lastly as a worldview. As mentioned previously, there is a tendency to misattribute his mature radical empiricist themes and interests with his initial proclamation. In order to avoid this mistake, what follows is a close textual reading of the 1896 preface, divided into four stages of explication.

Because of the long history of reading James’s The Will to Believe as a text that has little to do with radical empiricism, section one decontextualizes Madden’s assertions about the claims made in the 1896 preface as a way of making room for re-contextualizing it in a new light. Section two provides a manifest reading of the

44 The perspectives are as follows: (1) the attitude is recast in light of what I am calling an “epistemic sensitivity to the alogical;” (2) radical empiricism as a method of epistemological critique; and (3) an undefined yet robust, or thick, pluralism that includes epistemic, metaphysical, moral, psychological and social dimensions.
preface. It examines how James defines “radical empiricism” and explains how it functions as a methodological critique of infallibilism, dogmatism, and monistic thinking. This is followed by highlighting James’s immediate epistemic concerns regarding the bounds of rationality and the limitations inherent to human perspective. Section three addresses the minimal attention within the secondary literature that has been given to James’s initial description of his 1896 radical empiricism qua a “definite philosophical attitude.” I examine what James himself had to say about this attitude and why he anticipated that his colleagues would deem it “irrational.” I also suggest that it is better understood when we appeal to a wider conception of what, for James, constitutes philosophy. Finally, section four attends to a latent reading of the text, a hermeneutic strategy that will assist me in better approximating the meaning of the attitude in question. Having highlighted the manifest characteristics of James’s radical empiricist methodology and his critique of rationality and perspectival limits, this section turns toward a latent reading of the preface that fleshes out a democratic and pluralistic epistemological theme which James calls “the spirit of tolerance”—a pervasive theme that appears throughout James’s mid-1890s writings.

I argue that the historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts of the mid 1890s and his work in psychical research, religion, and mental/physical health server as a partial framework for understanding James’s early radical empiricism.\textsuperscript{45} Once re-

\textsuperscript{45} And as such, this reading of James’s early experimentation with radical empiricism constitutes a supplemental approach that nestles itself both within and alongside of the empirical tradition of philosophy that other scholars have variously depicted. In other words, this approach does not attempt to bracket or look past certain “embarrassing” aspects of James’s thinking.
contextualized in this light, I will tease out three critical dimensions regarding how and why James describes it as a “definite philosophical attitude.” Upon my reading, the attitude is (1) rooted in a specific type of epistemic awareness, or fringe sensitivity; (2) is drawn to particular types of persons, i.e. the “epistemic underdog;”46 and (3) results in the performance of particular types of action taken on behalf of said persons. In many instances, these actions serve as a democratic defense of the “irrational” other. As we shall see, what matters to James is that the continuum of experience is recognized as being legitimate facts of experience which carry a personal weight for the individual and are capable of producing knowledge.

The chapter concludes by summarizing my argument that interprets the “definite philosophical attitude” as an epistemological sensitivity to the way monistic thinking affects the social dynamics of the individual and his/her community. Whether socially or institutionally deemed the irrational other, James uses radical empiricism to defend this type of outsider. By arguing on their behalf, James is attempting to normalize the non-normal and to establish a “régime of tolerance;” that is to say, he tries to create a pluralistic, democratic, and free marketplace whereby different speculative ideas and concrete practices are openly encouraged and respected.

46 As discussed in detail below, I argue that two types of persons emerge from the content of James’s 1896 preface: (1) the blind monist who is dogmatically blind to the inner significance of “the other;” and, (2) the epistemic underdog, or outcaste, whose belief system locates him/her on the fringe of dominant epistemological paradigm. I make the claim that James’s radical empiricist attitude appeals to the epistemic underdog in two ways: (1) on a general level to the inner significance of the individual, and (2) more specifically to the individual’s context as being on the fringe of socially acceptable or “rational” belief.
The 1896 Preface of *The Will to Believe*

In the introductory essay to the sixth volume of James’s collected works Madden sketches a rough outline of *The Will to Believe* essays:

the first four [essays] concern the problems that arise for belief when evidence in support of a conclusion is indecisive; the next four discuss problems of moral and social philosophy; the ninth is a critique of Hegel; and the tenth…expounds James’s evolving views on psychical research.\(^{47}\)

He goes on to say that while it is unclear what exactly James meant by labeling them as essays in “popular philosophy,” he deems it likely due to the fact that “they concern issues close to every man’s heart rather than those reserved for the closet philosopher.”\(^{48}\)

These concerns, it seems, constitute the thematic heart of the text: belief, chance, faith, freewill, morality, religion, science, suicide, truth, and volition.

When taken together Madden asserts that “[t]he general theme that underlies all the essays is that intellectual decisions unaffected by the volitional and passional natures of man are pure fictions.”\(^{49}\) This, however, is in direct contrast with what James characterizes as the heart of the text, namely that it captures the spirit of “a tolerably definite philosophical attitude.” Madden writes:

James in the Preface to this book claims that the volume exemplifies his concept of radical empiricism, even though he does not discuss it, and that the exemplification of this concept provides the thread that binds the essays together. *The claim seems somewhat doubtful, since the general thesis of radical empiricism, that relations are epistemically irreducible as the elements of classic British empiricism, can be accepted—and generally has been—by empiricists who nevertheless totally reject James’s fideism. And the detailed analyses of pure experience in Essays in Radical Empiricism are simply irrelevant to the claims made in The Will to* \(^{47}\) Madden, Introduction, xiii.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., xiii.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., xi.
Believe. Finally, whatever the unifying thread is taken to be, the fact that the essays were written over a long period of time, and during long periods when he was not listed officially at Harvard as a philosopher, should not stand in the way of taking whatever unifying thread one thinks best. Regardless of what James was called, he was a philosopher from the beginning of his career to the end, and the cluster of issues he discusses in this book are those very issues which, unlike pragmatism and radical empiricism, concerned him throughout his life and must be understood if the volitional aspects of his whole world view are to be appreciated.50

While we can agree with Madden that the passional nature (i.e. sentiment, affective dimension, emotion, etc.) undergirds the intellectual dimension of human nature is a dominant theme of the text, it is not necessarily the only thread which binds together these essays. Rather, if we wish to grasp the center of James’s philosophical vision as depicted in The Will to Believe, we must let the text, and its own historicity, be our guide.

Despite having rewritten, in part, some of the essays, James did not explicitly make use of the radical empiricist language that would become (in)famous by his 1904-1905, or even 1909, publications. For example, he does not speak of “pure experience,” the reality of conjunctive or disjunctive relations, nor does he employ the language of “postulate, statement of facts, and generalized conclusion.”51 To retrospectively read pure experience as the heart of James’s 1896 version of radical empiricism is to miss the developmental dynamics of his theorization. Yes, one can provide a latent reading of the text which pieces together early formulations of James’s theory of pure experience as presented in his 1904-05 or 1909 writings, but to assume that pure experience was a manifest concern of James at the time of writing the 1896 preface is to overlook James’s historical and contextual concerns.

50 Ibid., xi-xii (emphasis added).

51 The latter, however, does first appear—in a more immature form—in an early experimentation with radical empiricism, namely, the 1897 Ingersoll lecture.
In contrast to Madden and other scholars that take James’s mature work as the conceptual starting point of his early radical empiricism, I argue that if we wish to know the historical concerns of James at the time of writing the 1896 preface, we need to make sense of several elements that are both psychological and social. From the former side we need to investigate his publications, personal/public correspondence, lectures, coursework, his personal reading habits as indicated through library withdrawals as well as through his own personal library. Regarding the latter point, we can focus on the particulars of the late nineteenth century cultural, historical, philosophical, religious, scientific, and theological contexts. Then, when applicable, appeal to prior contexts as elements that partially shaped James’s particular disposition. By combining these methods, we can attempt to piece together the approximate sense of James’s historical and philosophical concerns when he first publicly announced his radical empiricism. In order to demonstrate this point, I highlight a few of his central concerns and the historical context within which he wrote.

In his masterful introduction to Essays in Psychical Research, Robert McDermott observes that 1896 was a significant year for William James. He writes of James as a “weaver of intellectual and experiential threads” who “labored for the removal of those ideas, beliefs, and habits of mind that block insight and imagination” and that, on this account, “[t]he year 1896 is instructive.”52 By December of 1896, when James penned the preface to The Will to Believe, he published only four articles that year: “The Address of the President before the Society for Psychical Research,” “The Will to Believe,”

“Psychical Research,” and “A Case of Psychic Automatism.” He also published a total of seven notices and reviews that year: three focus on themes of psychical research, one defends the James-Lange theory of emotion, while the remaining three address dreams, abnormal psychology, and the psychology of art appreciation. In addition to all of this, he was also preparing his manuscript, “Is Life Worth Living?,” for separate publication with S. Burns Weston publishing company of Philadelphia.

Publications aside, much of James’s attention was absorbed by his lectures and addresses. In April he presented “The Will to Believe” to the Philosophical Club of Yale and again in May he delivered it to the Philosophical Club of Brown. Beginning in the summer of 1896 James presented the “Talks to Teachers” lecture in Cambridge, Massachusetts, then Buffalo, then Chautauqua, and finally Chicago. Later, in the fall of 1896 James delivered the Lowell Lectures on “Exceptional Mental States.”

In sum, what we find is that James was preoccupied with writing and lecturing about abnormal psychology, psychical research, and religion and that much of these writings and lectures stem from a defensive mode that sought to normalize the non-normal. Before moving on to the attitudinal dimension of the preface, I will first address the manifest image of the preface. In addition to serving as a reminder of what James was openly doing in the preface, this information will figure largely through the entire dissertation.

Turning toward the opening pages of the 1896 preface, James decides to give his new position a nickname for ease of reference. He writes,

> Were I obliged to give a short name to the attitude in question, I should call it that of radical empiricism, in spite of the fact that such brief nicknames are nowhere more misleading than in philosophy. I say “empiricism,” because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience.\(^{54}\)

Here we have the classic starting point of a philosophical methodology. James defines his orientation as being that of an empiricist. The traditional narrative in the secondary literature is to differentiate this school of thought from rationalism and to point out their respective historical and philosophical differences.\(^{55}\) He simplifies this division by reducing it to the fallibility of human knowledge, which stakes its position on the idea that knowledge claims are liable to change and modification through future experience. The significance of his linguistic adjustment—that is the transformation of “assured conclusions” into “hypotheses liable to modification”—is paramount not only for understanding his early radical empiricism, but also his pragmatism.\(^{56}\)

---

54 James, “Preface,” 5.

55 Classic examples of this narrative are Perry (1935), Lamberth (1999), and Hester (2003). Lamberth diverges from this path by associating this description with the “methodological empiricism of modern science” (11); similarly, Bordogna aligns this perspective with the practices of “good science and good philosophy” (119). Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vol. (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1935).

56 Setting aside the controversial nature of James’s pragmatism, for the purposes of this project, we need only concern ourselves with nature of James’s implicit critique of certainty.
The next major feature is James’s qualification of his stance as “radical” insofar as it may apply to any particular situation. He explains this as follows:

and I say “radical,” because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis, and, unlike so much of the half-way empiricism that is current under the name of positivism or agnosticism or scientific naturalism, it does not dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all experience has got to square.  

James’s concern here is for any type of monistic thinking, not merely a particular metaphysical doctrine. What is interesting is his use of the term “monism.” The first instance is presented as the “doctrine of monism” and gives the sense of referring to a singular thesis. The unfortunate consequence of this linguistic designation is that it is all too often identified as a specific type of rationalist metaphysics, as opposed to referring to its broader meaning. According to Baldwin’s Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology, monism is a “name applicable to any system of thought which sees in the universe the manifestation or working of a single principle.”

James is fairly clear about capturing the latter sense of the term when he mentions “the doctrine:” he refers to a variety of monistic thought, such as “positivism,” “agnosticism,” and “scientific naturalism”—not just absolute idealism.

At this stage in its development, radical empiricism refers to a methodology that asks uncomfortable questions: it challenges basic practical assumptions and philosophical presuppositions as a way of shaking the foundations of certainty. It does not, however, provide the solution, or answer, to its criticism: it functions solely at the level of

57 James, “Preface,” 5.

epistemological (or logical) critique.\textsuperscript{59} Taken together, the above points showcase how James’s early radical empiricism methodologically challenges both monistic thought—in any and all forms—and the idea of certainty: \textit{all claims} concerning matters of fact are to be treated as “hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience.”

\textit{The Limits of Reason and the Perspectival Critique}

Thus far according to a manifest reading of 1896 preface we have seen that James is intimately concerned with aggressive and over-extended knowledge claims. His radical empiricist position is methodologically rooted in the fallibility of human knowledge and directed toward the rampant dogmatism that permeates nearly all aspects of intellectual pursuit. While its aim is deeply concerned with the nature of truth, this perspective is expressed in a negative fashion. By showcasing rational and perspectival limits, James is directly calling attention to the dogmatic manner that certain parties monopolize their own perspective. The heart of this critique is that the “inward clarity” of a particular point of view is incapable of achieving a public or universal status: it always eclipses some fact or point of view.

Bordogna astutely observes that one of the features of James’s “new epistemological regime” is that his style of argumentation quickly shifts gears between

\textsuperscript{59} That is not to say, however, that James does not suggest his own solution. He does, but it must be differentiated from radical empiricism. For example, in his 1897 Ingersoll Lecture on Human Immortality, which was written shortly after having announced his radical empiricism, James employs the methodological critique as a means of challenging physiological psychologist’s certainty regarding the production theory of consciousness. He suggests a pragmatic alternative, the transmission theory, but is careful to point out that there is no clear-cut solution. In this light, it would seem that the controversial issue of the relationship between radical empiricism and pragmatism is fairly straightforward. However, as James’s develops both positions, it becomes less clear as to their relationship, e.g., compare and contrast his comments in the preface of \textit{PP} and \textit{MT}. 
different lines of reasoning. While he may begin with a methodological and epistemological framework, it quickly turns into a discussion of moral and social issues, only to later re-explore their meaning in a new epistemic and/or methodological context. This zigzagging style of argumentation, not unique to James, appears in the preface after he has described the basic meaning of radical empiricism. Unless closely followed, these distinctions can be easily lost, hence the importance of calling attention to how James is attempting to re-orient our perspective to that of an open, democratic, and pluralistic orientation.

James begins his perspectival critique reflecting on the reasoning process:

“Postulating more unity than the first experiences yield, we also discover more. But absolute unity, in spite of brilliant dashes in its direction, still remains undiscovered, still remains a Grenzbegriff [limit concept].” From an empirical standpoint, we postulate based upon previous experience. As our experience-base broadens, our hypotheses expand reaching further and deeper into the nature of reality and ourselves. Yet, however far we stretch, there is invariably something just out of intellectual reach. James expresses this point in “The Will to Believe” and “The Sentiment of Rationality” by arguing that if confronted with a genuine option that cannot be decided by reason alone, then our “passional nature” decides thusly.

---

60 Bordogna, *William James at the Boundaries*, 58.

61 James, “Preface,” 6.

62 He writes, “The thesis I defend is, briefly stated, this: Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided upon intellectual grounds….” James, *WB*, 20.
As we continue to trace his zigzag style we see that James transitions to the epistemic dimension in order to showcase the limitations of reason: “After all that reason can do has been done, there still remains the opacity of the finite facts as merely given, with most of their peculiarities mutually unmediated and unexplained.”\textsuperscript{63} Elaborating upon this perspectival limitation, he fluidly moves into the practical dimension in order to apply his critique of reason to the “greatest of philosophers.”

Drawing a parallel between the limitations of reason and our own human perspective, James points out that the “inward clarity” of one perspective is also necessarily limited: “To the very last, there are various ‘points of view’ which the philosopher must distinguish in discussing the world; and what is inwardly clear from one point remains a bare externality and datum to another.”\textsuperscript{64} The take away message is that James invokes a certain element of relativity into the degree to which something is deemed rational. A more accurate way of asserting this is to follow his language of “pro tanto rational,” meaning rational to such an extent. The point is subtle, but definitely there: James’s argument addresses the psychological, not epistemological, elements of rationality.\textsuperscript{65} Translated into the epistemology of “inward clarity,” James is calling attention to lack of communication between certain perspectives and the inability to imagine foreign states of mind. When an event takes place, multiple perspectives

\textsuperscript{63} James, “Preface,” 6.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{65} I wish to express my gratitude and appreciation to Kyle Bromhall for sharing one of his conference papers, “Is There More to Rationality than Its Sentiment,” which won the 2014 APA William James Prize. While I was already clear as to the psychological angle of James’s point, Kyle made this point clearer in my mind. Kyle Bromhall, “Is There More to Rationality than Its Sentiment,” (paper presented at American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, December 27-30, 2014).
converge on one point as a means of addressing it: however, what is necessitated in one point of view, may be mere distraction in another.

He draws this discussion to a close by zigzagging once more between the abstract and the practical in order to drive home this idea of limitations:

The negative, the alogical, is never wholly banished. Something—call it “fate, chance, freedom, spontaneity, the devil, what you will”—is still wrong and other and outside and unincuded, from your point of view, even though you be the greatest of philosophers. Something is always mere fact and givenness; and there may be in the whole universe no one point of view extant from which this would not be found to be the case.66

The brevity of the argument certainly does take away from its effectiveness. My suspicion, however, is that James is not trying to provide his readership with a technical and definitive statement regarding radical empiricism: his concision suggests that he is merely trying to illustrate how the essays which follow are brought together under a central theme. This sensitivity to perspectival limitations surfaces again and again throughout James’s work in the mid 1890’s. Most pointedly, in the preface to Talks to Teachers, he reflects upon his recently announced pluralistic philosophy and states that “[a]ccording to that philosophy, the truth is too great for any one actual mind...to know the whole of it.”67

To further illustrate this point, he draws upon the obscure writings of nineteenth century journalist, poet, and mystic Benjamin Paul Blood. “‘Ever not quite’ must be the rationalistic philosopher’s last confession concerning it.”68 While James goes on to quote

66 James, “Preface,” 6.


68 James, “Preface,” 6.
Blood’s lathe metaphor to illustrate his point, the meaning of this idea of “ever not quite” is better captured in a later essay. In “A Pluralistic Mystic,” James elaborates more fully what he means when he invokes Blood’s famous “ever not quite” phrase. He writes,

“Ever not quite!”—this seems to wring to the very last panting word out of rationalistic philosophy’s mouth. It is fit to be pluralism’s heraldic device. *There is no complete generalization, no total point of view, no all-pervasive unity, but everywhere some residual resistance to verbalization, formulation, and discursification*, some genius of reality that escapes from the pressure of the logical finger, that says, “hands off,” and claims its privacy, and means to be left to its own life. In every moment of immediate experience is some absolutely original and novel.⁶⁹

Approaching the Attitude of the 1896 Preface

To my knowledge, only a handful of scholars positively attend to James’s radical empiricist attitude as it appears in the 1896 preface. In his study *William James and Henri Bergson*, Horace M. Kallen identifies James’s radical empiricism as a “metaphysics which is expressible in an attitude, not in a system.”⁷⁰ However, his brief discussion does not differentiate between James’s early radical empiricism and his mature radical empiricisms as per *Essays in Radical Empiricism*.

While Kallen’s description may be troubling to the post-modern mind insofar as he characterizes the attitude as a unbiased or “neutral-starting point,” he does capture an important component when he states that “[i]t keeps throwing ever-new data into the focus of philosophical attention, emphasizing against the compensatory prejudice

---


innumerable neglected contents of experience.”\textsuperscript{71} It is inferred that Kallen has the metaphorical aspect of James’s later, more technical thinking in mind here.\textsuperscript{72} However, Kallen’s point that James’s radical empiricism is capable of calling attention to the biased (or habituated) and rationally reconstructed aspects of experience need not be metaphysically interpreted. Rather, we can see the merit of James’s early radical empiricism as a method of drawing attention to epistemic, social, and institutional injustice.

More recently, D. Micah Hester and Robert Talisse identify this attitude as a melioristic meta-philosophical attitude that attempts to navigate between various intellectualisms, both philosophical and practical.\textsuperscript{73} In the preface to \textit{On James} Hester initiates his point of departure:

\begin{quote}
71 Ibid., 29-30.

72 In this case, the prejudice to which he refers is the construct of consciousness which James railed against in his 1904 essay, “Does Consciousness Exist.” Along these lines, Kallen’s emphasis of a neutral-starting point signifies the notion of “pure experience” that James developss as a means of circumscribing the Cartesian ontological divide between subjects and objects.

73 While \textit{On James} is co-authored, I shall hereafter refer to Hester. The reason being that Hester also published other writings that continue this line of interpretation, see “Radical Empiricism” and “Pure Experience” in \textit{American Philosophy: An Encyclopedia}. The former is essentially the same interpretation, with a few minor additions, as that which is detailed in \textit{On James}. Hester also applies this interpretation of radical empiricism to the various problems of ethics and end-of-life care, see D. Micah hester, \textit{End-of-Life Care and Pragmatic Decision Making: A Bioethical Perspective} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). \textit{On James} is part of the Wadsworth Philosopher Series which aims to introduce each thinker by capturing dominant themes within the broad scope of each philosopher. What is particularly promising about this text is that it moves beyond the stock quotes which have perennially pollinated the field of Jamesian studies. Thus it is consistent with the style of the text that his attitudinal component actually comes to the surface. Unfortunately, however, due to the introductory nature of the text, the attitude it is not systematically explored or critically analyzed; aside from the information quoted above, the only other comment that specifically addresses this particular attitude is that it “comes to its fullest expression in James’s pragmatism…[or] philosophy of action“ (25-
Whereas previous commentators (and even, at times, James himself) emphasized radical empiricism as specific metaphysical or epistemological doctrines, we take radical empiricism to be, in part, James’s response to his personal travails, an attitude of commitment to lived experience, the insistence upon the reality of relations, transitions, risks, hopes and joys that we undergo and encounter.\(^{74}\)

They elaborate more fully by pointing out that James’s first statement about radical empiricism is that it is an attitude and proceeds to quote from the 1896 preface to *The Will to Believe*. He explains that “…radical empiricism, though metaphysically pregnant, is ultimately a deep human psychological and philosophical commitment to two claims: (1) One must not deny anything that is experienced; and (2) One must not deny the potency of human action.”\(^{75}\)

Most recently, Bordogna captures this attitude by associating it with James’s “boundary work.” Her reading of James depicts him as seeking to revise the “social and moral economy of science” by challenging “the prevailing epistemological regimes, reshaping the existing disciplines, and changing the geography of knowledge.”\(^{76}\) For Bordogna, the attitude in question constitutes “a spirit of inner tolerance” which gets to the heart of what “James took to be essential to the practice of good science and good

---


\(^{74}\) Hester, *On James*, preface (n.p).

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 25. Nevertheless, based upon the description of radical empiricism, it is fairly clear that the “commitment to lived experience” does not go beyond the traditional metaphysical themes of James’s mature radical empiricism which treats the reality of disjunctive and conjunctive elements of experience.

\(^{76}\) Bordogna, *William James at the Boundaries*, 58.
philosophy: open-mindedness, modesty, tolerance, respect for other people, and pluralism.”

While Kallen, Hester, and Bordogna all call attention to the importance of James’s radical empiricist attitude, none of them provide a sustained treatment. In order to grasp the significance of the attitude in question, I shall make a few preliminary remarks about how James discusses the attitude in the 1896 preface before digging into the latent content, and its relation to his work in the mid-1890s.

“A Tolerably Definite Philosophical Attitude”

In December of 1896 James penned the preface to The Will to Believe and the volume was first published on March 13, 1897. The text comprises ten essays written within a seventeen year span, between 1879 and 1896. In addition to previously publishing most of these articles in both popular magazines (e.g., The Atlantic Monthly, Scribner’s, etc.) and technical journals (e.g., Mind, International Journal for Ethics, Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research, The New World, etc.), James also delivered many of these papers as public addresses to a variety of associations, clubs, and societies.

What is particularly interesting about this collection of essays is the initial way that he characterizes them:

77 Ibid., 119.
78 James, WB, 307.
79 Readers interested in the historical matters surrounding each publication should consult Bower’s “The Text of The Will to Believe” in the back of the volume.
80 For a list of publications and deliveries, see each individual entry in “The Documents“ of WB: 311-340.
It has seemed to me that these addresses might now be worthy of a collection in a volume, as they shed explanatory light upon each other, and taken together express a tolerably definitive philosophical attitude in a very untechnical way.  

Readers familiar with James’s work will note that his writing is chalk full of attitudes, moods and temperaments, thus the secondary literature is replete with examples (e.g., the strenuous mood, tough and tender-mindedness, etc.) and explanations of these diverse dispositions. As pointed out previously, comparatively little attention has been given to developing the meaning and characteristics of James’s early radical empiricist attitude.

After his initial characterization that defines and methodologically describes his position as “radical empiricism,” James redirects his attention to the reception of this new standpoint by his philosophically-minded colleagues:

Many of my professionally trained confréres will smile at the irrationalism of this view, and at the artlessness of my essays in point of technical form. But they should be taken as illustrations of the radically empiricist attitude rather than as argumentations for its validity. That admits meanwhile of being argued in as technical a shape as anyone can desire, and possibly I may be spared to do later a share of that work.

There are several important points that need to be discussed in order to grasp the significance of this passage. First, James’s anticipates that his colleagues will deem his position as “irrational.” We might interpret this projected accusation in several fashions. It might, for example, call attention to the philosophical milieu within which James was writing. Facing off with the Spencers, Cliffords and Huxleys of the mid 1890s, we can see that a very strict type of reasoning was in vogue in the field of philosophy. Likewise, the prominence of Neo-Hegelian thought and the rising tide of positivism, in various

---

81 James, “Preface,” 5 (emphasis added).

82 Ibid., 7.
forms, was then giving way to other means by which James might anticipate this charge. At the same time, however, it is also possible that James’s comment is directed to the objects of radical empiricism’s study, e.g., chance, faith, psychical research, rationality, etc., and what his colleagues may think. In other words, we may interpret this statement to refer to the content, not the structure or form of thinking. In either case, whatever sense James had in mind, what at first appears to be a cautionary remark is, in fact, a telling feature and thus one of our touchstones for making sense of his early radical empiricism.

The next significant feature of his description of radical empiricism is the characterization that:

these essays seem to light up with a certain dramatic reality the attitude itself, and make it visible alongside of the higher and lower dogmatisms between which in the pages of philosophic history it has generally remained eclipsed from sight.  

For anyone familiar with “The Will to Believe,” “The Sentiment of Rationality,” or “The Moral Philosopher and The Moral Life,” it is quite clear that James’s essays were and still are thought-provoking. When given his preliminary statements and claim of the “certain dramatic reality” with which the attitude is illuminated in text, one would think that any reader would be able to gleam the essential features of his novel philosophical point of view. Yet, a cursory glance at the secondary literature reveals a distinct lacuna surrounding James’s supposed attitude as presented in the 1896 preface. In fact, one might go so far to say that despite the intention behind his philosophical debut, it is fairly

83 Ibid., 7 (emphasis added).
ironic that critical features of his early radical empiricism, particularly the attitude, still remain eclipsed from sight.

A third feature of this passage that needs to be carefully examined is that James specifically draws attention to the fact that his collection of essays illustrates, rather than argues, the standpoint of radical empiricism. To a degree, this suggests an element of vagueness or ambiguity in terms of how we are to interpret James’s thesis as it appears in the collected essays. Recall that the preface was the last thing that James wrote before publishing the book. Moreover, as he attests in the preface, “the revision of the essays has consisted almost entirely in excisions. Probably less than a page and a half in all of new matter has been added.” The point, then, is that the essays of The Will to Believe were not written from within the radical empiricist standpoint, but represent retrospective reflections of the kind that James feels are representative of this particular style of thinking.

In this case, we must be careful to not over-emphasize form or the methodological structure of his thinking within the essays: it is more likely the case that it is the collective content, the objects of studied, and/or, persistent themes taken up that merit the radical empiricist description. In other words, we must be cognizant of the fact that the description of his methodology appears after the essays are already written. Accordingly, by attending to this reflective recognition and its application within The Will to Believe, and other relevant texts, we are in a better position to approximate the concerns and interests that James deemed worthy of addressing from this particular point of view. Based on the idea of it being a definite philosophical attitude, we can follow James as he

85 James, “Preface,” 10.
drifts amongst the divergent themes of *The Will to Believe* picking out particular ideas and problems, both philosophical and practical, as a way fleshing out what merits careful scrutiny.

Lastly, recall that James maintains that the collected essays depict the radical empiricist attitude, albeit in an untechnical but “dramatic” form. What particularly interests us is the claim that this attitude is made visible amongst “the higher and lower dogmatisms” and that until 1896 it has “generally remained eclipsed from sight.” While it seems that James is trying to provide us with a context for grasping this attitude, it is entirely too open and vague for any definitive interpretation.

The bulk of the secondary literature draws our attention to James’s confrontation with absolute idealism, while also demonstrating his upbringing in the British (and Scottish) empirical tradition only to overcome the problems that vexed them.\(^86\) While this literature has done much to advance our understanding of James and his philosophical heritage—particularly in terms of his definition and methodological commitments—it overlooks the connection between James’s “spooky” interests in fringe, or subaltern, thought.\(^87\) While much has been written on James’s interest in mental hygiene, mental healing, mysticism, psychopathology, psychical research, and religious experience, his

---

\(^{86}\) Perry (1935), Siegfried (1978), and Hester (2003) are perhaps some of the better representatives (each having written a different type of text; respectively, biographical, technical, and introductory) of this form of literature that address the empirical lineage from which James both descends and transcends.

interest in fringe thinking has yet to be systematically explored in connection with his early radical empiricism.\(^88\)

According to Bordogna, James devoted much of his career to “transgressing the boundaries between fields of knowledge, groups of knowledge workers, and realms of discourse.”\(^89\) She explains that James’s pragmatism and radical empiricism functioned as “new epistemological regimes” that crossed presupposed boundaries with the goal of achieving a fluid “social geography of knowledge.” Each, in its own way, sought to introduce new conceptions of how to do philosophy and science. Extending Bordogna’s re-contextualization of James’s work at the boundaries between the disciplines of philosophy, psychology and science, I am suggesting that there is an alternative narrative to be uncovered if we look toward particular religious and epistemological themes, both historical and philosophical, which reveal themselves as focal points of James’s work in the mid 1890s, particularly the year 1896. By taking into account James’s interest in “fringe sciences,” or what many consider as forms of pseudoscience, it reveals a counter philosophical history that resituates how we understand the range and scope of James’s

\(^{88}\) There are, however, several sources that explore, to one degree or another, the relationship. That said, these sources do not critically differentiate between James’s early and mature radical empiricism, thus posing many of the same problems that have been alluded previously. For example, see Marcus Ford, “William James’s Psychical Research and its Philosophical Implications,“ *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 34:3 (Summer), 605-626 and Bordogna, *William James at the Boundaries*, chapter Four. Or, what happens is that a historian or psychologist addresses the topic, but has little to no training in philosophy. The resultant product, while rich in history, is left wanting in terms of philosophical and religious content. For example, see Eugene Taylor, *William James on Consciousness Beyond the Margins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Knapp, “To The Summerland;“; and, Alexandre Sech Junior, Saulo de Freitas, Jr., and Alexander Moreira-Almeida, “William James and Psychical Research: Towards a Radical Science of Mind,“ *History of Psychiatry*, 24:1 (2013).

early radical empiricism, the types of discourse that he entered, and what type of persons were capable of producing knowledge.\footnote{Ford does an excellent job of bringing the issue of psychical research to the foreground of James’s historical and philosophical context. Unfortunately, however, it does nothing for these other areas of “fringe thought.” Taylor (1983, 1996) functions exceptionally well in this capacity: while primarily focusing on mental pathology and psychical research, he does have a few passing remarks about James and the mind-cure movement. Where Taylor (1983, 1996) falls short, Sutton rises to the challenge. Emma Sutton, “Interpreting ‘Mind-Cure’: William James and the ‘Chief Task…of the Science of Human Nature,’” Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences, 48: 2, (Spring, 2012).}

The question we want to be asking ourselves, then, is what James has in mind by identifying radical empiricism as a “tolerably definite philosophical attitude.” His wording suggests precision insofar as it is a \textit{definite} attitude. Regardless of what commentators project, it is clear that James has something very specific in mind. The transparency of this vision, unfortunately, is left to the hermeneutical finesse of the academy due the fact that nowhere does he elaborate as to what this perspective entails. Nevertheless, at the time of publication what may have been clear in James’s mind is certainly not the case according to his readership, colleagues, and current James scholars.

A second point to consider is that in a time when his contemporaries are developing principles and strategies to deal with the inherited systems of rationality from thinkers like Kant, Hegel, etc., James’s draws attention to the fact that his new philosophy is an \textit{attitude}, or disposition. But most importantly, his wording also makes it clear that the attitude is \textit{philosophical}. While the bulk of the secondary literature interprets this to signify his involvement in the empiricist tradition, our point of departure will be a different understanding of what it means to be philosophical.
James’s Redefining of Philosophy

Consulting Baldwin’s *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* we find four definitions of “philosophy:” the first definition describes it as natural philosophy; the second stems from the first with the addition of a ethical or moral component; the third is “practically equivalent to metaphysics;” and the fourth functions an inter-disciplinary system of thinking which captures the “animating spirit of all.”91 As a sign of the times, we can make use of Baldwin’s definition as a general measuring stick for nineteenth century Victorian thought; yet, doing so would not give us the subtle and peculiar distinctions that differentiate James’s conception of philosophy from other contemporary thinkers.

As early as 1876 James offers a definition philosophy that runs against the grain. In “The Teaching of Philosophy in Our Colleges” he alludes to the importance of the unconventional point of view and the ability to look beyond our own proclivities. He writes:

If the best use of our college is to give young men a wider openness of mind and a more flexible way of thinking than special technical training can generate, then we hold that philosophy…is the most important of all college studies. However sceptical one may be of the attainment of universal truths…one can never deny that philosophical study means the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again, of imagining foreign states of mind. In a word, it means the possession of mental perspective.92

The twenty year difference between James’s writing of the preface to *The Will to Believe* and this description of philosophy should not deter us from drawing from his conception


of philosophy as “always seeing an alternative.” What is important is that we see continuity within James’s thinking and that this idea of “mental perspective” is one that pervades his democratic, pluralistic, and pragmatic thinking.

At the end of his life, James takes up the task of defining philosophy—devoting the first chapter of Some Problems of Philosophy to its definition and meaning.\(^93\) We can note that this is not the definitive definition for James, but it does reflect a long and illustrious career of thinking things philosophically. He closes his introduction with the following distinction:

\[
\text{[i]n its original acception, meaning the completest knowledge of the universe, philosophy must include the results of all the sciences, and cannot be contrasted with the latter. It simply aims at making of science what Herbert Spencer calls a system of “completely-unified knowledge” In the more modern sense, of something contrasted with the sciences, philosophy means “metaphysics.” The older sense is the more worthy sense, and as the results of the science get more available for co-ordination, and the conditions for finding truth in different kinds of questions get more methodologically defined, we may hope that the term will revert to its original meaning. Science, metaphysics, and religion may then again form a single body of wisdom, and lend each other mutual support.}\(^94\)
\]

In this passage James provides us with two conceptions of philosophy. The modern distinction draws a dividing line between the roles of science and philosophy; whereas the philosophy of old contains no barrier between the different disciplines. From this passage, it is quite clear that James praised the philosophy of old, that he deems it as “more worthy” and longed for the day when philosophy functioned as the Spencerian system of unified knowledge.


\(^94\)James, SPP, 20.
When we consider James’s ongoing critique of “Science,” we can see that what he considered as “science”—which does not carry the dogma and bias of its capitalized brethren—is extremely sympathetic to what were then, and still now, considered by many as non-scientific, or pseudo-scientific enterprises.95 As is well known, James devoted much of his life to psychical research; Perry notes that it was “not one of his vagaries, but was central and typical.”96 Along similar lines, James was also believer and regular participant in many alternative medical practices.97 And, as is more popularly known, he was a strong advocate of mysticism and the diversity of religious belief. Thus, when his interest in fringe “sciences” are taken into account, it becomes clear that during the mid 1890s his conception of philosophy is somewhere between his early and late definitions.

Keeping in mind Bordogna’s boundary analysis, we begin to get a sense for the type of inter- and intra-disciplinary thinking that James deems appropriate for the title of “philosophy.” It is one that functions as unifier of knowledge and is capable of always seeking the alternative. We see this connection fairly clearly in his later discussion when he alludes to the idea that philosophy is more than an interdisciplinary unification of knowledge: there is something in philosophizing that stems from a deeper source.


96 Perry, Thought and Character Vol. 1, 155.

Philosophers, he writes, “find matter for puzzle and astonishment where no one else does.” Philosopher, in this sense, are individuals that are capable of challenging the status quo, that are capable of looking beyond the mainstream, or monopolized, epistemology. It is this matter of questioning the unquestionable that shall bear the most fruit when we reconsider James’s early radical empiricism and how it embraces the plurality of facts and opinions.

**Early Radical Empiricism: a Latent Image**

By rereading James’s initial description of radical empiricism within the broader context of his work in the mid to late 1890s, it becomes increasingly clear that not only is he challenging things such as objective evidence and certitude through his attack on dogmatic and monistic thinking, but we also find that a strongly pervasive theme of epistemic sensitivity that directly relates to what he calls “the spirit of inner tolerance.” According to the manifest reading, we saw how James’s new philosophy functions as a form of critique, specifically with regard to “inward clarity.” If we stick with this visual metaphor, it becomes clear that James plays with this dynamic image of clarity and obscurity insofar as he is able to showcase two perspectives at once: manifestly, we catch the heart of his methodological critique of the inward clarity of an epistemically monistic claim and how it outcasts any belief that does not fall in line with its form of “rational” thinking; latently, we can *feel* the epistemic suffering created by the ripple effects of an unchecked monistic standpoint. Whereas the manifest image is negative and rooted in critique, the latent image points toward a positive point of view that showcases how

---

James employs a variety of standpoints to argue for an open, democratic, and pluralistic marketplace of worldviews.

In the remaining pages, I shall tease out this “spirit of inner tolerance” and show how it correlates to fringe thinking, the epistemic underdog, and James’s attempt to normalize the non-normal. Not only does he defend the irrational other through the selective engagement of which types of discourse he enters, but he also attempts to legitimize the alogical other as a valid type of knowledge producer by seeking to normalize the non-normal and rationalize the irrational.

“The Spirit of Inner Tolerance”

Throughout his mid to late 1890s publications, James is hard-pressed by this issue of [in]tolerance of opinion, particularly in the year 1896. After years of attacking the dogmatic and intolerable opinions that monopolized the fields of (mental and physical) therapeutics,99 psychology, religion,100 and science,101 James suggests that the utility of his work will be best grasped in the “marketplace” that is governed by a “régime of

99 For example, see the 1895-96 “Lecture on Abnormal Psychology,” particularly the 1896 Lowell Lectures on Exceptional Mental States (ML 76). One might also look at his letters to the editor regarding the 1894 Medical Registration Act (ECR 142-150).

100 For example, see the relevant essays in The Will to Believe: “The Will to Believe,” “Is Live Worth Living?,” “The Sentiment of Rationality,” “Reflex Action & Theism,” and “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.”

101 For example, see “What Psychical Research Has Accomplished,” “The Address of the President before the Society for Psychical Research,” and “Psychical Research” in EPR. One might also include James’s criticisms of the current state of psychology, thereby incorporating PP. For a particularly good discussion of this matter, see Taylor (1996) and Cotkin (1990).
tolerance.” In the 1896 preface he singles out the intolerant scientist—or, read more broadly as all dogmatists and monizers of thought—and his/her dogmatic rejection of religion as the object of his criticism: “With all such scientists, as well as with their allies outside of science, my quarrel open lies; and I hope that my book may do something to persuade the reader of their crudity, and range him on my side.” As expressed in his “Address of the President” lecture to the Society for Psychical Research, James is defending what he calls the “personal view of life”—that is religious, ethical, poetical, teleological, emotional, and sentimental thinking—from mechanical rationalism, positivism, dogmatism, and monism.

What is critical is that this “régime” moderates against the “intolerance of Science” in both speculative and practical endeavors. This becomes clearer as we step back and look at the types of discourse that James engages during the mid-1890s. In 1894 he pragmatically defends the legitimacy and value of alternative medicine, specifically the mind-cure movement, against State sponsored advocacy of allopathic medicine. Intellectually, practically, and scientifically, James’s argues that mental faith healers are producing results and thus advocates the continued use and study of mind-cure techniques. In 1897, shortly after announcing his radical empiricism, his Ingersoll lecture

102 James, “Preface,” 8.

103 Ibid., 9.

104 William James, “Address of the President before the Society of Psychical Research,” in Essays in Psychical Research, Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 134. For a detailed discussion of this appellation and how it factors into James’s defense of religion, see Chapter Four.

105 Ibid., 136.
seeks to democratically defend the rational legitimacy of religious belief in regard to the possibility of human immortality.\textsuperscript{106}

More pronounced, however, are James’s activities of 1896. In the Lowell Lectures on “Exceptional Mental States” he argues for the normalcy of degenerative mental health by arguing that we are all cut from the same cloth. In “The Will to Believe” he rationally defends the legitimacy of faith. And, in “The Address of the President before the Society for Psychical Research” he wards off attacks by the narrow views of “Science” and tries to reinstate the “personal view of life” and its “facts of experience.”

In short, James argues that we need to be more careful about how we judge one another and how we come to view the truth of our own opinion. In the preface to \textit{The Will to Believe}, when James is talking about why he defends the religious hypothesis, he suggests an evaluative approach that is grounded in pragmatic and Darwinian thinking: he says that the “freest competition” and the “openest application to life” are the “most favorable conditions under which the survival of the fittest can proceed.”\textsuperscript{107} He maintains that this idea of unabashedly free competition is rooted in “the spirit of inner tolerance” whereby what is “inwardly clear” to one individual can and should be capable of co-existing in a moral and social framework with others. In “The Will to Believe” James is very explicit about this point:

\begin{quote}
No one of us ought to issue vetoes to the other, nor should we bandy words of abuse. We ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect one another’s mental freedom: then only shall we bring about the intellectual republic; then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless, and which is
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{106} For a detailed treatment of this topic, see Chapter Five.

\textsuperscript{107} James, “Preface,” 8.
empiricism’s glory; then only shall we live and let live, in speculative as well as in practical things.\(^\text{108}\)

The practical side of this moral, social, and epistemological tolerance is that if a fallibilistic and non-dogmatic interplay of ideas and practices were adopted, then “the outsider” need not “lie hid each under its bushel, indulged-in quietly with friends” for they would be able to “live in publicity, vying with each other…[in] the liveliest possible state of fermentation.”\(^\text{109}\)

This “spirit of inner tolerance” takes its most pronounced form in his essay, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” which is published in \textit{Talks to Teachers}. Interestingly, in the preface James makes reference to the position he advocated in \textit{The Will to Believe}. Recall that in the latter, he first describes radical empiricism as a “definite philosophical attitude,” then nicknames it radical empiricism, only to subsequently identify it with pluralism. In the preface to \textit{Talks to Teachers}, he laments that he did not make “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” more impressive. In a letter to Elizabeth Glendower Evans, he alludes to its importance for his thought.\(^\text{110}\)

Having sent her a copy, he recommends that she not bother reading the “Teacher part, which is incarnate boredom.” Instead, he explains, “I sent it to you merely that you might read the Essay on a Certain Blindness, \textit{which is really the perception on which my whole}

\(^{108}\) James, \textit{WB}, 33.

\(^{109}\) James, “Preface,” 8.

\(^{110}\) In \textit{The Correspondence of William James}, the “biographical register” lists Mrs. Evans as an “American social reformer, widow of Glendower Evans (1859-1886), a Harvard student befriended by WJ” (643). While James was quite close with Glendower, it seems that he and his wife took kindly to Mrs. Evans when her husband passed.
individualistic philosophy is based,\textsuperscript{111} In “On a Certain Blindness” James argues that we all too often fail to perceive the inner significance of the Other. The purpose of the essay is to open our eyes to this inner world, with the hope of becoming more tolerant and respectful of “alien lives and personalities.”

A careful reading of the preface to Talks to Teachers reveals a telling portrayal of the heart of James’s early radical empiricism. Similar to his comments in the preface to The Will to Believe, he anticipates how his readers and colleagues might view the piece as mere “sentimentalism.” However, according to James, it is significantly more in that “[i]t connects itself with a definite view of the world and of our moral relations to the same.”\textsuperscript{112} What is striking about this statement is how it parallels the ideas of his early radical empiricism. In The Will to Believe he speaks of a “definite philosophical attitude” and in Talks to Teachers he writes of a “definite view of the world and our moral relation to the same.”\textsuperscript{113} In both texts, James’s implies that the root cause of immoral and poor epistemic relations stem from the social problem of perspectival blindness. In both volumes, he democratically defends the outcaste and epistemological other, and is deeply concerned with matters of fact and perspective. On the connection between the two, we can see that James intertwines the perspectives of radical empiricism \textit{qua} critique and an epistemological, moral, and social pluralism. He writes:

Those who have done me the honor of reading my volume of philosophic essays will recognize that I mean the pluralistic or individualistic philosophy. According to that philosophy, the truth is too great for any one actual mind, even though that me be dubbed ‘the Absolute,’ to know the

\textsuperscript{111} James, \textit{TT}, 244.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
whole of it. The facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in. There is no point of view absolutely public and universal. Private and uncommunicable perceptions always remain over, and the worst of it is that those who look for them from the outside never know where.

The practical consequence of such a philosophy is the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality—is, at any rate, the outward tolerance of whatever is not itself intolerant…. 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.114

Fringe Sensitivity, the Epistemic Underdog, and Rationalizing the Irrational

When we utilize the “spirit of inner tolerance” as our point of departure for reading the latent content of the 1896 preface, the nature and function of James’s description of radical empiricism dramatically changes. No longer do we see it strictly as a methodological position that harps on the rationalist, or as an epistemic challenge of objective evidence and certainty. Instead, as I have argued above, it suggests that we take into account the moral and social implications of its epistemological and methodological critique. This becomes clear upon teasing out three themes of fringe sensitivity, an epistemological typology, and James’s attempt to normalize the non-normal.115

First, by drawing attention to the spirit of inner tolerance we can re-contextualize James’s early radical empiricism in light of epistemic, moral, and social concerns for what I am calling “fringe sensitivity.” We can approximate the meaning of this term by describing it as a type of locative awareness, or consciousness of epistemological

114 Ibid.

115 To be clear, the idea of “normalizing the non-normal” is one of many variations that appear in James’s 1890s writings. We can see a common feature of incorporating the outsider by the manner in which he also attempts to rationalize the irrational, logiceize the alogical, etc.
place[ment].

It functions as an awareness of the epistemic relations within a given paradigm. More specifically, fringe sensitivity is cognizant of the epistemic interactivity which takes place at the borders, or fringe, of a monolithic belief system and how it relates to minority belief.

Secondly, in continuing our manifest-latent hermeneutic strategy for interpreting the text, I want to point to an observation that James’s description of radical empiricism focuses on two epistemic types: the blind monist and the epistemic underdog. The first is the perspective that is blind to the ideals and “vital secret” of the other. It is the universalizing vision by which an individual “presume[s] to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons’ conditions or ideals.” Whether consciously or unconsciously, it is the perspective that monopolizes its own point of view by epistemologically monizing the world. A frequent by-product of seeking ever greater

It is important to note that any analysis of fringe sensitivity must be relational and context-dependent, as appearing on a sliding scale within a given epistemic framework.

This distinction between two types of individuals is perspectival. That is to say, it is conditionally dependent upon both context and content. A contemporary example of this dichotomy is illustrated by the stereotypical conflict between allopathic and naturopathic medicine. What is important to note is that from the perspective of the former, naturopathic medicine is irrational, folkloric, and unscientific; however, when the perspectives are reverse, a similar dichotomy arises insofar as the latter is inwardly blind to the rationality of the former.

William James, “On a Certain Blindness,” in Talks to Teachers on Psychology, and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals, Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).132. To an extent, a parallel may be drawn between Isaiah Berlin’s “hedgehog” and the blind monist. In The Hedgehog and the Fox, Berlin centers his analysis of Tolstoy’s philosophy of history on a famous line taken from the Greek poetry of Archilochu. “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” Berlin figuratively describes the hedgehog as those types of individuals “who relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think, and feel—a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance” (3). Isaiah Berlin, The Hedgehog and the Fox: an Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History (New York: New American Library, 1957).
unity, this singular-mindedness rules out the possibility that other points of view have gotten it right. These are the positivists, agnostics, and scientific naturalists James chastises as having dogmatically affirmed monism “as something with which all experience has go to square.”¹¹⁹ For these types of individuals, such things as “fate, chance, freedom, spontaneity, [etc.]” are not real possibilities.¹²⁰ This type of individual comes to the forefront of the text as a manifest image.

The second perspective never directly comes to the surface of the preface, but is one that lies hidden in shadow. It is the “irrational” other that is “wrong and other and outside and unincuded” from the aforementioned universalizing vision. Their plight is relegated to the epistemic fringe, existing as anomalies which function as “bare externalit[ies] and datum” to the monolithic vision. Objectified and overlooked, this perspective is exemplified by an epistemic, psychological, and social suffering: as an outcaste, these types of beliefs are deemed “irrational,” “alogical,” or simply not normal. Representatives of this type of individual range from practitioners of faith healing to psychical researchers to mystics.

It seems that whenever James exercises the radical empiricist critique—that is to say, when he challenges a blind monist type—there is always an epistemic underdog lurking at the fringe of the monolithic belief in question. According to this analysis, James’s early radical empiricism actively, democratically, and pragmatically defends their point of view as one inherently containing “real possibilities, real indeterminations, real beginnings, real ends, real evil, real crises, catastrophes, and escapes, a real God, and

¹¹⁹ James, “Preface,” 5.

¹²⁰ Exemplified by the Brooklynite of James’s “On a Certain Blindness.”
a real moral life.” We see this most clearly in his defense of religious faith, but it also surfaces in his writings and publications that address mental and physical health.

We come to see that this sensitivity and identification translate into an epistemic sympathy for the marginalized point of view due to the perceived social and psychological suffering as a result of being deemed an outcaste. Thus the third characteristic is that James positions himself such that he is capable of arguing on behalf of the outsider. Upon identifying this epistemic sensitivity, it quickly registers that James is sympathetic to the social and moral repercussions of existence on the fringe of a monolithic paradigm. When we look toward these writings, they clearly display a point of view that attempts to de-emphasize the marginality of the epistemic underdog—that is to say, James tries to rationalize the irrational, normalize the non-normal, and logicize the alogical.

Taken together, a significant percentage of his mid to late 1890s writings and lectures, to one degree or another, exhibit this structure of sympathetic identification and attempted rectification. To illustrate this more clearly, we can briefly look at a couple of examples. In the fall of 1896 James delivered the Lowell Lectures on “Exceptional Mental States.” While presenting new material on the emerging field of abnormal psychology, he understood that inquiry into the human mind “meant understanding an expansive continuum with conventional psychology on one end and abnormal psychology and psychical research on the other.” Thus, we find in the Lowell Lectures the confluence of three streams of inquiry: a continuation of conventional psychology,

\[121\]

James, “Preface,” 6.

\[122\]

Stob, Art of Popular Statement, 136.
the emergence of abnormal psychology, and the effort to legitimize the methodological concerns of psychical research. Stob remarks that James both opens and closes the lecture with an eye toward open-mindedness:

Who shall absolutely say that the morbid has no revelations about the meaning of life, that the healthy-minded view so called is all? / A certain tolerance, a certain sympathy, a certain respect... / above all a certain lack of fear seem to be the best attitude we can carry in our dealings with these regions of human nature, /And in thanking... / Let me express a hope that you go away from them with that attitude increased & confirmed.123

Concerning Stob’s remarks, I would add that such an attitude also reveals James’s own democratic, pluralistic, and radically empirical tendencies, combined with an intimate concern for the non-normal and its relationship to practical, social, and speculative affairs. Blinded to the inner significance of the other, James calls our attention to the dramatic contrast between the validity of our own experiences and that which is outside and other—whether it strikes one as poetic, in the case of Whitman, or radically different, as in the case of a medium in a trance. What matters to James is that the continuum of experience—from normal to abnormal to irrational—are legitimate facts of experience which carry a personal weight for the individual.

For our purposes there are two significant points about the Lowell Lectures that need to be discussed. First, despite James’s previous success as a Lowell lecturer, he was not requested by Augustus Lowell; rather, James, himself, suggested the lecture series believing that it was “timely and interesting...[and] had great practical and historical

importance.”124 We see, then, that these were not ideas that were forced; rather, in 1896, they were at the forefront of James’s thought. On these grounds, we can see that James is actively trying to make a difference.

Second, it is important to take note of the following characteristics. First, James makes an appeal toward an attitude of respect and tolerance—“the spirit of inner tolerance.” Second, the content of the “Exceptional Mental States” lectures treat a variety of non-normal mental phenomena, including hypnotism, automatism, hysteria, multiple personality, mediumship, witchcraft, and genius. This mixture of abnormal, psychical and extraordinary states of consciousness can be understood as an identification of the various epistemic underdogs. Finally, when taken collectively, the underlying purpose of James’s lectures is to normalize the non-normal. According to Eugene Taylor’s reconstruction, the first four lectures establish James’s “understanding of a dynamic psychology of the subconscious…[while] the final four talks show the same dynamic psychology of the subconscious…at work in the social sphere.”125 Taylor goes on to characterize the lectures as an attempt to bring together the insights from each respective field in order “…to destroy our view of untouchability surrounding the insane.” He captures the spirit of inner tolerance as follows: “Too long had morbidity been treated as something fixed, unalterable, and somehow different from the normal. Long before Freud, it was James who had said that we are of one clay with lunatics and criminals.”126


125 Taylor, Exceptional Mental States, 7.

126 Ibid., 5.
Our second example comes from James’s defense of alternative medical therapies. In 1894 James defends the alternative therapeutics, specifically the “mind-curers,” against the proposed state mandated legislation that would require medical practitioners to register and pass a series of state examinations. The point of the legislation was to root out quackery and to standardize medical practices. While there were benefits to passing this bill, doing so would further exacerbate the already problematic relations between allopathic medicine and alternative practices, and, in James’s mind, limit the range of good experimental science. In a letter to the editor of Transcript James focuses his defense on the mind-curers:

I assuredly hold no brief for any of these healers and must confess that my intellect has been unable to assimilate their theories, so far as I have heard them given. But their facts are patent and startling; and anything that interferes with the multiplication of such facts, and with our freest opportunity of observing and studying them, will, I believe be a public calamity. As in the above example, we can tease out each of the primary elements of James’s radical empiricist attitude. The here aforementioned spirit of tolerance is at play insofar as it calls attention to the fact that James appeals to the inner workings of the mind-cure worldview. Additionally, we sense that James is also trying to invoke the “régime of tolerance” by appealing to the larger social and institutional perspective.

James recognizes this point and in fact supports it wholeheartedly. Nevertheless, he felt that punishing those “vampire quacks” could be done more directly and more efficiently. He writes, “I can only reply that I sympathize most heartily with that vindictive purpose, but that a direct way must be invented. It is a poor policy to set fire to one’s house to broil mutton chop, or to pour boiling water over one’s dog to kill his fleas….” See William James, “The Medical Registration Act,” in Essays, Comments, and Reviews, Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 148.

Ibid.
whereby all parties would be democratically and pluralistically respected. From the point of view of mainstream medicine, the mind-cure movement (as well as naturopathy, homeopaths, and practitioners of hydrotherapy) is clearly sanctioned as a “fringe” belief—one which does not conform to the mainstream views of materialistic Science. As epistemic underdogs, their methods and results are dismissed as irrational and illogical. To this type of accusation, James pointedly responds:

> And whatever one may think of the narrowness of the mind-curers, their logical position is impregnable. They are proving by the most brilliant new results that the therapeutic relation may be what we can at present time describe only as a relation of one person to another person.¹²⁹

Whether or not James was successful in his appeals is irrelevant; we can see that the epistemic status of the outsider consistently came to the surface throughout the mid to late 1890s. In addition to these examples, one only has to skim the pages of his other writings to see this “definite philosophical attitude” hidden just beneath the surface. It crops up in his writings on religion, particularly in “The Will to Believe” and his Ingersoll Lecture on Human Immortality, where he democratically defends faith as a rationally respectable position. Likewise, the attitude and its epistemic and social sensitivity appear to guide his writings on psychical research where he defends the legitimacy of its methods and the validity of the diverse range of exceptional experiences.

Consistently throughout these publications James accords to the believer, the insane, and the psychic a shared epistemic suffering due to their perceived non-normal experiences as confronted by some form of monistic, or epistemically monolithic, paradigm. Given his fallibilistic tendencies, we can understand the epistemic and ethical problems that James was constantly butting up against. It is from within this epistemic

¹²⁹ Ibid.
and socially sensitive standpoint that we see how the essays of *The Will to Believe*
illustrate a “definite philosophic attitude.” What is “inward clarity” to one point of view
may easily translate into discrimination and injustice from another. For James, to deem
particular facts of experience as inessential datum, or as being meaningless and without
value, is a natural consequence of the plurality of opinion. However, to universalize this
perspective and deem it as truth is tantamount to immoral and unsound epistemology.
When considering the nature of these problems, it is best that we remind ourselves what
James makes clear in the Lowell Lectures on “Exceptional Mental States:” “[t]he only
ting that I am absolutely sure of, being the extreme complication of the facts.”\(^{130}\)

**Concluding Remarks**

I have tried to make sense of James’s vague proclamation that radical empiricism
constitutes a “definite philosophic attitude” by historically and thematically
contextualizing this standpoint within James’s 1896 lectures and publications, as well as
elsewhere in his mid to late 1890s writings. In my estimation, the merit of this
interpretation is how it helps make sense of other aspects of James’s work in the mid to
late 1890s. First, it thematically situates his early period of radical empiricism within the
historical context of his epistemic, scientific, and social concerns of the late 1890s. By
taking seriously James’s first comment about radical empiricism that it is a “definite
philosophic attitude,” we shall see in other chapters that it constitutes a connecting thread
which binds together the essays of *The Will to Believe*.

\(^{130}\) James, *ML*, 71; quoted in Stob, *Art of Popular Statement*, 139
Second, it provides a supplemental approach to understanding James’s social and epistemic concerns regarding the non-normal, particularly in terms of fringe experience, e.g., from mentally dysfunctional to religious, mystical, and psychic phenomena. It traces the initial trajectory of this socially sensitive epistemic view as it appears in his 1894 advocacy of alternative medical practices, reappearing in the 1896 Lowell Lectures, and extending throughout *The Will to Believe* essays. After *The Will to Believe* the emphasis broadens in appeal as James’s concern with the inner significance of the individual and the “régime of tolerance” develop more explicitly, appearing in the 1897 Ingersoll Lecture, in essays like “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” and “What Makes Life Significant?,” and once again in his 1901-1902 Gifford lectures, published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

Having teased out the epistemic attitude, the next chapter redirects our focus to the ways in which physiological-psychology informs his thoughts on the issue of perspectival difference. In particular, I examine the historical trajectory of James’s thinking about reflex action and how it shapes his conception of irrationality.
CHAPTER 2

EARLY RADICAL EMPIRICISM AND REFLEX ACTION:

THE “LOOP-LINE” OF EXPERIENCE

No philosophy, however, wide its sweep or deep its dive, will ever be a substitute for the tiniest experience of life.

~William James, Review of Pleasure, Pain, and Ästhetics

Introduction

In the preceding chapter I argue that James’s “definite philosophical attitude” is rooted in an epistemic sensitivity and that this awareness figures largely in his radical empiricist defense of the irrational other. This chapter examines James’s understanding of the biological grounding of perspectival difference and how he makes sense of the rationality/irrationality dichotomy from within the psycho-physiological framework of his reflex action theory. This reading stems from an insight offered by James Pawelski’s study of dynamic individualism. Pawelski suggests that one way of reading James’s work in novel ways is by appreciating the role of physiology plays in his thought:

Keeping James’s physiology (and especially his appropriation and elaboration of reflex action theory) at the center of his thinking gives us a


hermeneutic key for understanding not just his discussions of individualism, but his entire corpus in fresh and dynamic ways.\textsuperscript{133}

Pawelski goes on to argue that “[i]f it is true—as I believe—that an understanding of James’s philosophy requires an understanding of James’s psychology, I argue that it is just as true that an understanding of James’s psychology requires an understanding of James’s physiology.”\textsuperscript{134} In the pages which follow I explore the merit of Pawelski’s claim that understanding James’s philosophy requires understanding his physiology by arguing more narrowly that understanding of early radical empiricism requires an understanding of the interdisciplinary use of the psycho-physiological theory of reflex action. My contention is that the reflex action theory illustrates how his epistemic sensitivity rests upon a biological foundation and that his perspectival critique is best understood by an attunement to individual human differences. Along these lines, I suggest that the reflex action theory can provide us with a fresh and dynamic insight into the nature of his early radical empiricism as a moral and social tool for understanding the dynamics of rational and perspectival difference.

\textsuperscript{133} Pawelski, \textit{Dynamic Individualism}, xix. Pawelski develops what he calls the “Integration Thesis.” He writes that the Integration Thesis, most noticeable in the religious dimension, is characterized “as a process of unification or gradual conversion of a heterogeneous personality” and that it unifies the various dimensions of James’s post \textit{Varieties} thought (115). He maintains that “the key to the Integration Thesis is the recognition that the reflex arc plays an important role in James’s thought throughout his career and across the various domains of his writing. Although James places varying emphasis on the different parts of the reflex arc, in his later works he moves toward a more balanced integration of them” (xviii).

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., xix.
In 1881 James delivered an address at Princeton, Massachusetts, later published as “Reflex Action and Theism,” where he asserts that doctrine of reflex action is so familiar that it hardly needs explanation.\textsuperscript{135}

It means that the acts we perform are always the result of outward discharges from the nervous centre, and that these outward charges are themselves the result of impressions from the external world, carried in along one or another of our sensory nerves.\textsuperscript{136}

One of the questions that we must ask ourselves is why James felt it important to republish his 1881 “Reflex Action and Theism” article in the 1897 publication, \textit{The Will to Believe}?\textsuperscript{137} If the reflex action theory was so well understood, what advantage does he gain by discussing such a mundane theory? In order to answer this question, I divide this chapter into three sections. The first section paves the way by providing a historical overview of James’s understanding of the reflex arc and how it appears in his writings in the 1880s and 90s. In order to see the evolving significance of this idea and how it relates to his thought, I briefly highlight James’s scientific and medical education, examine his 1866-67 medical notebook, and show how he incorporates reflex action into his early teaching of physiology at Harvard. Next I provide a historical chronology of James’s

---


\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{137} In 1896 John Dewey published “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” which has been deemed as a historical turning point in the theory of reflex action. Through Dewey’s functionalist interpretation, to which he is deeply indebted to James, the theory of reflex action took a significant turn toward behavioral psychology. Thus another way of inquiring into this perspective would be to investigate what did James see in this article of his that was so important that was not discussed in Dewey’s seminal essay. John Dewey, “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” \textit{The Psychological Review}, 3:4 (July 1896): 357-370.
major statements regarding the significance of reflex action theory. This prefatory work will provide us with the basic tools to handle his reflex action writings, approximate the degree to which James favored this particular idea, and to digest his assertion that it was the most important idea that developed out of physiology.

Section two examines the interdisciplinary nature of James’s interpretation of the reflex action theory. The first segment illustrates how his physiological conception of reflex action controversially reconceived the nature of action. Next I show how he translates the tripartite pattern of the reflex arc into a psychology of self and the “loop-line” of experience. Building upon his previous theories, I then move toward his philosophical interpretation and its role in the remodeling of “the given.”

Having laid out the basic framework of James’s interdisciplinary understanding of reflex action, section three explores these ideas in connection with his early radical empiricism and how his discussion of the psycho-physiological grounding of a rational or “satisfactory” worldview can be connected to his early radical empiricist attitude.

The Significance of Physiology for James’s Thought

As James states in his 1881 address, reflex action originally referred to a set of very specific actions that illustrate the dynamic functioning of the nervous system. The history of reflex action as rooted in anatomical and physiological experimentation, as well as its nature, role, and scope in nineteenth century psychology, is long, varied and filled with controversial discoveries, experiments, and theories. While there are a variety of different generative accounts that provide the origins and history of reflex action, any significant
treatment of its historiography is beyond the scope of this project.\textsuperscript{138} In what follows I trace James’s understanding and interpretation as presented in his notebooks, lecture notes, and public writing, and in doing so, I incorporate relevant historical data as a way of contextualizing James’s thought.

\textit{James’s Medical Education: the 1866-67 Medical Notebook}

Virtually all of the James biographers provide a detailed account of his scientific and medical studies at Harvard in the 1860s. He enrolled in the Lawrence Scientific School in 1861 to study chemistry and within a year switched to comparative anatomy and physiology, working closely with noted anatomist Jeffries Wyman. Also influential in James’s education were Louis Agassiz, Asa Gray, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.\textsuperscript{139} In addition he also studied with E.H. Clarke, J.B.S. Jackson, C.E. Brown-Sequard, H. J. Bigelow, H. I. Bowditch and J.S. White, but it is relatively unclear as to the effect that the latter group had on his medical education.


\textsuperscript{139} Perhaps the best account of the influence these men had on James can be found in Paul Croce’s masterful account; see Croce, \textit{Science and Religion}, 83-149. Also see Richardson, \textit{William James}, 41-65.
In 1864 James entered Harvard’s medical school and while it only took three years to complete the M.D., he did not earn his degree until 1869. Part of the reason for the delay can be traced back to depression and several health issues.\textsuperscript{140} The other reason is that James took several sojourns, one of which carried him to the Germany for a year and a half. In Berlin James was he regularly attending courses and lectures in physiology and psychology by such figures as Emil Du Bois-Reymond and possibly Isidore Rosenthal. In fact, Richardson speculates that James was attending up to eleven lectures a week.

We may obtain a sense of James’s knowledge of the field through his correspondence at that time. In a letter dated the 15\textsuperscript{th} of June 1868 to Henry Pickering Bowditch, who later became a physiologist and colleague at Harvard, James expresses a strong knowledge of the field of physiological studies in Germany.\textsuperscript{141} Informing Bowditch that the German studies of physiology where far superior (than the French, as well as virtually everyone else at that time that was doing physiology-psychology), James recommends where and with whom Bowditch may consider to further his studies.\textsuperscript{142}

In addition to his coursework in Berlin, James expressed interest in studying under Herman von Hemholtz and Wilhelm Wundt, and even traveled to Heidelberg in June of that year. However, without letters of introduction or personal connections, he

\textsuperscript{140} For the various depressions and illnesses that James suffered from in this period, as well as later in life, see Richardson (2008) and Simon (1998). As for Richardson’s account, not only does he provide a very detailed narrative, but his treatment of this particular subject is exceptionally well indexed.

\textsuperscript{141} James to Henry Pickering Bowditch, Dresden, 15 June 1868, in Correspondence, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds. vol. 4, 1856-1877 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 318-320.

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
quickly returned to Berlin.\textsuperscript{143} Disappointed and still suffering from poor health, James remained in Berlin and systematically worked through a reading list of physiological and psychological texts that he developed prior to his Heidelberg fiasco. By the end of 1868, James returned to his medical studies at Cambridge and finally graduated with a medical degree.

As a student of science and medicine at Harvard, particularly during his studies of comparative anatomy and physiology, it is unclear how much and to what degree James was exposed to the latest findings of the reflex arc.\textsuperscript{144} It is documented that James had some formal exposure to the idea as a basic physiological function. An early source that tracks James’s introduction to the physiology of reflex action can be found in his unpublished medical notebooks. While a student at the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard Medical School, James kept detailed notes from his courses. In particular, his 1866-67 medical notebook provides us with evidence that James was introduced to the physiological study of reflex action as early as 1866.\textsuperscript{145}

\textsuperscript{143} Richardson, \textit{William James}, 93.

\textsuperscript{144} Presumably James learned about this idea in both his anatomy and physiology courses while at Harvard. It seems likely that he would have encountered this in Germany as well, but I have not yet found documents to substantiate this claim. My sense, however, is that James taught himself most of what he learned after he graduated, and began teaching and doing book reviews on notable physiology texts. Throughout his education and well after, James, a voracious reader, composed exceptionally large reading lists for physiology, psychology, philosophy, religion, etc. Several of these are contained within his diaries. Another source of relevant information for his study of physiology may be found in \textit{Index Rerum}, bMS Am 1092.9, # 4520, William James Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Interested researchers should also consult Philip J. Kowalski, “Guide to William James’s Readings,” an annotated bibliography which is available through the William James Studies website.

\textsuperscript{145} William James, 1866-67 Medical Notebook, CB 1869.42, unpublished manuscript, Rare Book Collection, Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard University.
Richardson remarks that the 1866-67 medical notebook is “dominated by physiological details, processes, and hypotheses;”\textsuperscript{146} however, without a detailed studied of the course syllabi, the textbooks and the lecturers’ notes, it is difficult to distinguish between what James was copying from the lecture and what he was freely writing of his own accord.\textsuperscript{147} The unnumbered pages, approximately ninety-nine in total, are inconsistently divided: sometimes by lecturer, sometimes by topic and occasionally by lecturer and date. For our purposes, a handful of passages are adequate to establish James’s early familiarity with the physiology of reflex action as a specific and localized reflex—one that is to be differentiated from the psychological concept.

The first relevant passage is from an undated lecture by Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard.\textsuperscript{148} James’s notes, partly written in abbreviated form, refer to specific, localized reflexes when the posterior spinal column is stimulated:

\begin{quote}
grey matter of chord not irri- / table to outer stimuli except by / when inflamed. // Postr cols extremely excitable to / produce reflex phenomena. This had / led to discovery of one of their fuctus / viz. that of producing the spread of reflex action.\textsuperscript{149}
\end{quote}

While it is impossible to tell what James took away from this lecture, it is clear that he did encounter the idea of reflex action. The notation regarding the discovery and its

\textsuperscript{146} Richardson, \textit{William James}, 86.

\textsuperscript{147} Thus far I have not been able to track down the texts that were used, let alone the titles of the courses that he took that year. Based upon the 1866-67 medical notebook it is known that he had sat in lectures given by the following notable figures: E.H. Clarke, J.B.S. Jackson, C.E. Brown-Sequard, H. J. Bigelow, H. I. Bowditch, and J.S. White.

\textsuperscript{148} Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard (1817-1894) was a French neurologist and physiologist who taught at Harvard and in Paris at the College de France. He briefly practiced medicine between teaching positions and is well known for a prolific publication record in the fields of physiology, psychopathology, and neurology.

\textsuperscript{149} James, 1866-67 Medical Notebook, n.p.
emphasis of the spread of reflex arc most likely refers to the work of Marshall Hall (1790-1857). It was in the 1830s that Hall, the pioneering nineteenth century Scottish physiologist, who is credited with developing the reflex arc concept after observing the physiological connection between sensory (afferent) nerves going into the spinal cord and motor (efferent) nerves exciting the spinal cord and traveling to the muscles. However, according to Danziger, it was Thomas Laycock’s 1845 essay, “Reflex Functions of the Brain” that “truly” set in motion the psycho-physiological movement. Whereas Hall’s conception of reflex function was specific and localized, Laycock broke from this idea and developed the reflex arc as a governing principle that guided the behavior of the lower and higher animals. According to Fearing, by the 1870s significant progress had been made detailing experiments and discoveries regarding stimulation and inhibition functions, as well as gathering more data about the physiology and functionality of the spinal cord, the cerebrum, and the nervous system in general. Characterizing the significance of the late nineteenth century discoveries, Fearing remarks that it was then that the “conception of reflex action changed…from that of a simple, invariable, and

150 John Greenwood, A Conceptual History of Psychology (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 204. In 1882, Bastian, author of The Brain as an Organ of the Mind, maintains that “the existence and mechanisms of the ‘reflex actions’ were first distinctly referred to by David Hartley in 1748; they were more definitely described by Prochaska in 1784; though it was Marshall Hall who, some fifty years later, first clearly recognized and clearly elucidated their importance” (158). In addition to this discrepancy, Kurt Danziger notes that it was “Hall (and others)” that established the reflex arc function, referencing R. D. Grangier’s 1837 publication, Observations on the Structure and Functions of the Spinal Cord. Kurt Danziger, “Mid-nineteenth century British psycho-physiology: A neglected chapter in the history of Psychology” in M. Ash & R. W. Woodward, eds., Psychology in nineteenth century thought:International cross-disciplinary perspectives. (New York: Praeger, 1982).

relatively isolated neuro-muscular phenomenon to that of a complex, highly adaptive response.”

Other passages referencing the reflex arc are discussed in terms of diagnosis and treatment. For example, James’s notes for February 6th are largely devoted to the diagnosis and treatment of paralysis, mainly dealing with the facial region. An interesting, albeit unclear, passage indicates that one of many symptoms of paralysis is that “reflexes [were] paralyzed by worms.” The surrounding context makes it unclear as to whether the paralysis and subsequent retardation of the reflexes is the result of the practice of leeching, or whether it was an effect of a parasitic worm, e.g., tapeworms. Nevertheless, for one reason or another, the young James considered it important enough to note.

Later in the same section, more remedies are proposed to treat the patient with facial paralysis. For example it is noted that “galvanism / is most efficacious, applied as soon as possible” whereas other cases were treated as follows:

acupuncture of the / muscles, the needles being left in some- / time. In other cases no benefit. The / best mode of application is to surpra & infra orbital nerves to act by reflex / action. If this be too pnfl rub / 1.2 gram of aconitine in ointment over / the spots. This does not interfere c.[cum] reflex action.”

It is unclear in this passage as to whether acupuncture needles where applied above and below the orbital nerve, or if a separate treatment of massage is implied here to stimulate reflex movements. Similar to the worm note, James deems it important to record the fact

152 Fearing, Reflex Action, 279.

153 James, 1866-67 Medical Notebook, n.p.

154 Ibid.
that aconitine, a neurotoxin that can be applied in very small dozes, does not damage the nerves enough to stunt or stop the trajectory of the reflex arc.

The last and most relevant example of James’s early physiological study of the reflex arc comes from an undated lecture delivered by Brown-Sequard on “Reflex Phenomena.” His notes read as follows:

Reflex Phenomena
action occurring in muscle/ gland, vessel, coming after exci-/tation of centripetal [afferent nerves] /

food injected to stch. produces/ salvation. Food in mouth/ produces secretion of gastric/ juices, bile + pancreatic./

salt, sugar, or chocolate in/ the mouth of some persons / provokes a secretion of / the forehead/

Mental reflex actions e.g. / memories suggested by smell /

Auricles continue to beat / when separated fm. ven- / tricles, but the latter do not. / This is a reflex action, since / the heart once set in motion / by the mere fact of muscular- / contraction. galvanically irri- / tate muscular fibres inci- / dent on ganglia wh. reflect /throught [sic] motor fibres upon / muscles. / 

Here we have evidence that possibly suggests early stages of reflex conditioning, later popularized in the 1890s by the experiments of Russian physiologist, Ivan Pavlov. Readers familiar with James’s Principles and Talks to Teachers will recognize the link between his insights into the psychology of reflex action as being greatly intertwined with the role of habit as a way of inhibiting one neural pathway by replacing it with another.

The significance of the 1866-67 medical notebook is that it documents James physiological familiarity, particularly through Brown-Sequard, of the non-tactile

\footnote{James, 1866-67 Medical Notebook, n.p.}
reflexes. What impact this may have had on his thinking, however, is not indicated in his notes or diaries. As discussed in the next section, soon after graduation James began teaching courses in anatomy and physiology. Textual evidence shows that James incorporated his research on reflex action into his classroom and exams.

*Teaching Physiology and the New Psychology at Harvard, 1870s - 1890s*

In 1872, shortly after graduating from medical school James was hired to teach physiology at Harvard and by February of 1876 he became an assistant professor of physiology. According to Skrupskelis’s impeccable notes, James’s first teaching assignment was “Natural History 3: Comparative Anatomy and Physiology;” James covered the physiology section and Thomas Dwight taught anatomy. After a successful semester of teaching, James was reappointed by Harvard but instead opted for another

156 In another example James notes the relation between reflex movement and epilepsy. More interesting, however, are the notes that treat certain parts of the brain as “seats of the will.” Readers familiar with his psychology know that he breaks from the old psychology of the will as a separate controlling faculty and defines the will in terms of attention. His notebook reads:

In every animal in hlth / a faculty exists of producing reflex movements / tickling soles of foot – irritation of skin of / penis produces *ejaculation* contractn. Of certain / muscles tc… Thus diagno by / degree we are led to look of on epilepsy as / seem an iner[?] Degree of the normal reflex / excitability of *certain parts* of nervous cen- / tres. Make a sudden noise / near a weak / person, he will jump…/ …If the reflex actn takes place on / those vessels wh. go to the parts of the / ff brain wh. are the seats of the will you / may have short fits of paralysis s [sine] unconscious- / ness. Such (Case) boy who was thus suddenly / paralyzed several times a day for 2 minutes. / In the case of weakness after the attack / this paralysis of will is prolonged a little after / the loss of consciousness. No dimm., in all / these cases, of heart beating so they are total- / ly distinct fm syncope.

sojourn in Europe. Upon returning, he resumed his teaching of Natural History 3, this time teaching the entire course by himself. Making several modifications to the course, its texts, and its title—now called “Comparative Anatomy and Physiology of Vertebrates”—James continued teaching the course until 1878. From 1879 to 1882 he embarked upon further modifications that reflected the courses transition to a voluntary elective; the course was re-titled “Physiology and Hygiene.” In addition to “Natural History 3,” James also taught “Graduate Course 18: The Relations of Physiology and Psychology” in 1875-76 and “Natural History 2: Physiological Psychology” in 1876-77.

As James turned more and more toward the new psychology, he continued to incorporate physiological elements into his teaching. For example, in “Philosophy 4: Psychology” James uses Hippolyte Taine’s *On Intelligence* and in “Philosophy 5: Psychology” he devotes the entire course to Alexander Bain’s *Mental and Moral Science*, both being texts that devote ample attention to physiological psychology.

158 James, *ML*, xxiv.

159 James’s personal library contains copies of Taine’s original French edition. See Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, *De l’Intelligence*, 2 éd. 2 Vol. (Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1870); this copy is preserved in Houghton, WJHough WJ 684.41. Presumably James used the translation for his course, see Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, *On Intelligence*. trans. T. D. Haye. 2 vols. (New York: Holt & Williams, 1871). In 1881-82 James taught “Philosophy 2: Psychology: the Human Intellect” and this course also used Taine’s *On Intelligence*.

I was fortunate to find a notebook of one of James’s students for sale on ABE.com and meet with the seller before he sold it to an undisclosed private collector. The notebook consists of approximately 120 pages of notes, part of which appear to be devoted to another course. The student’s first name, Alanzo, is identifiable, whereas the surname has faded. On the back cover of the notebook, Alanzo provides an address, which I believe refers to a dorm on campus. Thus far I have not been able to track down any information on this student. His notes, however are very legible and seem to be fairly thorough.

For our purposes, it is important to note that archival evidence shows that James incorporated the physiology of the reflex arc and psychological doctrine of reflex action into his classroom. In 1874-75 he includes the following question on one of his undergraduate exams: “What is reflex action? Give examples.” Skrupskelis explains that such questions are “not atypical.” For example, in the final examination for his 1878-79 undergraduate psychology course that focuses on Spencer’s *Principles of Psychology*, James poses the following question: “What is the general distinction between actions performed by lower centres and actions performed by hemispheres?” And, once again, in a more advanced course James asked his students “Can actions accompanied by intelligence be conceived under the form of reflex action?”

In addition to the questions that James posed on exams regarding reflex action, we also have archival documentation that his courses were “heavily physiological.” The question, then, is to what degree did James incorporate the study of reflex action in his


161 James, *ML*, xxvi. It seems as though the course was originally titled “Natural History 3: Comparative Anatomy and Physiology,” however it was later renamed “Comparative Anatomy and Physiology of Vertebrates.”

162 Skrupskelis, Introduction, xxvi.

163 Ibid., xxx.
class room? George Albert Burdett took James’s 1880-1881 “Philosophy 5” course which studied Bain’s *Mental and Moral Science.* According to Skrupskelis,

> [t]he notebook shows that the course was heavily physiological, although as it developed, James spent more and more time discussing subjects such as will, spontaneity, feelings, perception, memory, and dreams. At one point Burdett records a suggestive sequence of questions: “1. What test do we commonly use to decide whether intelligence is present in phenomena or not? 2. Do actions from the lower centers conform to this test? 3. If so, can they be excluded from the mind?”

One can extrapolate both the answers and the reasoning behind these questions from James’s 1878 Lowell Lecture, “The Brain and the Mind.” In a draft of Lecture Two, James writes: “the sensorial stimulus in an intelligent creature does not discharge directly into the muscles as it seems to in the machine-like animal, but acts by first suggesting considerations.” An answer to his question about intelligence is one which differentiates actions based upon choice. Reflex actions, taken in a general physiological sense as actions of the lower centers, are automatic responses to stimuli and thus are classified as “machine-like.” The question then, most likely, refers to the idea that

164 George Albert Burdett, Philosophy 5 Notebook, HUC 8880.370.5, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University.


167 Ibid., 36.

168 In 1890-91 James Taught “Philosophy 1: General Introduction to Philosophy” and twice he refers to “reflex action” in his notes. The bulk of these notes appear to be lists, with the occasional paragraph description. Both instances are references to Descartes. To a degree we can see that what follows are references to Descartes and his idea of “undelatio reflexa,” or reflexive action, which refers to a type of movement that is “not supervised or determined by the will” (Duane Schultz, A *History of Modern Psychology*, 3rd ed [New York: Academic Press, 1981], 22). The significance of Descartes’s idea is
intelligence is present if an alternative response is possible. Despite reflex acts not conforming to this test, it remains important in James’s study of psychology insofar as reflex action is deeply intertwined with consciousness, habits, and attention.

Similar to James’s own notebooks from his days as a student, his lecture notes do not provide us with much significant information. Instead they merely illustrate the point that James routinely incorporated the notion of reflex action into his classroom. That he decided to included reflex action oriented questions on his exams suggests that he considered it an important idea and that students should be able to grasp its most basic elements. When we look toward the wider views that James develops in the 1870s, a better source of information are his early physiological book reviews and critical notices.\(^{169}\) However, given the narrow focus of the maturation of James’s understanding that it divides actions into two categories (concurrent with his dualistic metaphysics): voluntary and involuntary (see Fearing, *Reflex Action*, 286). The former are constituted by free acts of the mind while the latter are derived from the machine-like reflexes of the body. While this was a great stride forward, it was merely an intellectual distinction and thus lacked physiological evidence and repeated experimentation.

The first reference appears amongst the various one word notes and short phrases that presumably served as key talking points for James’s lecture regarding Descartes’s thinking and achievements. Thus “Physiology / Reflex action / Brain pneal gla” is sandwiched between “Optic refractions. Perception” and “Meterology, magnets” (James, *ML*, 193; bMS Am 1092.9 #4455a ). The second instance occurs after James quotes and summarizes Descartes’s argument for the existence of God: “What we conceive clearly and distinctly to belong to the nature, essence, or immutable and true form of a thing, may be said or affirmed with the verity of that thing. Existence belongs thus to God’s essence; therefore he exists.”(Ibid., 194). Immediately following James emphasizes “Body a machine. Reflex action” (Ibid.).

\(^{169}\) Another early source of information which expresses James’s understanding of the theory of reflex action are his book reviews of the 1870s through the 1880s, as well as an occasionally notice or letter to an editor. In 1874 he reviewed William B. Carpenter’s *Principles of Mental Physiology*. There he points out that Carpenter’s theory is controversial, noting that it is rivaled by a theory which “maintains that *all* brain action is reflex action” (James, *ECR*, 272). William James, Review of *Principles of Mental Physiology, with Their Applications to the Training and Discipline of the Mind and the
of the general significance of physiology, I limit the discussion to his 1877 review, “The Mind and the Brain,” and a letter to the editor that James published in 1876 in *The Nation*. Both texts, published in the mid 1870s, illustrate that a marked change takes place with respect to his approach toward the field of physiology in general and that it, as we shall see in the next section, has important ramifications for his appreciation of the importance of the reflex action theory.


James’s 1880 review of *The Brain as an Organ of Mind* is more revealing in that it makes several telling remarks. First, James raises a point about the lack of depth and scope of facts regarding the relations of the brain and the mind and implicitly criticizes the author, H. Charlton Bastian, as being one of the “authorities on the subject“ whom is probably on a “false scent.” James then offers a suggestion that “the man who will do the most service to brain physiology to-day will be not he who scoops most cerebral material from dogs and monkeys, but he who makes most guesses, simple guesses, different from any made hitherto, as to what may possibly be the elementary forms of functioning of this mysterious organ” (*ECR* 372). In an about face, James turns around and praise Bastian’s for his treatment of reflex action and unconscious cognition. William James, Review of *The Brain as an Organ of Mind, International Scientific Series. Vol. xxix*, by H. Charlton Bastian (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1880) in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 371-373.

In and of themselves these reviews provide the reader with rich details about James’s views on physiology as well as the state of the field in the latter half of the nineteenth century. For a thorough discussion of these and other reviews, see Paul Croce, “Physiology as the AnteChamber to Metaphysics: The Young William James’s Hope for a Philosophical Psychology,” *History of Psychology*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1999): 302-323; also see Croce (1999), Bordogna (2008), and the corresponding notes provided in *ECR*.  

60
As early as the late 1860s James caught wind of the emerging “new psychology” and became convinced that much would come of the “border ground of physiology and psychology.” Carrette captures the spirit of this conviction when he describes physiology as a “live strand” of James’s thought even after he moves into a more robust philosophical and religious orientation. Carrette maintains that “the key tone in James’s work in the 1870s and 1880s is that physiology is offering something of enormous value and that it demands a change in “method.” This idea of a change in method stems from a letter to editor that James wrote for The Nation and which has been posthumously called, “The Teaching of Philosophy in Our Colleges.”

In this letter James criticizes the faddish nature of scholarship and asserts that the “educational essence” of philosophy—bear in mind that this is the very same article wherein James defines philosophy as “the possession of mental perspective” and “the habit of always seeing an alternative”—is the “quickening of the spirit to its problems.” Reading between the lines, we can already sense that James is developing a distaste for the dogmatic manner in which philosophers “hawk” about ideas and books that they feel are of “tremendous import,” despite the fact that they do not understand these ideas, nor have they actually read the book. James explains that whether or not these “new developments” stick is not what is important: what matters is that they signal

---

170 Richardson, William James, 87.

171 Carrette, Hidden Religious Imagination, 115. Carrette’s citation is mistaken: this passage actually comes from James’s “The Teaching of Philosophy in Our Colleges,” not “Brute and Human Intellect.” The page number, however, is correct.

172 James, “Teaching of Philosophy,” 5.

173 Ibid. 7
a “change in the method and personnel of philosophic study.” His reasoning is that to criticize these “new developments” at all, much less attend to the problems they confront, “one must have gone through a thorough physiological training.”

James quickly points out that the Leipzig chair of philosophy is none other than Wilhelm Wundt, “the eminent physiologist.”

One of the important elements that James articulates again and again is that if one wants to know psychology, one must first understand the basics of nerve-physiology. Two years later we find him expressing this very same sentiment in his three part review, “The Mind and the Brain.” As a way of substantiating his comments, James provides a little “how-to” guide to learn physiology—the attentive reader will note that this point is repeated, in essence, in Principles:

We earnestly advise everyone who wants a smattering of science in this deeply interesting field to set about it in the only solid way. Procure two or three sheep’s brains and dissect them, with the aid of one of the shorter manuals of human anatomy, such as Holden’s. Then read the account of the nervous centres in Carpenter’s, Dalton’s, Flint’s, or Foster’s Physiology. Finally read Ferrier. This will give distinct ideas about facts to start with; after which the reader may indulge in Maudsley’s pantheistic developments…Dr. Carpenter’s “Mental Physiology,” and in “popular” writings in general, with some sense of when he is on terra firma and

174 Ibid.

175 Ibid.

176 James, PP Vol. I, 24. “The reader will find in H.N Martin’s Human Body, in G.T. Ladd’s Physiological Psychology, and in all the other standard Anatomies and Physiologies, a mass of information which we must regard as preliminary and take for granted in the present work…[footnoted] Nothing is easier than to familiarize one’s self with the mammalian brain. Get a sheep’s head, a small saw, chisel, scalpel and forceps (all three [sic.] can best be had from a surgical-instrument maker) and unravel its parts either by the aid of a human dissecting book, such as Holden’s…, or by the specific directions ad hoc given in such books as Foster and Langley’s Practical Physiology (Macmillan), or Morrell’s Comparative Anatomy, and Guide to Dissection.”
when he is not. The student who begins with popular literature never properly knows where he is.\(^{177}\)

By 1881, when James penned “Reflex Action and Theism,” his thought had matured and he transitions away from reporting about reflex action as discussed in the field of physiology and begins to take his own distinct psychological and philosophical stance. Skrupskelis comments that within James’s thinking there is a “constant readiness to draw philosophical conclusions from physiological data.”\(^ {178}\) To hint at the dynamic versatility of James’s thinking, Croce argues that James “viewed scientific [i.e. physiological] knowledge as a way to understand philosophical questions more deeply.”\(^ {179}\) As illustrated in the previous section, James’s confidence regarding the significance of the reflex action theory (and physiology in general) escalates.

\textit{Reflex Action Writings: 1880s through the 1890s}^{180}

In 1881 James gave an address to the Unitarian Ministers’ Institute at Princeton, Massachussetts, entitled “Reflex Action and Theism.” Prefacing his lecture with a few remarks on the state of affairs in physiology, James comments that “the latest breeze

\(^{177}\) James, \textit{ECR}, 332. Originally published as William James, “The Mind and the Brain,” \textit{Nation}, 24 (June 14, 1877, 355-356 (unsigned). In this publication James reviews three 1877 publications: Ferrier’s \textit{The Functions of the Brain}, Maudsley’s \textit{The Physiology of the Mind}, and Luys’s \textit{Le Cerveau et ses fonctions}. 

\(^{178}\) Skrupskelis, “Introduction,” xxxvi.


\(^{180}\) None of the statements that occur in James’s book reviews, notices, etc. are nearly as bold as what I am calling his reflex action writings. Similarly, I have yet to find strong statements that can culled from his personal correspondence.
from the physiological horizon need not necessarily be the most important one…. This being the case, I know that you will justify me if I fall back on a doctrine which is fundamental and well established rather than novel.”

He then introduces the doctrine of reflex action and provides his audience with a fresh examination of its most basic components and its consequences for theology. Stressing the triadic structure of the nervous system and that both perception and cognition are subservient to volition, James reiterates the significance of the reflex action theory:

I am sure I am not wrong in stating this result as one of the fundamental conclusions to which the entire drift of modern physiological investigation sweeps us. If asked what great contribution physiology has made to psychology of late years, I am sure every competent authority will reply that her influence has in no way be so weighty as in the copious illustration, verification, and consolidation of this broad, general point of view.

The following year, in 1882, James published “Rationality, Activity and Faith” in The Princeton Review. Speaking toward his interpretation of the functional and practical character of consciousness, James exclaims: “It is far too little recognized how entirely the intellect is built up of practical interests. The theory of Evolution is beginning to do very good service by its reduction of all mentality to the type of reflex action…. Six years later, in 1888, in an article entitled, “What the Will Effects,” James once again comments on the importance of the reflex action theory. He writes:

---

181 James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 91.

182 Ibid., 92.


184 Ibid., 65.
The only conception at the same time renovating and fundamental with
which Biology has enriched Psychology, the only essential point in which
“the new Psychology” is an advance upon the old, is, it seems to me, the
very general, and by this time very familiar notion, that all our activity
belongs at bottom to the type of reflex action, and that all our
consciousness accompanies a chain of events which the first was an
incoming current in some sensory nerve, and of which the last will be a
discharge into some muscle, blood-vessel, or gland.\textsuperscript{185}

What is significant is that James’s comments go further than his 1881 and 1882
remarks: previously considered the doctrine of reflex action was the “great physiological
contribution,” six years later he deems it as “the only essential point” which differentiates
the new psychology from the old. In part, the difference between the two schools of
thought can be reduced to the conception of the will: “old” psychology believed that the
will was an organ or faculty which was responsible for action. In \textit{Talks to Teachers} James
explains that “[t]his doctrine was long ago exploded by the discovery of the phenomena
of reflex action…”\textsuperscript{186}

Two years later James once again comments on the significance of the reflex
action theory in his magnum opus \textit{Principles}. Explaining that all action is of the reflex
kind, that it is merely a matter of degree, not type, James goes on to make the following
statement: “The conception of \textit{all} action as conforming to this type is the fundamental
conception of modern nerve-physiology.”\textsuperscript{187} It is important to note that this passage is a

\textsuperscript{185}William James, “What the Will Effects,” in \textit{Essays in Psychology}, Frederick H.
Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard

\textsuperscript{186}James, \textit{TT}, 101. Of his published writings—at least those that were turned into
books—\textit{TT} is the last publication that \textit{explicitly} mentions the reflex arc or the
doctrine of reflex action.

\textsuperscript{187}James, \textit{PP}, 35; William James, \textit{Psychology: a Briefer Course}, Frederick H. Burkhardt,
Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,
1984), 98.
repeated verbatim two years later in *Psychology: a Briefer Course*, an undergraduate
textbook version of *Principles.* This signifies that two years after the publication of
*Principles*, James continued to see the fitness of his comments regarding the reflex action
theory as the quintessential theory in the field of nerve-physiology.

In addition to various comments given throughout the 1880s and 90s regarding
the significance of the reflex action theory, James felt that the reflex arc concept, when
translated into functionalist psychological terms, was significant enough to provide the
basic structure of *Principles*. As Wild, Ramsey, and Pawelski have all pointed out,
readers familiar with the basic anatomy of the reflex action theory will recognize that the
second volume is loosely based upon the triadic structure of the reflex action theory.
Ramsey provides the best general account by describing the structure of *Principles* as
being divided into three parts:

In my analysis the *Principles* is divided as follows: part one, in which
James disposes of certain preliminary matter, covers chaps. 1 through 7;
part two, which contains the pivotal work on the stream of consciousness,
comprises chaps. 8 through 16; and part three, which takes up the entire
second volume (chaps. 17-28), presents James’s image of the self in terms
of a reflex arc.  

---

188 Frederick H. Burkhardt, the General Editor of *The Works of William James*, notes that
Harvard students referred to *PBC* as “Jimmy” in order to distinguish it from the larger,
more engaged work, *PP*, which was known as “James.” Burkhardt, Frederick H.,
Foreward to *Psychology, Briefer Course*, Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and

Pawelski provides a more systematic breakdown in terms of each of the three departments: chapters 17-21 explores department One, chapter 22 treats department Two, and chapters 23 through 26 handle department Three.\(^{190}\)

While James is not explicit about his structuring of *Principles* on the reflex theory, he does make this claim in *Psychology: A Briefer Course*. In a section entitled “The Division of Psychology” he provides us with a direct insight into the role that the reflex action theory serves in his psychological thinking.

So far as possible, then, we are to study states of consciousness in correlation with their probably neural conditions. Now the nervous system is well understood to be nothing but a machine for receiving impressions and discharging reactions to the individual and his kind—so much of physiology the reader will surely know. Anatomically, therefore, the nervous system falls into three main divisions, comprising---

1) The fibres which carry in currents:
2) The organs of central redirection of them; and
3) The fibres which carry them out.

Functionally, we have sensation, central reflection, and motion, to correspond to these anatomical divisions. In Psychology we may divide our work according to a similar scheme, and treat successively of three fundamental conscious processes and their conditions. The first will be Sensation; the second will be Cerebration or Intellection; the third will be the Tendency to Action. Much vagueness results from this division, but it has practical conveniences for such a book as this, and they may be allowed to prevail over whatever objections may be urged.\(^{191}\)

Tracing James’s Physiological, Psychological, and Philosophical Interpretation of Reflex Action

By citing James’s comments about the significance of reflex action, we can see that this concept was of central importance to his psychological thought. A brief survey of the

\(^{190}\) Pawelski, *Dynamic Individualism*, 38. Preceding both of these claims, Wild suggests that “[t]he whole latter part of the *Principles* is organized in accordance with this scheme” (Wild, *Radical Empiricism*, 214).

\(^{191}\) James, *PBC*, 14.
secondary literature on reflex action reveals that scholastic commentary echoes James’s sentiment. Fearing opens his hallmark study *Reflex Action: a Study in the History of Physiological Psychology* with the following assertion: “[t]he reflex arc concept has come to play a rôle in modern psychological and physiological theorizing which is comparable with the part played by the fundamental explanatory principles of physics and chemistry.”192 Similarly, Franklin’s *A Short History of Physiology* confirms this statement when he writes that “[t]he chief advance of neurophysiology in the nineteenth century was the study of reflex action….“193 Now that we have a general sense of the importance of reflex action for James’s thinking, I turn to a more detailed examination of his evolving interpretation.

*Reflex Action and Physiology: Action Reclassified*

To this day, the categorization of what constitutes reflex action is, in some circles, still controversial.194 In part, it depends upon how terms like “voluntary,” “involuntary,”


193 Franklin, *Short History of Physiology*, 127.

194 Fearing lays it out best by pointing out the problem areas: “The uncertainty and confusion regarding the definition and delimitation of the phenomena include under the term reflex action may be summarized as follows:

(1) The nature of the so-called voluntary actions is largely undetermined. The use of the term “voluntary” as contrasted with “involuntary” is a source of confusion unless objective criteria are available. In this connection the question may be raised as to whether “involuntary” actions are ever wholly so—at least they are modified by the action of mechanisms to which “consciousness is adjunct.” The voluntary-involuntary dichotomy is of questionable value.

(2) Learned or habitual actions bear some of the characteristics of the traditional reflex act. They are unconscious and invariable. They have been called “acquired reflexes” or “brain reflexes.” The word “automatic” has been used in connection with these reactions, but this
“consciousness,” etc., are defined. The 1892 *Dictionary of Psychological Medicine* defines reflex action as follows: “As a rule the term ‘reflex action’ is confined to those motor or other results which are immediate, and which impress us as being comparatively mechanical….”\(^{195}\) Baldwin’s 1901 *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* is more specific and thorough. Composed by Baldwin and Principal C. Lloyd Morgan of University College, Bristol, the entry begins by stating that reflex action is a “[k]inesiodic response to aesthesodic stimuli of a regular kind without the intervention of volition or necessary participation of consciousness” and continues in a more popular vein by redefining it as “a non-voluntary reaction taking place in the body from stimulation to the brain or other nerve centres.”\(^{196}\) In each of these definitions there is a clear division between consciousness-based actions and the immediate, involuntary actions that are characterized as mechanical. Furthermore, both definitions give the impression of referencing the traditional notion of the reflex arc as being an action/reaction of the lower nervous centres.

When we look at James’s 1881 definition, we get a slightly different take. In “Reflex Action and Theism” he provides us with a more generalized explanation:

---

word issued by some psychologists with reference to certain vegetative functions.

(3) The term reflex is frequently used with reference to all types of response involving afferent-efferent conduction in the nervous system” (Fearing, Reflex Actions, 7).


It means that the acts we perform are always the result of outward discharges from the nervous centre, and that these outward charges are themselves the result of impressions from the external world, carried in along one or another of our sensory nerves. Applied at first to only a portion of our acts, this conception has ended by being generalized more and more, so that now most physiologists tell us that every action whatever, even the most deliberately weighed and calculated, does, so far as its organic conditions go, follow the reflex type.\footnote{James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 91-92.}

In this definition, it is clear that James is going beyond the former definitions insofar as he maintains that “every action” can be understood as reflex action. This means that not only the lower functions, but also the higher functions are considered to be of the reflex type.

In “The Functions of the Brain,” an early introductory chapter of Principles, James distinguishes between three different types of actions that physiologically and psychologically explain the interactivity between external and internal environments. “Reflex acts” are involuntary responses to stimuli, such as the blinking of the eye when a foreign particle touches it. “Semi-reflex act” are described as actions into which both “instinct and volition enter upon equal terms.” A classic case of semi-reflex action is breathing. In normal circumstances, we do not think about the process as it occurs seemingly by itself; however, it is a bodily function that we frequently control. The last category, “voluntary action,” refers to acts that have no instinctive component, but are the result of conscious decision.\footnote{James, PP Vol. I, 25-27.}

After defining these three types of examples, James walks the reader through the most relevant discoveries of the past twenty years regarding anatomy and physiology. In order to illustrate the functions of the nerve-centres, he explains in great detail the

\footnote{James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 91-92.}

\footnote{James, PP Vol. I, 25-27.}
vivisection of a frog and what happens when the brain’s connection to the spinal cord is severed. Devoting time to both the lower centres, which act based upon stimulation only, and to the cerebral hemispheres, which act based upon perceptions and conceptions, James familiarizes the reader with the basic patterning of the reflex arc structure. Having illustrated the “general preliminary conception of modern nerve-physiology” he draws the following conclusion.

In the ‘loop-line’ [i.e. sensation, cognition, movement] along which the memories and ideas of the distant are supposed to lie, the action, so far as it is a physical process, must be interpreted after the type of the action in the lower centers. If regarded here as a reflex process, it must be reflex there as well. The current in both places runs out into the muscles only after it has first run in; but whilst the path by which it runs out is determined in the lower centres by reflections few and fixed amongst the cell-arrangements, in the hemispheres the reflections are many and instable. This, it will be seen, is only a difference of degree and not of kind, and does not change the reflex type. The conception of all action as conforming to this type is the fundamental conception of modern nerve-physiology.199

199 Ibid., 35. For example, Dewey’s Psychology defines reflex action as “the direct and immediate deflection of a stimulus having a sense origin into a motor channel….Reflex action, as such, is a physiological process, but it is of importance here because it forms the physical basis of sensuous impulse. The reflex action, in itself, involves no consciousness, while the sensuous impulse does; but the union of sensory and motor nerves, whether in the spinal cord or brain, affords the mechanism by which any feeling may discharge, and thus relieve the pressure.” (349-350). John Dewey, Psychology, 3rd revised ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893).


Lewes, however, seems to be on James’s side. His Problems of Life and Mind, does not, as far as I can tell, provide an actual definition of reflex action. Instead, he presumes that the reader is familiar with the terms based upon how he immediately jumps into a discussion of why he rejects the older view which is “purely mechanical,” in favor of a view whereby “Reflex Action is involved in all sensorial reactions, and on this grounds comes within the range of Psychology, which is the science of the facts of Sentience” (Vol II, 93). George Henry Lewes, Problems of Life and Mind, 3rd series. (London: Trübner & Co., 1890).
Bordogna observes that not only did James adopt a generalized physiological conception of the reflex arc that covers the lower, animalistic “reactions,” but that he also “stretched” the notion of reflex-action to cover the higher processes of the mind.200 As quoted previously, James did express this point as early as 1881 and again in the 1888 article, “What the Will Effects,” by referring to the familiarity of the idea that “all our activity belong at bottom to the type of reflex action.”201 However, his 1890 statement in Principles is much more explicit. He once again reiterates that reflex action is the fundamental concept of modern nerve-physiology, but he goes further to state that all actions fit the reflex arc pattern of (1) incoming stimuli, (2) movement of the nerve centres, and end with (3) an outward discharge. Over and against the opinion of many, James maintains that the difference between all types of actions is one of degree: that is to say, there is no fundamental separation between different kinds of action.202

Reflex Action and Psychology: The “Loop-line” of Experience
James’s expansion of the reflex arc into that of the psychological theory of reflex action marks a significant break from the standard physiological interpretation. Extrapolating from the starting point that all action is reflex action, it becomes clear that James is


201 James, EPsych, 217; Quoted in Bordogna, William James at the Boundaries, 183.

launching a new psychological interpretation of reflex action—one which stresses a functionalist interpretation of consciousness.

Previously I discussed how James’s understanding and interpretation had matured in comparison to his student days at Harvard. By 1881, when he delivers “Reflex Action and Theism” to the Unitarian Ministers’ Institute, his confidence regarding the significance of reflex action had peaked. In “Reflex Action and Theism” he presents this new version of reflex action, psychologically reinterpreted. Pawelski points out the immediate parallels between the reflex arc and the tripartite functions of the mind as follows:

Applied to psychology, the reflex action model describes three basic functions of the human mind: perception, conception, and volition. Perception involves the introduction of novelty into the mind by means of incoming sensations; conception is the mental process of translating perceptual data into concepts; and volition is the means for determining the appropriate response to novelty.

When James announces his new conception his commentary on the revised theory of reflex action is comparatively short, yet very direct. Quoted in parts, I illustrate how

203 This was also reprinted in James, PP Vol. 2, 1231-33.

204 Pawelski, Dynamic Individualism, xvii. Pawelski continues saying that “It is also important to note in this context that the reflex action model, in effect, postulates electrochemical neural current as a physiological concomitant to James’s psychological stream of consciousness. This physiological reflex arc allows for a dynamic account of how the psychological stream of consciousness can be both continuous and selective.” For a detailed discussion of the role and function of each department, see Pawelski, Dynamic Individualism, Chapter 2.

205 In a review of W. Lauder Lindsay’s Mind in the Lower Animals James makes the following comment: “For our own part, however, we deem ten pages of good analytic work to be more valuable than ten volumes of anecdotes, however curious or marvelous” William James, review of Mind in the Lower Animals, W. Lauder Lindsay, 2 vols., in Essays, Comments, and Reviews, Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 364.
James is coming into his own by providing his audience with a succinct conception of reflex action within the rubric of his functionalist psychology.

First, James explains how this important theory has been watered down through continual application. Distilling the reflex arc into a more generalized theory of reflex action, we are able to understand the functional activity that takes place when any action is performed, whether by the lower or the higher centres.

Applied at first to only a portion of our actions, this conception has ended by being generalized more and more, so that now most physiologists tell us that every action whatever, even the most deliberately weighed and calculated, does, so far as its organic conditions go, follow the reflex type. There is not one which cannot be remotely, if not immediately, traced to an origin in some incoming impression of sense. There is no impression of sense which, unless inhibited by some other stronger one, does not immediately or remotely express itself in action of some kind... \(^\text{206}\)

James goes on to point out that when we “stretch” the generalized theory, we can extrapolate a generic portrait of experience which follows the same structural patterning.

The structural unit of the nervous system is in fact a triad, neither of whose elements has any independent existence. The sensory impression exists only for the sake of awakening the central process of reflection, and the central process of reflection exists only for the sake of calling forth the final act. All action is thus re-action upon the outer world…. The Willing department of our nature, in short, dominates both the conceiving department and the feeling department; or, in plainer English, perception and thinking are only there for behavior’s sake. \(^\text{207}\)

In this passage he draws our attention to the triadic structure and patterning of the three departments of self: perception, conception and volition. He describes it as a “loop-line” whereby all actions, or outward discharges, are always firmly rooted in sensory stimulation, having passed along its way, the middle department of mind.

\(^{206}\) James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 91-92.

\(^{207}\) Ibid.
Having explained the basic structure and patterning of the three departments, James notes that they function in a very particular way. Here, he makes two important distinctions. First is the idea that the three departments are interdependent. The point that James is making is that the malfunction of one department causes pathological problems for the system at large.\textsuperscript{208} As discussed below, this element of his reflex action theory is more significant when we consider the social and ethical implications of its epistemic translation into the constitutive elements of a satisfactory/unsatisfactory worldview.

Second, as illustrated in the above quote, both perception and conception are subservient to volition. In “Rationality, Activity, and Faith” he comments on the idea that the lower centres are action-oriented and that it is no different with the higher centres, despite the subtle complexities of human consciousness. “Cognition,” he purports, “in short, is incomplete until discharged in act.”\textsuperscript{209} What is crucial to understand is that just as the lower centre, so too with the higher centre. He explains that it does not matter how complex or simple an idea is, it always will be subservient to volition, for example, even “when the cosmos in its totality is the object offered to consciousness, the relation is in no whit altered.”\textsuperscript{210} Capitalizing on this explication, Pawelski summaries James’s psychological and biological insight that “the structure of our being, following the

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{210} Ibid.
general reflex-type, is such that the neural currents generated by sensations and modified by thoughts have movement as their natural consequence.”

Wishing to make the consequences perfectly clear to his audience, James emphasizes his point in regard to his teleological conception of consciousness as a way of hammering home the significance of the theory of reflex action. He writes:

I am not quite sure that its full scope is grasped even by those who have most zealously promulgated it. I am not sure, for example, that all physiologists see that it commits them to regarding the mind as an essentially teleological mechanism. I mean by this that the conceiving or theorizing faculty—the mind’s middle department—functions *exclusively for the sake of ends*....

Through this idea we catch a glimpse of James’s interpretation of Darwinian philosophy and the theory of adaptation. Bordogna points out that James’s re-contextualization of the reflex arc model serves as a fundamental component of his functionalist psychology and draws connections between its relationship to his evolutionary conception of consciousness, his teleological conception of mind, and the importance of selective attention. She explains that:

James developed this approach to cognition in the 1870s [and 1880s], when he was working out his conception of consciousness as a selective agent and his evolutionary view of the knower as an organism willfully acting in and responding to the environment on the basis of subjective needs, purposes and interests.

---

211 Pawelski, *Dynamic Individualism*, 50.

212 James, “Rationality, Activity and Faith,” 66.

213 Bordogna, “The Psychology and Physiology of Temperament,” 17. Bordogna also observes that this translation into higher functioning also includes “a person’s reaction to the universe at large” insofar as temperament serves as a “mediator in reflex-action process.” She explains that this was not unique to James, but was a unifying feature of many *fin de siècle* psychologies.

214 Ibid., 22.
Timothy Sprigge further elaborates upon the connection between the selectivity of consciousness, James’s fifth characteristic of consciousness, by stating that “its function is to present biologically suitable goals to the organism and to steer it towards them. As such it helps organisms to survive and has therefore been sustained and developed by natural selection.”\(^{215}\) The basic idea is that when the triadic structure of reflex action is translated into the psychological “loop-line” of experience, human consciousness is actively engaged in-the-world, unlike the passive conception of Locke’s \textit{tabula rosa}.\(^{216}\) Turning toward the final installment of James’s revisionist account of the reflex action theory, we see how he correlates reflex activity as a fundamental part of constituting a rational worldview.

\textit{Reflex Action and Philosophy, Part I: “the Given”}

Having established the foundational elements of the psychological interpretation of reflex action, James entreats his audience to follow him while he speculates about the consequences of this theory and “whether its influence may not extend far beyond the limits of psychology.”\(^{217}\) He poses this question so as to position himself to make the argument that the human mind is hardwired for theism. While this is an interesting argument in its own right, our interests go no further than what James calls the “relations of the doctrine of reflex action.”\(^{218}\)


\(^{216}\) Bordogna, “Psychology and Physiology of Temperament,” 17.

\(^{217}\) James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 93.

\(^{218}\) Ibid.
James returns to the reflex action theory to elaborate once more on the implications that one commits to when adopting his revisionist account. He begins by explaining his previous point about the teleological nature of mind and that one of its essential functions is to act as “a transformer of the world of our impressions into a totally different world,—the world of our conception; and the transformation is effected in the interests of our volitional nature, and for no other purpose whatsoever.” This idea of the mind as transformer of our world becomes more clear once we grasp the relations of reflex action as per his discussion of the remodeling of “the given.”

The term “the given,” or “givenness,” has a rich philosophical history, particularly within the last hundred years of American philosophy. The basic idea harkens back to Ancient Greek philosophy and the metaphysics of Plato. Traditionally, the given is understood as a relationship between the perceiving subject and his/her environment. At the epistemic level, the agent is thought to passively receive data (variously interpreted throughout philosophical history as ideas, impressions, experience, etc.) from the object: the presentation of which is known as the given. While the intellectual history of the given is a fascinating narrative, it is beyond the scope of our present interests: instead we will limit ourselves to an internal discussion of the given as it appears throughout James’s work. For now, we can reasonably entertain the idea that the given may be pursued

219 Ibid., 94-95.

220 Recommended reading on the given: John Wild, “The Concept of the Given in Contemporary Philosophy—its Origins and Limits,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 1:1 (1940): 70-82; Wilfrid Sellar’s, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in Science, Perception and Reality (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1991); Colin Koopman, Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). Koopman argues for a view of “givenism” as understood through practice that avoids the failures of previous waves of pragmatism, that is by excessive reliance on either experience-centric (e.g. classical pragmatism) or
along vary diverse lines of inquiry: empirically, epistemologically, metaphysically, phenomenologically, physiologically, psychologically, spiritually, etc.

Like most major ideas, James addresses the notion of the given from a variety of different angles, each perspective being dependent upon its situated context. To illustrate this point, I will show three different ways in which James confronts the issue of the given. In *Principles* James approaches the given from the physiological-psychologist point of view. First, he deems the given as a plenum:

…reality exists as a plenum. All its parts are cotemporaneous, each is as real as any other, and each as essential for making the whole just what it is and nothing else. But we can neither experience it nor think this plenum. What we experience, what comes before us, is a chaos of fragmentary impressions interrupting each other; what we think is an abstract system of hypothetical data and laws.\(^{221}\)

Here the given is addressed as an empirical given, one which is presented to our sense faculties. Yet, James notes, due to the chaotic nature of the given, he maintains that “we have no organ or faculty to appreciate the simply given order.”\(^{222}\) At the same time, however, James also provides his readers with an alternative perspective in *Principles.*

---

\(^{221}\) James, *PP* Vol. 2, 1231.

\(^{222}\) In *PP* James footnotes a passage from his “Reflex Action and Theism” article which contains this assertion, see James, *WB*, 95.
Taking the given as primordial reality, we can interpret it as “chaotic sensations” or as a “given space-time order.”

In his 1895 presidential address before the American Psychological Association, published as “The Knowing of Things Together,” James problematizes the division between grammatical subject and object, arguing that the separation between objects [the given] and the subject is but “two names for one indivisible fact which, properly named, is the datum, the phenomenon, or the experience.” While the article was originally published in a psychology journal, its philosophical focus ranges between the epistemic and metaphysical status of the given with the bulk of emphasis laid on the side of subjectivity.

Much later, in a flurry of articles written between 1904 and 1905, James returns to the notion of the given and examines its epistemic and ontological aspects through his mature radical empiricist stance, paying particular attention to the notion of “pure experience.” In “Does Consciousness Exist?” he continues to explore the given as an onto-epistemic chaos which problematicizes the reigning metaphysics of Cartesian subject-object dualism:

223 Seigfried poses this contradiction as a means of addressing his mature radical empiricism and its doctrine of relations, see Seigfried, Chaos and Context, Ch 2 and 3, especially page 27.

This world [the world of concepts], just like the world of percepts, comes to us at first as a chaos of experiences, but lines of order get traced out. We find that any bit of it which we may cut out as an example is connected with distinct groups of associates, just as our perceptual experiences are, that these associates link themselves with it by different relations, and that one forms the inner history of a person, while the other acts as an impersonal 'objective' world, either spatial and temporal, or else merely logical or mathematical, or otherwise 'ideal'.

As we can see in the three passages James rarely approaches the same subject matter from the exact same position; rather, he seems to be always working new angles and further developing his thought. As I argue below, these historical and thematic differences of contextual emphasis have far reaching ramifications for James’s revisionist account of the reflex action theory in terms of the light that they shed on the radical empiricist attitude. Moreover, when coupled with his pluralism and radical empiricist critique, it becomes a powerful tool for defending minority standpoints from the universalizing vision of the blind monist.

Reflex Action and Philosophy, Part II: Remodeling “the Given”

From a natural-history or evolutionary point of view, James explains, the basic idea of the reflex action theory of mind is that three interdependent departments (perception, conception, and volition) are rooted in a dynamic interaction with the world. Before moving into his argument that the reflex action theory naturally leads to theism, he

---

225 James, *ERE*, 9-10; And again in “How Two Minds Can Know One Thing” he writes that “Experiences come on an enormous scale, and if we take them all together, they come in a chaos of incommensurable relations that we cannot straighten out. We have to abstract different groups of them, and handle these separately if we are to talk of them at all” (William James, “How Two Minds Can Know One Thing,” in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds. [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976], 65-66).
pauses in the beginning of the lecture to elucidate an oft overlooked, but essential feature of the reflex theory of mind, and there introduces his conception of the given:

It [the mind] is a transformer of the world of our impressions into a totally different world—the world of our conception; and the transformation is effected in the interests of our volitional nature, and for no other purpose whatsoever. Destroy the volitional nature, the definite subjective purposes, preferences, fondnesses for certain effects, forms, orders, and not the slightest motive would remain for the brute order of our experience to be remodeled at all. But, as we have the elaborate volitional constitution we do have, the remodeling must be effected; there is no escape. The world’s contents are given to each of us in an order so foreign to our subjective interests that we can hardly by an effort of the imagination picture to ourselves what it is like.  

The point that James is articulating here is that reflex action theory of mind is teleologically driven. More specifically, that it transforms perception in such a way so as ensure that actions follow. While his focus is on the epistemic activity of the mind and the role that subjective interests play in the performance of action, he also discloses a secondary point in regard to the epistemological object. Our point of departure begins by examining this notion of the given and the process of remodeling it.

James lays out his conception of the given, or what he calls the “brute order of our experience,” and explicitly states its foreignness. A few paragraphs later he describes it as a “chaos” and maintains that the real order of the world is one of “collateral contemporaneity.” He writes that “the real world as it is given objectively at this

---

226 James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 94-95.

227 Ibid., 95-96. For an epistemological and metaphysical assessment of chaos in James’s work see Seigfried, Chaos and Context, particularly chapters One and Two; also, see Frederick Ruf, The Creation of Chaos: William James and the Stylistic Making of a Disorderly World (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), which is the first book to address the writings style of James, and which predominantly focuses on providing a stylistic interpretation of chaos from PP through VRE.
moment is the sum total of all beings and events now.”" From the previous chapter’s discussion on perspectival limitations, it suggests that James is speaking very practically when he talks about the objectivity of the given. His point is that the empirically given, as “foreign” and “chaotic,” is too much for one point of view to handle. We have no all-seeing eye, instead we have evolved with a finite means of perception that is necessarily partial and one-sided. We have eyes to register visual content and ears to perceive sound, but we have no organ or faculty for appreciating the given; instead, our complex interaction with the given is distributed amongst three different departments: perception, conception, and volition. We must each distinguish our own point of view in order to makes sense of our world of experience.

James captures this point in “Reflex Action and Theism” when he says that we must “remodel” the given: it is not an option, but a necessary biological and psychological function. He describes the process of “remodeling” in such a way that best fits the individual’s practical concerns and needs:

We have to break that order altogether—and by picking out from it the items which concern us, and connecting them with others far away, which we say ‘belong’ with them, we are able to make out definite threads of sequence and tendency; to foresee particular liabilities and get ready for them; and to enjoy simplicity and harmony in place of what was chaos….229

228 James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 95-96. Readers familiar with James’s mature radical empiricism will recognize this language as akin to how he describes his notion of pure experience. Yet, I must remind you, as of 1881 when “Reflex Action and Theism” was original produced, he had not yet developed this perspective, nor the language associated with it. It may well be the case that James recognized the problems involved in his initial treatment of the given. Moreover, we can note a distinct difference in James’s concerns when he treats the subject of pure experience: in ERE, one of his central points of focus is the myth of consciousness. In PP James describes the nature of reality as “overflowing” and nearly fifteen years later in “A World of Pure Experience” he describes experience “grows by its edges” (James, ERE, 42).

229 Ibid.
The process of remodeling the given is a function of reflex action. As James points out in *Principles* and more clearly in *Talks to Teachers*, the processional or dynamic activity of the reflex action theory of mind functions as a feedback loop through which we develop habits, attitudes, and dispositions which guide our interest and attention, thus altering the way that we perceive, conceive, and will. Recalling the contextual nature of reflex action and that conception, for James, is teleologically oriented, it is easy to see how epistemic and metaphysical problems arise when attempting to address the “objective” status of the given. However, in the context of “Reflex Action and Theism,” this is not the point for James.

After his brief digression on the given, James invokes his perspectival criticism: if the process of remodeling functions as an affirmation of a particular practical worldview, it also acts as a denial, or negation, of another point of view. In “Reflex Action and Theism” he hints that this process is what is taking place through the remodeling of the given:

> …[w]e break [the order of the world, i.e. the given] into histories, and we break it into arts, and we break it into sciences; and then we begin to feel at home. *We make ten thousand separate serial orders of it, and on any one of these we react as though the others did not exist.* We discover among its various parts relations that were never given to sense at all (mathematical relations, tangents, squares, and roots and logarithmic functions), and out of an infinite number of these we call certain ones essential and lawgiving, and ignore the rest. Essential these relations are, but only *for our purpose*, the other relations being just as real and present as they.  

---

230 While I do not think it to be an accurate reading of James, this is the heart of Dewey’s critique of James’s reflex arc. While Dewey does not come out and say that he is correcting James’s interpretation, he does cite James’s “familiar child-candle” example from *PP*. The basic argument is that James’s account depicts a static conception of the reflex arc—one likened to a photograph—whereas Dewey’s theory is more dynamic, like a motion picture.

231 James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 96 (emphasis added).
While this quote is rich and deeply textured with all kinds of bridging concepts to James’s other work, the point we need to focus on is that he calls attention to the non-teleologized objects of thought, or the parts which do not conform to a particular point of view. The basic idea is such that the teleological nature of consciousness actively interprets the given based upon the idiosyncratic interests of the individual. By drawing attention to the non-teleologized aspects of the given, James is pointing toward parts of experience that are overlooked and/or deemed unimportant. However, given the perspectival limits of human perception, it calls into question the very manner in which an individual remodels the given based upon individualized, idiosyncratic interests. From any designated point of view, the essential nature of relations functions in such a way that they plow a path for the individual to get along within the world. It enables the individual as perceiver, conceiver, and actor to reconcile the past with the present and to act as if the present will fluidly mix with the future. What is essential to remember is that while this web of relations which forms the foundation of a worldview are biased, or teleologically selected, from amongst all the elements of the chaotic given, the other, non-teleologized relations are “just as real and present.”232 In short, James’s contention is such that when we reconstruct the “order of the world” we need to be cognizant of the fact that our remodeling of it is necessarily partial to our own proclivities and that what is essential

---

232 In his famous “Stream of Consciousness” chapter of PP, James explains the selectivity of perception and how we assign values based upon our selective interests. The most straightforward example he uses is looking at a table-top. From one point of view it is square, while from other perspectives its shape registers as two obtuse angle and two acute angles. We assign the “real” shape of the table-top to be square, yet this is but one of an infinite number of perspectives. Though equally real and present, we have a tendency to prioritize one point of view over another.
from one point of view does not necessarily carry the same weight and value within another.

Reflex Action and Radical Empiricism

Up to this point, each of the previous quotes on the given that were originally written in “Reflex Action and Theism” were also reprinted in a footnote in Principles. From this point forward, we need to take note of the fact that James did not excise the following discussion of the given from the 1897 republication of “Reflex Action and Theism.” A significant feature of my argument hinges on the idea that in the preface to The Will to Believe James’s concerns with the given turn a new corner. When we look carefully at how he treats the given in the preface (and in the text) it is clear that what he is pursuing does not require technical epistemic discussions of the ontological relations between the subject and object, much less a technical discussion of the doctrine of [conjunctive/disjunctive] relations, nor how two consciousnesses can know one thing. Instead, the recontextualization of incorporating “Reflex Action and Theism” into a

233 For a good study of these two aspects of James’s mature radical empiricism and its connection to PP, see Seigfried (1978, 1990). Also, it is important to note that at the time of writing the 1896 preface, James seems to have been working through similar epistemic and ontological problems in a course he was teaching. However, in the manner that I attend to James’s early radical empiricism, there does not appear to be any significant cross-over between his 1895-1896 notes on “The Feelings” and his announcement of radical empiricism in late 1896. In this case, we can see that these ideas or approaches are still actively present in James’s thinking; however, the lack of textual evidence suggests that these particular themes are not directly involved in his WB writings. In the opposite direction, for a greater appreciation of the development and evolution of James’s metaphysics of experience as expressed by his mature radical empiricism, Lamberth (1999) fleshes out several connecting threads between “The Feelings” and James’s mature standpoint.
collection of essays that “illustrate” James’s early radical empiricism, reveals a new emphasis of the given as having strong moral and social implications.

While the treatment of the given as presented in “Reflex Action and Theism” appears to be only a slight departure from what he incorporates into Principles, there are several stark differences. First is the fact that what was republished in Principles is only a partial account of what is provided in “Reflex Action and Theism;” it stops at the idea of the non-teleologized object and suggests that “simple conception and prevision are subjective ends.” Second, when “Reflex Action and Theism” is published alongside of the other essays of The Will to Believe, it is repackaged by the content of the 1896 preface. Along these lines, I am suggesting, thirdly, the fact that James republishes the article as a whole signifies that it he deems it still relevant—even after Dewey publishes his seminal essay “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology”—in some shape or form.

Radical Empiricism, “The Given,” and Rationality

To begin discussing the relationship between James’s early radical empiricism and his treatment of the given, it should be noted that the idea that all affirmation necessarily results in some form of negation is at the heart of the perspectival critique that he offers when he initially describes his early radical empiricism. In the 1896 preface he explains that no matter how great a philosopher (or a philosophy) might be at describing the world, it always leaves something out—“there still remains the opacity of the finite facts as merely given, with most of their peculiarities mutually unmediated and unexplained.”234 This, again, is where we left off with James’s philosophical discussion

234 James, “Preface,” 6.
of the reflex action theory. As one continues reading “Reflex Action and Theism” it is noted that he offers one final qualification in regard to the consequences of his new theory.

Returning to the basic outline of James’s “Reflex Action and Theism” lecture, we see that he develops a third theme of reflex action: its relation to rationality. Having discussed his teleological interpretation of the triadic structure and function of the nervous system and that all actions are reflex actions, James moves on to speak about the remodeling of the given by way of discussing the functionality of a rational/irrational worldview.

He begins his explication through a circumnavigation of the traditional boundaries of rationality by talking in terms of satisfaction: “[w]hether true or false, any view of the universe which shall completely satisfy the mind must obey the mind’s own imposing, must at least let the mind be the umpire to decide whether it be fit to be called a rational universe or not.”

First, it is clear by this statement that when James is considering the qualifications of what makes something rational, he is not appealing to an external, or objective, standard. Rather, he approaches the question of rationality from an internal, or psychological, perspective, on the one hand, and a functionalist perspective, on the other.

Readers of *The Will to Believe* will recognize that James’s treatment of rationality in “The Sentiment of Rationality”—the preceding essay—straddles the line between

---

235 The first two interpretations of reflex action, e.g. the first being the re-conception that all actions are of the reflex type, while the second interpretation addresses the triadic structure and function of the nervous system and the teleological nature of conception are reprinted in *PP*, see pgs 1231-33. The third component, what I am calling the loop-line view of the universe, is not reprinted in *PP*.

subjectivity and objectivity by drawing from both perspectives. That is to say, he offers a perspective which attends to the idiosyncratic nature of the individual while also respecting the requirements of collective, or social, agreement.

Additionally, as pointed out in the previous chapter, it is clear that James lends a sympathetic ear toward things and perspectives that have been deemed “irrational” by the blind monist; his writings display a marked capacity for thinking counter-culturally insofar as he champions the epistemic underdog. While James leans more closely to the subjective perspective, what he does not do, however, is provide a framework that enables any and all perspectives to be considered rational:

> Not any nature of things which may seem to be will also seem to be *ipso facto* rational; and if it do[es] not seem rational, it will afflict the mind with a ceaseless uneasiness, till it be formulated or interpreted in some other and more congenial way.\(^{237}\)

What is particularly interesting here is that James is establishing an internal arbiter of rationality, one that is based upon the triadic structure of reflex action. For him, rationality is not decided in terms of alignment or correspondence to an ideal type or by adherence to strict logical principles. Instead, it is relational, historical, and psycho-physiologically dependent.\(^{238}\) He explains the intimate connection between reflex action and rationality in the following way: “[a]ll three departments of the mind alike have a vote in the matter, and that no conception [of rationality] will pass muster which violates

\(^{237}\) James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 100.

\(^{238}\) A detailed discussion of rationality within James’s work is beyond the scope of this project. Also, like many other ideas, his treatment of this topic varies by context. What is says in \(P\) is going to be different from what he surmises in \(VRE, PP, PU\), etc.
any of their essential modes of activity, or which leaves them without a chance to work.”

When discussing this view of rationality, it is important to remember that James is talking about a person’s total view of the universe, one which is based upon the loop-line experience of the triadic structure of the self. To a degree he will generalize the standpoint of rationality, comparing and contrasting views, such as theism, materialism, agnosticism, etc, but as can be gleamed from his description it is meant to serve at the individual level. In either perspective, it is critical that we understand that James is not advocating an objective standard by which we may evaluate and judge the “rationality” of another perspective. As gathered from our discussion of the perspectival critique in the last chapter, an overtly simplified objective standard is extremely problematic given that any human perspective is necessarily limited and biased. Instead, the text suggests that he is examining the internal perspective of rationality in order to see what it looks like from a particular perspective.

For James the reflex action theory of mind serves as a functionalist and idiosyncratic criteria for rationality and the sustainability of a satisfactory worldview. He captures this idea when he explains to his audience how irrationality is determined for the individual:

Either it has dropped out of its net some of our impressions of sense—what we call the facts of nature, or it has left the theoretic and defining department with a lot of inconsistencies and unmediated transitions on its hands; or else, finally, it has left some one or more of our fundamental

James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 100.

Rather than delve into the detailed personal dimension of particular people, James continues this discussion at the level of –isms with the hope of navigating some of the more challenging divisions that separate competing schools of thought.
active and emotional powers with no object outside of themselves to react-
on or to live for. Any one of these defects is fatal to its complete
success.\textsuperscript{241}

The idea is that in order for something to qualify as rational, it must consist of a free
flowing quality that is capable of successfully traveling the “loop-line” of experience.
Fluidity, in this metaphor, refers to the ease of transferability between departments, as
well as between subjectivity and objectivity.\textsuperscript{242}

First, something may be considered internally irrational if it neglects to
incorporate the facts of experience and matters of perception. It is considered rational,
therefore, so long as it flows with perceptual experience and the accumulation of facts.
In regard to percepts, as we saw above, the teleological nature of consciousness as
structured by the individual’s power of selection and attention illustrates a contextualist
approach to perceptual relations. This is also the case with his treatment of the various
facts of experience. As discussed throughout this dissertation, James is extremely flexible
in his categorization of facts; this is certainly the case with regard to his keen awareness
of the existence of “fringe facts.” His statement that “the facts and worths of life need
many cognizers to take them in” serves as a pointed reminder of his democratic and
pluralistic view of the world.\textsuperscript{243} Taken together, it is not difficult to see that certain types
of the rationality/irrationality divide will always be at cross-purposes: the fluidity of the
stream of experience contains many different currents and eddies.

\textsuperscript{241} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{242} This is most important for department two. The second criterion of retaining
coherency of an “idiosyncratic narrative” needs to be understood in a soft sense. What I
mean by this is that the coherency must equally attend to both subjective and objective
aspects.

\textsuperscript{243} James, \textit{TT}, 4.
The second criterion of rationality is that it maintains a coherent idiosyncratic narrative. Once again, we see that James is adopting a contextualist approach insofar as the ideas and elements that introducing jarring, or disruptive, qualities that destabilize the continuity of experience may be considered a fatal defect for one perspective, but not necessarily another. In “The Sentiment of Rationality” James hammers this duality home when he writes about the diversity of rational fitness: “it is almost certain that personal temperament will here make itself felt, and that although all men will insist on being spoken to by the universe in some way, few will insist on being spoken to in just the same way.” Irrespective of how we epistemically, metaphysically, or morally characterize the world of our experience, the idea of inwardly clarity reveals that someone is always over-looking something, or someone, regardless of how significant or minute.

The third qualification is that new data must be capable of inciting action and corroborating the preceding conception of the world. Whether immediate or remote, direct or indirect, we must re-act or respond to the incoming current which flows between departments. As he states in “The Sentiment of Rationality” the circuit is corroborated or refuted by the idea from which it flowed. This action, or consequence centered-orientation, anticipates what he will later develop as a pragmatist theory of meaning and truth. The point is that in order to determine whether or not one’s perceptions and conceptions are rational is to simply act upon them.

\[244\] James, “Sentiment of Rationality,” 75.

\[245\] Ibid., 86.
To summarize these points a worldview is satisfactory, if and only if, the three department of mind are dynamically and actively engaged in the world, while also fluidly interacting with one another. Each department, he reminds us, must be able to perform its essential task. When one department fails, the other two are there to pick up the pieces. Speaking to an audience of ministers, James suggests an example of a broken worldview that will capture their attention.

This only is certain, that the theoretic faculty lives between two fires which never give her rest, and make her incessantly revise her formulations. If she sinks into a premature, short-sighted, and idolatrous theism, in comes department Number One with its batter of facts of sense, and dislodges her from her dogmatic repose. If she lazily subside into equilibrium with the same facts of sense viewed in their simple mechanical outwardness, up starts the practical reason with its demands, and makes that couch a bed of thorns. From generation to generation thus it goes—now a movement of reception from without, now one of expansion from within; department Number Two always worked to death, yet never excused from taking the most responsible part in the arrangement. To-day, a crop of new facts; to-morrow, a flowering of new motives—the theoretic faculty always having to effect the transition, and life growing withal so complex and subtle and immense that her powers of conceiving are almost ruptured with the strain.²⁴⁶

Beyond providing us with the details of the inner workings of the three departments, this passage presents to us an idealistic version of how worldviews, in James’s opinion, should function: an individual is to always be dynamically engaging the world, not back sliding into routine habit and dogma. From this point of view, we get a clearer sense of James’s engagement with religion and religious experience insofar as he seems to be advocating that the former is not a static enterprise that is meant to be blindly followed. Instead, religion and things deemed religious are interactive insofar as they are

²⁴⁶ James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 102.
shaped by the biological, historical, political, scientific and socio-cultural landscape just as much as they are informed by individual lived experience.

Seigfried observes that James’s treatment of rationality “in its fullest sense is based upon his reconstruction of ‘the reflex-action theory of mind.’”247 She captures the dynamic element of rationality though a reconstruction of what she calls James’s “genealogy of rationality” by bringing together the dominant themes of his evolutionary, fallibilistic, melioristic, and pragmatic point of view.

The method is genealogical insofar as it assumes that the present configuration of what we take to be rational is the result of our whole past history as beings who have gradually evolved, not only physically but mentally. This includes all the false starts, dead ends, and accidental branching in one direction rather than another. Therefore, our present beliefs contain errors as well as truths and one way of distinguishing between them is to evaluate the desirability of the outcome of acting on them. All our understanding takes place over time. Acknowledging our temporality means recognizing that we can only correct errors from the standpoint of the understanding we have achieved up to now, and therefore all our beliefs are in principle revisable, even if such revisions are practically very difficult.248

As implied in Seigfried’s account, James’s reworking of the doctrine of reflex action represents a dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment, the individual and the community, and the individual and herself. Through the interplay of three levels of reflex action and the three levels of relations, we can begin to fathom the complex intricacies of James’s pluralism and his conception of (ir)rational worldviews.


248 Ibid., 385.
Concluding Remarks: the Reality of Relations

All of this has gone a long way in order to reach an understanding of the physiological and psychological grounding of James’s radical empiricist sensitivity to the epistemic underdog and the depth of his commitment to a genuinely democratic pluralism. My purpose is to show that the epistemic attitude accounts for the respectability of difference at the epistemic, moral and social levels, while the doctrine of reflex action suggests a psycho-physiological model whereby we can recognize difference as grounded in the basic structures of human experience. My argument focuses on James’s interdisciplinary interpretation of the doctrine of reflex action and how it captures the dynamism of pluralistic thinking, his critique of perspectival difference, and his willingness to defend the epistemic underdog. Taken in conjunction with his radical empiricist attitude and the “spirit of inner tolerance,” this psycho-physiological reading suggests a new emphasis as to the meaning of “the reality of relations” and how James conceives of the facts of experience.249

In presenting his revisionist account of the physiology of the reflex arc model I have reconstructed three inter-related conceptions of James’s “loop-line” of experience:

249 Throughout his writings, both public and private, James was keenly aware of the reality of relations. Often scholars note the metaphysical or technical epistemic features of this phrase, thereby inadvertently subverting its social (and/or political) dimension. For example, see Seigfried (1978) or Lamberth (1999). Recently, however, a growing number of scholars have taken an interest in James’s radical empiricism by critically re-examining its socio-political aspects. See Deborah Coon, “Courtship with Anarchy: The Socio-Political Foundations of William James’s Pragmatism“ (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1988); Eric MacGilvray, “Pluralism in the Thought of William James,” The Good Society, 15:3 (2006), 15-18; Scott Philip Segrest, America and the Political Philosophy of Common Sense (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009); Paul Stob, “Pragmatism, Experience, and William James’s Politics of Blindness,” Philosophy and Rhetoric, 44:3 (2011), 227-249; and, Alexander Livingston, “Excited Subjects: William James and the Politics of Radical Empiricism,” Theory & Event, 15:4 (2012), n.p.
(1) how all actions are reconceived under the rubric of reflex action; (2) that when he translates it into a psychological theory of mind, it takes on a teleological dimension that accounts for differences and distinctions of the idiosyncrasies of the individual’s historical and psychological contextuality; and (3) that this opens up a regulative function wherein the reflex action theory accounts for the (ir)rationality of a particular worldview.

Taken collectively, James’s early radical empiricism draws upon this account in order to illustrate why he is willing to defend the epistemic other, much less critique the blind monist. The point is that when we consider the “inward clarity” of a worldview, the relations which constitute its (ir)rationality are very real for that individual, regardless of what an outsider determines in stark opposition. That is to say, James takes seriously the “finite facts as merely given” which are “unmediated and unexplained” from one point of view, because it is likely that they are mediated and explained from an alternative point of view.\(^\text{250}\) In this manner, his revisionist account of the reflex action theory of mind seeks to physiological and psychologically recover the negative, the alogical, and the so-called irrational by showing that what is a “bare externality and datum” to one person is “mere fact and givenness” to another.\(^\text{251}\)

Every worldview necessarily requires a dynamic, continuous, and idiosyncratic remodeling of the given and that despite the claims that are made by the blind monist, no perspective is infallible and absolute. Translated into a biological framework, all epistemic claims and all psycho-physiological remodelings of the given are necessarily limited. \textit{In abstracto}, any irrational point of view can be made into a rational one, it just requires a particular context in order to understand its foreignness. As James remarks in

\(^{250}\) James, “Preface,” 6.

\(^{251}\) Ibid.
“The Will to Believe” “living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider.” In concreto, the essential difference between rationality and irrationality is that a worldview that is constituted by the former is a world in which the individual can act upon real relations as they perceive and conceive them; whereas a worldview that is constituted by the latter is a world in which individual actions are without fruit. In this respect, James’s inclination is to not judge a worldview by its origins, that is to say what constitutes its (ir)rationality, but by its consequences: what kind of actions does this “irrational” worldview lead to.

As I have tried to make clear, one of James’s interests in irrationality is that he is driven by the idea of making real differences for real people; on my view he is not credulously defending every form of irrationalism. As I have illustrated in the previous chapter, James’s epistemic sensitivity is drawn to the social and psychological suffering that comes with being an epistemic outsider. When it comes to defending the epistemic underdog, he is not endorsing a particular belief system as correct—in point of fact, he

252 James, “The Will to Believe,” 32.

253 On the one hand, when it comes to the issue of particular religious beliefs—for example, as constituted by what the next chapter discusses in terms of James’s interest in and engagement with “spooky” pluralism—it is critical to keep in mind that he routinely exhibits the requisite critical faculties for drawing important distinctions between “obscure and exceptional phenomena” and fraudulent behavior. A cursory survey of James’s writings on psychical research illustrate that he always strove to embody the practices of what Bordogna calls “good science and good philosophy.” More striking is his personal correspondence that touches upon investigations that were deemed fraudulent. On the other hand, this, of course, opens up a moral quandary insofar as it requires a discussion of what constitutes socially acceptable and/or legally permitted behavior. In many respects issues such as this can be solved by merely acting upon the conception. However, this issue is more complex when there are situations in which one person’s belief may led to the harm and suffering of another. Given the historical nature of this study and the fact that I am not attempting to make use of James’s early radical empiricism as a way of addressing contemporary theory I do not address this issue.
strongly disagrees on a personal level with many of the standpoints that he is defending—
; rather, all that he wants to do is to epistemically enable it by giving it a fighting chance.

Irrespective of how we epistemically, metaphysically, or morally characterize the
world of our experience, the idea of inwardly clarity reveals that someone is always over-
looking something, or someone, regardless of how significant or minute. As we shall see
more clearly in the conclusion of Chapter Four and the discussion of James’s pragmatic
and melioristic conception of religion, he is endorsing the vitality of the marketplace.

If religious hypotheses about the universe be in order at all, then the active
faiths of individuals in them, freely expressing themselves in life, are the
experimental tests by which they are verified, and the only means by
which their truth or falsehood can be wrought out. The truest scientific
hypothesis is that which, as we say, “works” best; and it can be no
otherwise with religious hypotheses.\textsuperscript{254}

The point that James is making is that supposed “irrational” worldviews will not last long
due to self-destruction. However, until that time when we can falsify with demonstrable
certainty, James words function as a clarion call for recognizing, respecting, and
celebrating diversity. Differences of worldviews, differences of facts, and differences of
experience, these are not for James mere matters of intellectual opinion; rather, they are
grounded in the biological structures of the “loop-line” of human experience.

\textsuperscript{254} James, “Preface,” 7.
CHAPTER 3

HETERODOX FACTS AND RATIONALITIES: THE “SPOOKY” SIDE OF PLURALISM

“The great field for new discoveries,” said a scientific friend to me the other day, “is always the Unclassified Residuum.” Round about the accredited and orderly facts of every science there ever floats a sort of dust-cloud of exceptional observations, of occurrences minute and irregular, and seldom met with, which it always proves less easy to attend to than to ignore.

~ William James, “The Hidden Self” 255 ~

Introduction

Looking toward the secondary literature, it is widely attested that the three pillars of James's thought are pluralism, pragmatism, and radical empiricism. 256 Of each of these topics there is no dearth of literature. Nevertheless, the triadic structure of his philosophy has not been exhausted: every year articles, books, and chapters are published that put forward new insights while critically evaluating the vast body of Jamesian studies. What


256 It is still controversial as to how one might order these categories in terms of the primacy of importance to James’s thought. After his death he was most commonly interpreted as a pragmatist. Whereas Perry (1935) maintained that James was first and foremost a philosopher and seemed to advocate equal emphasis on his pragmatic and radical empiricist thinking, it was not until the late 1970s that McDermott argued for the primacy of James’s radical empiricism. With the help of scholars like Wild (1969), Seigfried (1978, 1999), Lamberth (1999) and many, many others, this has remained one of the more mainstream views.
seems to be lacking, however, is a treatment of what has been called the “spooky” side of James’s thought and how it relates to his pluralism.  

The term “spooky” as a description of a peculiar side of James’s thinking first arises in Gale’s article that treats Dewey’s naturalization of James. In this essay Gale never goes into the gritty detail of what really constitutes James’s spooky side. Instead, he finds it sufficient to point out this limitation of Dewey’s interpretation of James. He writes:

Dewey’s attempted ontological naturalizing of James fails to address the overall spookiness of Principles, as well as the extreme spookiness of The Varieties of Religious Experience and A Pluralistic Universe, in regard to both its metaphysics and treatment of important psychological topics, such as the self and paranormal phenomena.257

What is gathered from the essay is that Gale’s notion of spookiness mainly refers to James’s penchant for panpsychism in connection with the self and psychical phenomena. While Gale does address these points from the standpoint of James’s philosophy, there is no discussion of the historical, cultural, or religious background that informed these ideas. As Skrupskelis once remarked, it is “here more than anywhere else James leaves the several ivory towers in which he dwelt and approaches an underworld of tricksters, rogues, charlatans, adventuresses.”258

In the opening lines of “The Hidden Self” James writes about a group of irregular phenomena—a “sort of dust-cloud of exceptional observations”—that lingers in a space just beyond the fringe of the mainstream epistemic, metaphysical, and religious


paradigm. Unwanted and untouched by the orthodox fields of medicine, philosophy, physiology, psychology, religion, science, and theology, this “unclassified residuum” finds a home in the “‘dark matter” of James’s intellectual universe. While this topic has been broached in the biographies and through various individual studies, it appears that little concern is expressed in regard to how the spooky side of James’s thinking is connected to the larger pattern of his pluralistic writings. That is to say, should one conduct a survey of the various approaches towards James’s pluralism, there exists no extended treatment of his regular engagement and theoretic assessment of the “unclassified residuum” and how it informs his pluralistic worldview. In response, this chapter serves as an entry point for those unfamiliar with this side of James’s thought: my contention is that more mainstream awareness needs to be raised not only in terms of how dedicated James was to the exploration and scientific examination of facts and experience(s) that lay beyond the epistemological norm, but also to the degree which this type of thinking informs his writings in other fields.

As a means of illustrating this view, the chapter opens with a general overview of James’s pluralism and an assessment of how his penchant for the unorthodox reflects a deep and abiding interest in heterodox facts and rationality. Next I briefly discuss James’s career as a psychical researcher and reflect on the ways in which it informs his philosophical thinking.

In order to make a case for the dark underbelly of James’s pluralism, particularly that which is reflected in his 1890s publications, I devote the remaining sections to Spiritualism, psychical research, and the Mind-Cure movement as a way of selectively

———

capturing his engagement with experiences beyond the epistemological and social norm. First, I focus on James’s positive engagement with psychical research and Spiritualism. After a general introduction to nineteenth century American Spiritualism and psychical research, I discuss James’s earliest encounters with Spiritualism. The next section provides a general survey of the so-called “Mind-Cure movement,” his first- and second-hand experiences with it in the 1880s, and why he problematizes it as an inquiry for psychical research. Lest we get the impression that James uncritically accepted all forms of inquiry, I argue in the final section that we must approach this topic with caution and precision, otherwise we lose sight of the rationale behind his “spooky” interests.

Defending the “Spooky:” Heterodox Facts and Rationalities

When we consider the question of classification, James's pluralism spans the definitional divide. At different stages in his career he alternated between epistemic, moral, and metaphysical musings, each venture carrying with it its own set of moral, philosophical, psychological, socio-political, and religious implications. By 1901 Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* defines “pluralism” metaphysically as a "the theory that reality consists in a plurality or multiplicity of distinct beings." At that time, however, James was already exploring its epistemological, moral, religious, and social dimensions. Dewey recognizes this much when he attributes to James the increasing popularity of the idea. He writes that “James has probably done more than

---

anyone else to give [pluralism] currency, in his *Will to Believe* (see Preface in particular).”

The question we must ask is what type of pluralism was James advocating when he composed the preface to *The Will to Believe*? My contention is that when we look toward the historical context of James’s work in the 1890s, and in this case, also the 1870s and 80s, we can see that his pluralistic tendencies stretch well beyond the nature and scope of the pluralistic thinking of his contemporaries. At the time of writing the 1896 preface, while his contemporaries where considering pluralism metaphysically, James is deeply entrenched in heterodox epistemic, moral, and social dimensions of pluralism. In his writings of the 1870s and leading up to *The Will to Believe* we can see that James wrestles with a wide range of complex and controversial issues, not the least of which is the question of facts and rationality. When we trace the trajectory of his conception of philosophy as “always seeing the alternative,” it comes as no surprise that in tandem with his recently announced radical empiricism we see a recurrent tendency toward heterodox pluralism. More specifically, his pluralism attempts to carve out a space for the contemplation and examination of medical, philosophic, religious, and scientific facts that exist outside of the epistemological norm. As will be discussed in the examples below, his interests were not isolated instances, but were the long standing product of a serious engagement with heterodox realities. Throughout his career he routinely remarks that he does not agree with the *metaphysical* presuppositions of the various perspectives that he investigated (e.g., Spiritualism and the mental healing

---

261 Dewey, “Pluralism,” 306. In fact, very near to the time that Dewey was composing this entry, James was already deeply steeped in religious pluralism as he preparing to give his 1901-02 Gifford lectures, *VRE*.  

103
movement); nonetheless, James’s interests suggest that a thick ethical, epistemological, and social dimension of his pluralism arises when we are no longer clouded by mainstream metaphysics.

In the preceding chapters I have made an attempt to show that James’s early radical empiricism attempts to level the epistemic field. By attending to the religio-philosophical side of his spooky pluralism, we can begin to understand why he advocates that we reconsider other voices. Already we have seen that in the late 1870s he champions the idea of “always seeing the alternative.” In 1879, he publishes “The Sentiment of Rationality” wherein he advances a psychological conception of rationality. The central purpose of the article is to steer away from a philosophical conception of rationality in favor of elaborating upon the psychological idea that rationality is nothing more than “the consciousness of the perfectly free, fluent, unimpeded movement of thought.”²⁶² To this end, James harps on the rationalist as universalizing his own perspective, when in fact the rationality that he employs is but one of several types of rationality. Lamberth explains that according to James’s A Pluralistic Universe there are at least four classifications of rationality: theoretical, moralistic, practical, and aesthetic.²⁶³ Meanwhile, early in his career James was contemplating different types of rationality and Lamberth observes that as early as 1879 James conceived that “there were at least practical and perhaps religious alternatives that did not pass muster with the

²⁶² James, “Rationality, Activity and Faith,” 58.

philosophers but nonetheless produced the feeling of rationality.” By the early 1880s the notion of competing rationalities becomes more pronounced in James’s thought—particularly in terms of his 1881 article “Reflex Action and Theism”—and by 1890 he is readily defending heterodox experience and the accompanying rationalities.

Rather late in his career James characterizes the empiricist as a “lover of facts in all their crude variety;” however, quite early in his career, alongside of his work on competing rationalities, he takes on a stricter attitude toward the way in which we treat epistemic claims of fact and perspective. Whereas Baldwin’s Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology defines “fact” as “an objective datum of experience,” James’s idiosyncratic use of the term requires that we consider the nature of facts in more nuanced categories. For example, in The Will to Believe he makes use of over twenty different categories of facts. While most individuals will have no problem with the bulk of his categories, he does emphasize the importance of non-traditional factual categories such as those pertaining to alternative medical practices, religion, and psychical research. When

264 Lamberth, “A Pluralistic Universe,” 140. In Metaphysics of Experience Lamberth provides a brief contextualization and topical discussion of this formulation, see his discussion of James, rationality and intimacy; however, for a more detailed assessment of its merit and limitations, see Lamberth (2014).

265 William James, Pragmatism, Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 12 (emphasis added). He contrasts this view with the “rationalist” who is described as a “devotee to abstract and eternal principles.”

266 Thus far I have come up with the following categories of fact as discussed in WB: chemical, empirical, hard, material, mental, mystical, objective, of human nature, of human sensibility, of experience, of evolution, of life, of nature, of the world, of social evolution, outer, physical, psychological, psychic, religious, and subjective. A search of “facts” in the work of James reveals that as the years go by, he uses this term less and less in his writing. For example, “facts” indiscriminately appears more than 300 times in PP and 140 times in WB, whereas in ERE it appears only 30 times, and nearly 40 times in PU.
we look at the type of facts that he is considering, however, it is important that we readjust our own vantage point: rather than look at such matters as irrational quackery, it is important to grasp these views as historically situated cultural phenomena. Thus whatever we may think of his spooky interest in alternative religions, alternative medical practices, and/or psychical research, it is my contention that James’s “lover of facts” is more epistemologically, socially, and morally complex than many scholars are willing to admit.

We routinely witness this interest in heterodox facts and rationalities in James’s personal correspondence—the most notable being an 1886 letter addressed to James John Garth Wilkinson, a British homeopathic physician, Swedenborgian and close friend of James’s father, Henry James, Sr. At the end of March James writes a letter to Wilkinson after having read his The Greater Origins and Issues of Life and Death. In the letter James confesses that he cannot grasp, let alone agree with, certain parts of the book because he cannot “see my way to being a Christian.” He goes on to suggest that he felt that Wilkinson went too far in his chastising of science, but then doubles back and speaks to the merit of what he sees in Wilkinson’s book. Having complemented Wilkinson insights, James writes that he is frustrated, near to the point of “almost foam[ing] at the mouth,” because of the “resolute ignorance and conceited barbarism” of the dogmatic

267 For example, one can think of James’s interest in animal magnetism and the facts of the subconscious. Regardless, there is a wealth of views within the secondary literature that address James’s interest in subaltern cultural phenomena, particularly his psychical research. For examples, see McDermott (1986), Taylor (1996), Barnard (1997), Taves (1999, 2014), Simon (1999), Bordgona (2008), Carrette (2013), and Stob (2013).

scientists that claim that their perspective is the only scientific attitude. He continues the line of thought:

But even here one may be patient,—Science carries its own remedy in its method and will slough off each successive crust of scientism that tries to harden over it, before it has had time to set. Your book therefore I simply take as one way of taking in the sum of things, destined later to be completed by fusion with what now seems to be its alternative. It shows through what all this “Psychical Research” I am coming to believe as I never did before, that the fullness of truth is not given to any one type of mind. I have hitherto felt as if the wonder-mongers and magnetic physicians and seventh sons of seventh daughters and those who gravitated towards them by mental affinity were a sort of intellectual vermin. I now begin to believe that that type of mind takes hold of a range of truths to which the other type is stone blind. The consequence is that I am all at sea, with my old compass lost, and no new one, and the stars invisible through the fog. But it is exhilarating to have things suddenly enlarge their possibilities—at any rate. 

As pointed out in this letter, it is clear that James did not always lean toward the spooky side of pluralistic thinking and that he initially considered any association with these types of persons to be intellectually inferior. And yet, now he sees these individuals in a more positive light, as epistemic outsiders, who have some form of access to a truth which the blind monist is incapable of recognizing. What marks this change, however, is not indicated in the letter, nor is it clear when James began to take an interest in the religio-philosophic fringe: the degree to which he was exposed to “wondermongers” of various sorts during his childhood is relatively unknown.

One can make an educated guess that James’s exposure to such phenomena was just as likely to happen at the dining table as it was walking the streets of New York City in the late 1840s and 50s. As many biographers have pointed out, his father, Henry

269 James to Wilkinson, Cambridge, 28 March 1886, 125.

James, Sr. had a reputation for being an eccentric, well-connected individual and that the James’s family dinner table is well known for its vibrant discourse. According to Perry, “Men like [James’s] father and his father’s friends, who were attracted to Fourierism, communism, homeopathy, women’s rights, abolition, and spiritism, were not likely to have any prejudices against mediumship, clairvoyance, mesmerism, automatic writing, and crystal gazing.” Krister Knapp goes a step further by analyzing the writings and ideas associated with the many friends and guests of James, Sr. in order to conclude that it was virtually impossible that the young William was not exposed to these novel metaphysical, religious, and socio-political ideas and communities.

Whatever his exposure to such things during his childhood, by the mid to late 1880s, after several significant encounters with fringe experiences, James was intellectually uncertain or lost at sea when it came to making sense of the “unclassified residuum,” despite being so deeply involved in it. Nevertheless, what is perfectly clear is that he began to recognize the importance of seeing alternatives, or recognizing the merit of looking at the world from different perspectives. Alongside of James’s formation of rationality we can see a continuing interest in facts and experiences that lay outside of the epistemological norm. As time went on and he gained repeated exposure, James quickly

---


272 Perry, Thought and Character, vol 2, 155.

273 For example, Knapp points out that while James was growing up in New York City in the late 40s and early 50s, Spiritualist circles were spreading like wild fire across the States. During the months of July and August of 1850, the Fox sisters—the very girls that were responsible to for the spread of the Spiritualist movement—were residing at Barnum Hotel, just a few blocks from where James lived (Ibid., 55).
became convinced of the importance of the need to scientifically investigate these phenomena.

By 1890 James’s “The Hidden Self” presents a defense of the “unclassified residuum” with the hope of persuading others of the scientific, religious, and philosophical import of this dark universe. Two years later, in “What Psychical Research has Accomplished” he suggests that it is mystics, not the scholastic scientists who tend to be correct about the exceptional or heterodox facts; the latter, he admits, are better at theorizing and synthesizing the facts, whereas the former are best at identification. In 1894 he defends the Mind-Curers and cites their positive contributions to the study of mental health. And finally, by 1896, James is in full fledged defense mode: in the Lowell Lectures on “Exceptional Mental States” he argues that we are all cut from the same cloth; in “The Will to Believe” he argues for the right to believe in matters religiously; and in the preface to The Will to Believe he unveils his new philosophical empiricism that is rooted in an epistemic sensitivity that seeks to defend the alogical other from the social, moral, and epistemic tyrannical monopoly of orthodox thinking. All of this goes to show that an alternative context for understanding James’s pluralism is readily available if we are willing to deeply consider his idea of philosophy as “always seeing an alternative.”

274 For a detailed account of James’s treatment of the “unclassified residuum” see chapters Four and Five.
As James’s great biographer Ralph Barton Perry notes, psychical research was for James “not one of his vagaries, but was central and typical.” James became a corresponding member of the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR), founded in 1882, from 1886 to 1889. From 1890 to 1894 and again from 1896 to 1910 he served as a vice president, and during the interim years of 1894 and 1895 as President. As for his work for the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR), Knapp offers the following summation:

However time consuming and demanding the work was, for the five-year duration of the ASPR’s existence (1885-90), James labored almost continuously for no less than five committees, namely, those on Telepathy, Hypnotism, Hallucinations, Apparitions and Spiritualism. He chaired the meetings, wrote the reports, and engaged himself in the day-to-day details that made the work happen. More importantly, he conducted research in each of these areas, penning articles in both the ASPR’s and SPR's *Proceedings* and *Journal* respectively, writing essays for mass consumption in more popular magazines like *Forum* and *Scribner's*, and responding to numerous inquiries from individuals seeking to be tested for their special occult power(s). In fact, from 1885 through 1890, James was so engrossed with psychical research that it is not an exaggeration to say he gave it his foremost priority.

In addition to spearheading committees, James worked tirelessly as reviewer, financial contributor, organizer, and researcher. As an active member of the society, he would frequently preside over the Boston meetings and occasionally chair meetings at the New

---

275 Perry, *Thought and Character*, vol 2, 155.

York branch. In many ways James seemed to enjoy the work, but he often complained of its social requirements.

“While Spiritualism represents the more spectacular and notorious interest of the society,” Skrupskelis notes, “most of its efforts were devoted to other subjects.”

Following the lead of the London society, the other subjects were mainly thought-transference, hypnotism, apparitions, and haunted houses. It is fair to say that for large chunks of time James was regularly engaged in conducting experiments in automatic writing, crystal gazing, and hypnotism, as well as sitting with Spiritualists and trance subjects. More frequently, however, he seemed to always be sifting through surveys, questionnaires, and personal accounts of psychic events: the paperwork involved in psychical research appeared to be endless—so much so that during the late 1880s he was constantly falling behind on his preparation for *Principles*, which in turn lead to a supposed swearing off of psychical research.

The more sensational of James’s activities as a psychical researcher stem from his study of material and mental mediums. As a member of the Committee on Mediumistic Phenomena, he was in frequent contact with the Spiritualist community. George Herbert Palmer, a fellow philosophy professor at Harvard and member of the ASPR, reminisced

---


278 In a letter to his brother, Henry, James writes: “I loathe all this psychical work so far as it has a social side. I must preside over a meeting in Boston, at which Lodge’s paper on her [Mrs. Piper] will be read, Dec. 3rd.” James to Henry James, Chocorua, 25 September 1889, in *Correspondence*, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 2, 1885-1896 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 157.

279 Skrupskelis, “Notes” to *EPR*, 381.
that one winter he and James attended cabinet séances every Saturday. Scattered throughout James’s correspondence are reports of attending various séances and performances. Many of these events appear to have left a negative impression on him and he complained to his wife, to his brother, and to like-minded colleagues and friends that such activities were “disgusting” and “nauseating.” And yet, despite all of the negativity toward material mediums, James continued his investigations—though it seems that his preference was for mental mediums. As is most often discussed, James and his wife, Alice, regularly met with a local mental (or trance) medium, Mrs. Lenora Piper, after the death of their son Herman. Mrs. Piper, who never claimed to be a Spiritualist, proved to be James’s “white crow,” and until the end of his life he acknowledged that he could never detect fraudulent activity, nor could he reasonably explain her abilities.

Turning toward James’s publications in the field of psychical research McDermott notes that the bulk of James’s writings on psychical research were published within “the semiprivate world” of the journals and proceedings related to the SPR and its sister branch, the ASPR. For various reasons, neither publication circulated widely. Other articles, notices, and reviews that James penned were published or republished in more popular venues, like Boston Daily Advertiser, Religio-Philosophical Journal, Science, Psychological Review, The Forum, The Nation, and American Magazine.

In the opposite direction it has been noted that James’s activities as a psychical researcher were well known to the public. Stob remarks that “Strange as it may seem today—especially given James’s reputation as a brilliant psychologist, an astute writer on religious life, and the eminent founder of pragmatism—no facet of James’s career

280 Simon, Genuine Reality, xix.
received more ink in the general press than psychical research, at least during his lifetime.”  

Given the depth and breadth of James’s engagement in psychical research, and the corresponding literature that is available on this subject, I turn to a discussion about the general relationship between James’s philosophy and psychical research before moving onto the feature themes of this chapter, Spiritualism and the Mind-Cure movement.

**Philosophy and Psychical Research**

In tracing the trajectory of James’s career as a psychical researcher, we can note that he always approached the subject with an open mind—though many of his colleagues and later commentators are predisposed to think otherwise. Inclined as he was to reject the metaphysical explanations, he continually defended the epistemic respectability of the “unclassified residuum” and the seemingly “alogical” other. From the early 1890s onward, he began to be more adamant about the necessity of an unbiased assessment of psychical phenomena. McDermott writes that throughout James’s work in psychical research, he (like other members of the SPR) adhered to two basic principles: “first, to investigate psychic phenomena according to the methods and criteria of science; and second, to enlarge the scope of science to include the study of phenomena that are random, nonrepeatable, and dependent on unusual personal capacities and dispositions.”


282 McDermott, Introduction to *EPR*, xix.
James was an enthusiastic supporter of science and sought to utilize it as a means of legitimizing the careful work of the SPR; however, he was not alone in calling attention to the dogmatic and biased perspective of “Science”—the capitalization of which he used to signify that it had departed from the neutrality of “science” and moved in the direction of a “religion of mechanical rationalism.” As if channeling Thomas Kuhn, James often argued that it would be the fringes which moved science forward. For example, in “What Psychical Research has Accomplished,” James asserts that “he who pays attention to the facts of the sort dear to mystics, while reflecting upon them in academic-scientific ways, will be in the best possible position to help philosophy.” As James clearly points out in the text, a then-contemporary example is that of animal magnetism, which although initially dismissed by the academic and scientific community, eventually gave rise to hypnotic suggestion which in turn resulted in the first repeatable or lab-based studies of “consciousness beyond the margins,” i.e. the realm of the unconscious.

Here we can see that psychic research need not be incompatible with James’s philosophy, let alone his early radical empiricism. McDermott maintains that James’s interests in philosophy and psychical research exhibit a “strong complimentarity” and thus, while ultimately remaining as two separate fields of inquiry, they interpenetrate one another so intimately that it is easy to overlook their fundamental relationship to one another. He writes,


285 James, “What Psychical Research Has Accomplished,” 244.
Although James’s philosophy does not include extended treatments of ideas derived from psychical research, nor does it exhibit the influence of such research, there are several ways in which his enormous labors in the psychical vineyard seem to have affected the formation and articulation of his philosophy. That James neither wrote a philosophy of psychical phenomena nor conducted his psychical research with an explicit concern for philosophical implications should not minimize the strong complimentarity of these parallel modes of inquiry. The interpenetration between James’s psychical research and his philosophy is so general and pervasive that it can easily be missed, but it seems clear that there is a positive relationship between these two early and enduring intellectual passions which includes several shared attitudes and positions.\footnote{McDermott, Introduction to \textit{EPR}, xxxi.}

McDermott then proceeds to draw parallels between James’s philosophy and his psychical research, noting the following commonalities: that both (1) sought to reconcile religion and science, (2) employed a radical empiricist approach, (3) were fallibilistic when considering ultimate questions, (4) leaned heavily on personal and subjective epistemology, and (5) challenged the Cartesian mind-body paradigm.

A minimalistic way of framing this relationship is to conclude that James’s interests in psychical research—baffling as they may seem to us modern thinkers—sought to further the study of science, philosophy, psychology, and religion by broadening their borders, as well as deepening our understanding of human nature. My suspicion, however, is that McDermott’s claim is rather conservative. As Bordogna has pointed out and as I argue throughout these chapters, there is an epistemic, social, and moral awareness that is tied to James’s work as a psychical researcher that critically informs his philosophy of radical empiricism (and later, Bordogna demonstrates, his pragmatism). His willingness to repeatedly enter into different discourses as a defender who philosophically champions the epistemic outsider can be detected all throughout his 1890s writings. More specifically, however, is that in the period of 1896-97 we can see a
very intentional “turn” in James’s thought. Bordogna describes it as a “new epistemological regime” that “embodied the attitudes and sensibilities that by the late 1890s James took to be essential to the practice of good science and good philosophy: open-mindedness, modesty, tolerance, respect for other people, and pluralism.” She goes on to point out that this turn is the result of James’s transgression of boundaries: how he sought to break down and re-build the boundaries that separate fields of knowledge, kinds of discourses, and types of knowledge producers, concluding that “James’s boundary work was not something that he conducted on the side. It was central to his philosophical and scientific practices” and that it takes on the specific form of his early radical empiricism during the mid 1890s wherein “he depicted philosophy as the overarching framework wherein the fundamental assumptions on which the various special sciences rested could be opened up and discussed, and where conflicts among the different sciences could be adjudicated.”

Bordogna traces the trajectory of this line of thinking from the early 1870s up to the mid 1890s and maintains that it develops further in connection with his articulation of pragmatism; in contrast, I limit my focus to his early radical empiricism as historically situated in his 1890s defense of the epistemic underdog. Thus, in contrast to

287 Credit for the catchy phrase “the 1896-97 turn” goes to Colin Koopman who has graciously read and commented on my work. Readers will notice that I do not attend to the political dimension of James’s thinking, much less its role in his social and moral thinking of the 1890s. One of several scholars that have advanced this aspect of James’s political thought is Coon. For a list of relevant research that has taken an interest in James's radical empiricism by critically re-examining its social and political aspects, see MacGilvray (2006), Segrest (2009), Stob (2011) and Livingston (2012).


289 Ibid., 270.
McDermott’s notion of “strong complimentarity.” I think that we can go a step further and claim that James’s engagement with psychical research and alternative religio-philosophical points of view illustrate how these thoughts and ideas inform James’s philosophical thinking, particularly his early radical empiricism.

Spiritualism and Psychical Research
The first vantage point that I explore for grasping the “spooky” side of James pluralism is through his controversial life-long career in psychical research. In many ways, the dark side of James’s pluralism begins and ends with Spiritualism, the nineteenth century counter-cultural religious tradition that believed it possible to communicate with the dead through a medium or in a state of trance. James never sided with the metaphysical explanations of the Spiritualists in regard to automatic writing, trance messages, and other associated phenomena; nevertheless, it was through extensive study of the experiential phenomena affiliated with this religious group that, he believed, pointed to deeper realities of the self and the “unseen order.”

A General Overview
Once described as the “historical hourglass” into which the sands of “witchcraft, popular ghostlore, mesmerism, Swedenborgianism, and scientism [poured],” only to disperse into Theosophy and parapsychology,” the Spiritualist tradition looms large in the background.

---

290 This is a term James adopts in his analysis of religion. For a detailed analysis of its relation to his defense of religious faith, see chapter Four.
of James’s study of religion and psychical phenomena.\footnote{The hourglass metaphor stems from the work of Kerr and Crow (1983), cited in Ann Taves, \textit{Fits, Trances and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 401.} The movement began with the Fox sisters and the mysterious Hydesville rappings in the spring of 1848 and spread like wildfire throughout the States, eventually spilling over into Europe. Over time the methods and techniques of communications quickly advanced, becoming more and more sophisticated as the movement spread. The novel, but cumbersome “alphabetic rappings” of the Fox sisters evolved and eventually transformed into two wings of “empirical proof” of the afterlife. On the one hand were the material mediums who maintained the ability to “convince” their audience of the existence and interaction of the spirit world through physical phenomena such as table-tipping, levitation of objects, the appearance of “spirit” bodies and/or body parts, the mysterious production of disembodied voices and music, etc. On the other hand, mental mediums entered a trance state of consciousness and were able to produce verbal and written communication from deceased family, friends, and loved ones. Often this would take the form of automatic writing (\textit{via} slate-writing, planchettes, and Ouija boards) and spirit drawings, trance speech, clairvoyance, clairaudience, and spiritual impersonation.\footnote{Geoffrey K. Nelson, \textit{Spiritualism and Society} (London: Routledge and & K. Paul, 1969) 29-30.}

John Buescher explains that “the pivotal experience of the spiritualist was personal and individual” and that while mediums worked as “effective prophets and visionaries but were not good group members…they were wary of binding themselves into an organization, and their efforts to do so were often confounded by internal
dissension.” Nevertheless, séances or “circles” sprang up in virtually every corner of the nation and overseas: by 1850, the existence of nearly a 100 mediums was reported in a neighboring town of Hydesville, and by 1860, an estimated 600 spiritualist groups had formed across America and an estimated 1,600,000 (some sources cite upward to three to five million) Americans declared themselves as spiritualists. Emma Hardinge-Britten documents that by 1869 the Spiritualist population counted one hundred million persons worldwide, with an estimated eleven million being American. Whatever the actual numbers reflect, it was abundantly clear that the movement caught the private attention of nineteenth century public.

The growth of the movement is also captured by the number of Spiritualist publications that emerged after the Hydesville rappings. Braude’s findings suggest that the movement is credited with the production of more than 214 American periodicals.

293 John B. Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation: Spiritualism and the Nineteenth-Century Religious Experience* (Boston, Skinner House Books, 2004), x. Ann Braude confirms this by writings that “the movement had no identifiable membership because it had no formal associations for believers to join. It had no official leaders because it had no offices to hold and no hierarchies to sanction them. It had no creed, no authoritative text” (400). Anne Braude, “News From the Spirit World: A Checklist of American Spiritualist Periodicals, 1847-1900” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 99 (1989), 339-462.


296 Braude explains that “[w]hile [Spiritualism] is ubiquitous in the documents of the nineteenth-century culture, its adherents’ abhorrence of organization makes their movement difficult to chart in retrospect.” (Braude, “News From the Spirit World,” 400).
during its heyday. While most of the publications “can only be described as unsuccessful” due to their eventual collapse after a few months or years of publication, a handful of periodicals, like *The Banner of Light* (1857-1907), *Religio-Philosophical Journal* (1865-1907), and *World’s Advance Thought* (1876-1918), were able to spread the spiritualist message for nearly half a century. In addition to self-published periodicals, books, pamphlets, and self-published manuscripts offered tips and techniques for how to conduct your own séance, while others provided firsthand accounts and offered philosophical explanations.

Most scholarly accounts agree that Spiritualism peaked by the 1870s. Through the combination of fraud and deceit, as well as a general inability to live up to its own “scientific” pronouncements, mediums quickly acquired a bad rap. Nevertheless, one of the distinctive features of the movement was its proclivity for social and political reform. Having overcome the initial polemic of early scholarship, the last forty years has seen a boom in critical assessment of the nature, role, and scope of Spiritualism and its impact on the American (and more recently global) landscape. Scholars like Ernest Issacs, Laurence Moore, Ann Braude, and Molly McGarry, just to name a few, have greatly contributed to our understanding of how Spiritualists sought reform in terms of women’s rights, the abolition of slavery, education, economic, health, and politics.298

Alongside of providing testimonial support for the existence of the spirit world, one of the hallmark features of Spiritualism was its predilection for empirical

297 Ibid., 401.

verification. Moore explains that “[a]ny interpretation of [S]piritualism’s impact must begin with what has appeared to many as an anomaly. Spiritualism became a self-conscious movement precisely at the time it disassociated itself from occult traditions of secrecy. It appealed not to the inward illuminations of mystical experience, but to observable and verifiable objects of empirical science.” Drawing from the energetic well-spring of Mesmerism and the metaphysics of correspondence, the Spiritualists capitalized on recent advancements in science and technology, most notably electricity and magnetism, telegraphy and photography. In a time when Victorian science was progressing at exponential rates, becoming more rigorous, systematic, and professional, there emerged a divide between the “popular science” of the Spiritualists and that which was practiced in universities and laboratories.

In reaction to the Spiritualist’s claims, groups of “learned men” began formal scientific investigations into Spiritualism and psychic phenomena. In 1857 a group of Harvard scientists investigated the Davenport brothers—famous for their spirit “cabinet” and their ability to “perform Houdini-like escapes with the aid of spirits,”—and the Fox sisters. While the distinguished Harvard professors could not entirely discount the ability

---


300 Recent scholarship has become more nuanced on this matter. Whereas early scholarship exhibited the tendency to dismiss the relationship between Spiritualism, science and technology, writers like Wrobel (1987) and Lightman (1997) reflect the ongoing debates in the history of science which problematizes the science pseudo-science dichotomy. Also, see Katherine Gutierrez, *Plato’s Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

of the Davenport brothers, they did report that “spiritualistic circles...corrupt the morals and degrades the intellect.”

In 1882 Henry Sedgwick, Edmund Gurney and Frederic Myers would found the London Society for Psychical Research with the goal of scientifically investigating the wide ranging psychical phenomena associated with Spiritualism and other traditions within the alternative metaphysical movement.

Prominent and active members included Sir William Barrett, Arthur Balfour, and Alfred Russell Wallace. In 1885 James and other Bostonians brahmins founded a sister branch, the American Society for Psychical Research. Taylor describes the main purpose of the ASPR “to apply modern techniques of scientific investigation to the claims of spiritualism and mental healing. Whereas the organizers left the question open as to whether they would be able to marshal evidence for the existence of the supernatural, they did expect to uncover what they called any underlying and consistent ‘laws of mental action.’”

Shortly after the formation of the Boston branch, other satellite organization began cropping up across the nation.

---

302 Moore, In Search of White Crows, 33-35. Also see Deborah Blum, Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 24-25. Worth mentioning is that two members of the committee, Benjamin Peirce (father of Charles S. Peirce) and Louis Agassiz, would later hold significant influence over James’s Harvard education. For a detailed account this relationship, see Croce, Science and Religion, 112-124.

303 Haynes points out that the aim of the society was “to examine without prejudice and prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable in terms of any generally recognized hypotheses.” Renée Haynes, The Society for Psychical Research, 1882-1982: a History (London: MacDonald & Co., 1982). For detailed accounts of the founders and founding of the SPR see Gauld (1968), Moore (1977), Haynes (1982), Oppenheim (1985), and Blum (2006).

James’s Early Interest in Spiritualism and Psychical Research

The origins of James’s interest in Spiritualist phenomena are, as of yet, unknown. As mentioned previously, it was quite probable that while growing up in New York he encountered some variety of its cultural, religio-philosophic, and scientific manifestation, whether through conversation at the dinner table, through street-life, or merely by reading the local papers. We know that James’s first public engagement with Spiritualism is an 1869 review of Epes Sargent’s *Planchette: or the Despair of Science.* What we do know with certainty is that he expressed an interest in Spiritualist related phenomena as early as 1869.

Gardner Murphy and Robert O. Ballou describe James’s review “as the first public expression of interest and as a fragmentary expression of a point of view which was later to be stated more eloquently and with greater profundity.” At the same time, they also note that the review could “scarcely be called a contribution to the literature of psychical research” and that “it was not until seventeen years later, in 1885, after his first meeting with the famous Boston medium Mrs. Piper, that his serious interest in psychical research was aroused and reflected in research and contributions to the literature on the subject.” This characterization is apt, particularly with respect to James’s post 1885 contributions to the literature; however, I think that we need to exercise a bit more

---


307 Ibid.
caution with regard to how we judge the seriousness of James’s earliest interests in Spiritualism and Psychical Research. In the sections that follow I shall discuss three different accounts of James’s early engagement with the tradition.

_Bowditch, Chevillard, and Table-Tipping_

The first documented indication of James’s engagement is recorded in his personal correspondence with Henry Pickering Bowditch, who studied with James at Harvard Medical School and would later become one of James’s ASPR colleagues. While in Paris, on the 10th of February 1869, Bowditch sends James a recently published pamphlet on Spiritualism. The thirty-five page manuscript, A. Chevillard’s _Études expérimentales sur le fluide nerveux et solution definitive du problème spirite_ was published in Paris. It scientifically examines the phenomena of table-tipping, which, alongside of rapping and spectral phenomena, was widespread among the early materialist mediums and frequently found to be the result of fraudulent activity.

According to Bowditch’s letter, Chevillard’s “book has many absurdities,” but it may “entertain” James for awhile. Whether he sent him a copy of the pamphlet as a comical gesture or because he thought that James would be genuinely intrigued by the manuscript is unclear from the context. In his letter Bowditch’s reports that Chevillard’s conclusion is an attempt to affirm and scientifically explain the legitimacy of the table-tipping phenomena. In order to understand Chevillard’s claim, it is important to recognize

308 Bowditch to James, Paris, 10 February 1869, _Correspondence_, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 4, 1856-1877 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 363-366.

309 Ibid., 362.
that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century there was widespread belief in “vital” energy or “nervous fluid.” This fluid, Anton Mesmer hypothesized, permeates the universe just below the surface of the physical and connects the mental and spiritual. It was believed that a magnetizer could manipulate the fluid of the entranced individual and thereby heal the subject.\textsuperscript{310} According to Bowditch, Chevillard believed that there was a magnetic connection between the medium and the table. He explains that:

when tables tip or rap out answers to questions the nervous fluid of the medium really enters the table in the shape of vibrations of its substance. The table thus becomes as much a part of the medium, as his hand is, as far as executing the will of the medium is concerned but the medium is not conscious that the table thus executes his will because the action is not performed by muscular effort.\textsuperscript{311}

James’s response to the suggested reading is characteristic of his overall relationship with Spiritualism. One the one hand, he writes that he read it “with some amusement tho’ not much profit;” on the other hand, he seems to take Chevillard’s explanation with some seriousness because he says that “[i]f it be a fact that the tables vibrate between the knocks, and cease at the moment of the rap, it is interesting…”\textsuperscript{312} The manner in which he is willing to consider the possibility of different causal explanation attests to his ability

\textsuperscript{310} Taves notes that early in the Spiritualist movement the fluid-based analysis drew strength from the theoretical understanding and practical technology of the telegraph and of electricity. Over time and in conjunction with changes in the dominant nature of mediumship, we see a corresponding shift in theoretical framework from the material to the mental (Taves, Fits, Trances, and Visions, 179). Thus what is most peculiar about Chevillard’s explanation is that it seems, in the broader context of the movement, a dated explanation by its use of fluid as a causal explanation.

\textsuperscript{311} Bowditch to James, Paris, 10 February 1869, 364.

\textsuperscript{312} James to Bowditch, Pomfret, Conn., 12 August 1869, in Correspondence, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 4, 1856-1877 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 383.
to approach complicated phenomena with an open mind.\footnote{13} While we can only guess at why this might be interesting, it is assumed that it would be so on account of the fact that it could be empirically studied.

Despite evidence of any previous discussions with James about Spiritualism, Bowditch’s letter presumes a familiarity with the subject. This is not striking because little more than a month later James publishes a review of Sargent’s \textit{Planchette}.\footnote{14} In his review, he gives the impression of knowing the literature insofar as Sargent’s book is determinedly a “less esoteric point of view than most other publications dealing with the same subject.”\footnote{15} In James’s view Sargent’s treatment of the philosophy of Spiritualism as the “serene, optimistic musing ‘into the blue,’” is fundamentally no different than that which is found in the popular Spiritualist periodical, \textit{The Banner of Light}, wherein this type of writing may be “obtain[ed] by the bucketful.”\footnote{16} This observation, we can note, could not have been made if he was not already steeped in the literature.

\footnote{13} In fact, many years later James would later describe an experience of table-tipping wherein he “was rewarded by the sight of an \textit{object moving without contact}, under conditions so simple that no room for fakery seemed possible.” He would go on to describe the experience with the following metaphor: “Since this is the crack in the levee of scientific routine through wh[ich] the whole Mississippi of supernaturalism may pour in, I am surprised that the spectacle hasn’t moved my \textit{feelings} more.” See “Physical Phenomena at a Private Circle” in \textit{Essays in Psychical Research}, Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 248-252. In particular see the corresponding note, 248.1.

\footnote{14} In a letter dated 22 March 1869 James informs his brother, Henry, that we published a notice in the \textit{Boston Daily Advertiser} and was paid $10.00; see James, \textit{EPR}, 453. The review appears, unsigned, in the March 10, 1869 issue. See James to Henry James, Cambridge, MA, 22 March 1869, in \textit{Correspondence}, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 1, 1861-1884 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 60.

\footnote{15} James, “Planchette,” 3.

\footnote{16} Ibid., 4.
A second point of significance regarding his review of *Planchette* is that James provides a methodological critique of Sargent’s style. He cites the author as “writing avowedly for purposes of propagandism,” but then criticizes him for not knowing the attitude of his audience. James’s opinion is that the book would have been more successful had it differentiated itself from the available literature. He writes that:

one narrative personally vouched for and *minutely* controlled, would be more apt to fix [the audience’s] attention, than a hundred of the striking but comparatively vaguely reported second-hand descriptions which fill many pages of this book… If our author, in concert with some good mediums, had instituted some experiments in which everything should be protected from the possibility of deceit, remembering that the morality of no one in such a case is to be taken for granted, and that such personal precautions cannot be offensively construed, he would probably have made a better contribution to clearing up the subject than he has now done.\(^{317}\)

From this passage we can see that prior to James’s work as a psychical researcher, he was particularly sensitive to the methods and style of careful observation that were required to *scientifically* attend to the Spiritualist phenomena. In keeping with Murphy and Ballou’s observation, it is fairly clear that this review is not a substantial piece for James, nor are his comments on Chevillard’s pamphlet; nevertheless, it certainly is enough to show that not only was he engaged in the literature, but that he had digested enough to have an informed opinion about how to appeal to a wider audience.

*Automatic Writing and the “Spiritual Monad” Experience*

The second example of James’s early engagement with Spiritualism is rooted in an offhanded comment that he makes in one of his last writings. It takes into account a self-disclosed experience that James had four decades ago. In “The Confidences of a

\(^{317}\) Ibid. 2
‘Psychical Researcher,’” James reflects upon his twenty five year career of studying and writing about Spiritualist phenomena.\(^3\) He writes that “the first automatic writing I ever saw was forty years ago. I unhesitatingly thought of it as deceit, although it contained vague elements of supernormal knowledge.”\(^4\) As to what exactly this experience entailed, we do not know because he does not discuss it in his diary, nor does it appear that he wrote about it in any of his correspondence. We do not know whether he actively sought out a medium in order to gain first-hand experience of automatic writing or whether James happened to attend an informal circle hosted by family or friends. The fact that there is not documentation of this experience suggests many possible interpretations, the simplest answer is that that it was not a profound experience at the time and thus he did not write about it, or if he did, then the letters pertaining to this event were not kept or even lost.

That James recalls this moment forty years after the fact does suggest that it had an impact in any meaningful capacity. It is possible that this experience is the “spiritual monad” that he spoke of when writing to his close friend, Thomas Wren Ward, in March of 1869—approximately forty years prior to writing “Confidences.” In the midst of a long monologue about religion, James confesses that he had some sort of spiritual experience:

“I had a little while ago an experience of life wh.[ich] woke up the spiritual monad within

---


\(^4\) Ibid., 372.
me as has not happened more than once or twice before in my life.”

It should be noted that this “spiritual experience” precedes his famous 1870’s crisis and his subsequent choice as an agent of free will was to “to believe in free will.”

Richardson makes an interesting connection between the two experiences: surveying the wealth of primary resources that are available to James scholars, he reminds us that “parts of [James’s life are] muddied and obscured for us by excisions and mysteries, lost or burned letters and papers, and unrecoverable moments.”

Citing the complicated relationship with Minnie Temple, James’s distant cousin and possible love interest, Richardson reminds scholars of Habegger’s astute remarks that “interpretation has already been built into the documents the Jamess allowed to survive.”

Richardson then goes on to suggest that the account of the “spiritual monad” experience “covers a lot of ground. It includes intense inner life, and it certainly doesn’t exclude romance.”

What is more fascinating, however, is that Richardson draws a potential connection


321 Much has been made of this experience and James’s reading of Renouviers’s philosophy. Readers unfamiliar with the biographical relationship and how Renouvier helps James overcome this time of crisis may consult any of the James biographies. Scholars of religion may take interest in how Carrette (2013) addresses the conceptual significance of Renouvier’s thought and how it influenced James’s thoughts on religion and relations.

322 Richardson, William James, 99.

323 Ibid., 98.

324 Ibid., 99.
between James’s review of *Planchette* and the spiritual experience by suggesting that “[i]t probably doesn’t even exclude ghosts.”

Rather than adopt a conspiratorial approach, it seems that the best response is to merely postpone conclusions until more evidence surfaces. In other words, there may be a link between these two events, but it is also just as likely that there is no direct connection. In either case, a more detailed and systematic search of James’s correspondence and diaries will, one hopes, reveal further clues as to the separate or connected meaning of these two events.

*Mediumship and the Hope of Discovery*

Whereas the first example’s significance is that it provides us with the earliest documented evidence of James’s engagement with Spiritualist literature, and the second provides us with a vague and speculative account of his encounter with Spiritualist phenomena, this third pre-1885 context provides us with the most powerful statements regarding James’s commitment to investigating Spiritualism. Taken from his correspondence with Catherine Elizabeth Havens, a New York musician and teacher, we encounter a new side of James’s interest in Spiritualism. He met “Miss Havens” while residing in Dresden during the winter of 1868. He describes her as “decidedly not a commonplace personage, and had I the genius of an Arry [his brother Harry] I wd. put her into a novelette.”

---

325 Ibid.

326 James to Alice Gibben Howe James, Dresden, 14 May 1868, in *Correspondence*, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 4, 1856-1876 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 296.
On 14 June 1874, James writes to Havens and discusses his reading habits, the start of classes, and potential plans for travel. In an abrupt transition from discussing John Stuart Mill’s autobiography, James launches into a new topic:

Being desirous of “investigating” Spiritualism I went a few days ago to see a medium who was said to raise a piano in broad daylight. She was a deceiver, performing the feat by means of her wonderfully strong and skilful [sic] knee. If I go on investigating I shall make anyhow an important discovery: either that there exists a force of some sort not dreamed of in our philosophy, (whether it be spirits or not)—or, that human testimony, voluminous in quantity, and from the most respectable sources, is but a revelation of universal imbecility. I hate to settle down in this last conviction, and so would like to give the thing more of a trial than I have done yet. Have you seen any manifestations?327

Whether or not Havens attended séances is unclear: we have no existent letters from her and the next letter that James writes to her is missing pages.328 Nor is it clear from previous letters that this was a standard topic of conversation between them. It may well be the case that James was seeking a new direction of conversation and decided to steer his way into a popular subject that Miss Havens, an intelligent and well informed upper-class woman of New York, could offer her own opinion.

Yet, despite whatever reason that James may have had for broaching the subject, the significance of the letter stems from James’s own self-disclosure. He claims that he is “desirous” of “investigating” mediums and well known phenomena associated with Spiritualism. His intention seems to be that of genuine interest: despite his encounter with fraudulent behavior on behalf of the unknown medium, he feels that it is quite possible

327 James to Catherine Elizabeth Havens, Cambridge, 14 June 1874, in Correspondence, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 4, 1855-1876 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 496.

328 Known correspondence between James and Catherine E. Havens began in 1868 and continued until 1877, though no know copies of her letters have been uncovered (see Correspondence Vol. 4, 610).
that there is a deeper explanation whether it is of the metaphysical or perhaps of the
psycho-physiological type. At the same time, however, James recognizes the possibility
that there may be nothing behind the phenomena other than the wishful thinking on
behalf of the audience.

While merely an academic point, the secondary literature suggests that it was not
until James’s 1885 encounter of Mrs. Piper that his “serious interest…was aroused” and
that he firmly committed himself to the study of mediumship and psychical
phenomena. This letter, in contrast, suggests that his devotion to the subject precedes
Piper by a full decade. Given his proclamation to continue his research into the matter, he
gives the impression that this is not his first go at it. That is to say, the letter suggests that
this is not the first medium that he has visited, nor was it his last. While we know that
James was significantly involved in the study of mediumistic phenomena from 1884
onward, as a result of his involvement with the SPR and the ASPR, the letter to Havens
suggests a keen interest prior to his encounter with Mrs. Piper, the medium that would
have the most profound impact on his theoretical and practical thinking about
Spiritualism and psychical research. Whether or not James actually acted upon this
commitment to physically “investigate,” however, is a question whose answer evades
scholars.

The initial problem is one of sheer volume: nearly four hundred pages of
correspondence separate James’s letter to Havens and his joining of the SPR, when he
began regular investigations of mediums and psychical phenomena; whether or not these
letters have been “lost” or edited out of the collection, however, is the real problem.

329 Murphy, William James on Psychical Research, 19.
Nevertheless, we know that during this time he did continue his investigations in a different sense. For example, communication between James and G. Stanley Hall, an early member and later critic of the ASPR’s work on psychical research, reveals that James continued to read and discuss Spiritualistic matters during the late 1870s. In the fall of 1879, while Hall is studying in Leipzig, the pair appears to be closely following the investigation of Henry Slade, the American medium made famous for his slate writing. Hall sent James a copy of Wilhelm Wundt’s *Der Spiritismus* and mention is made of Gustave Fechner’s investigation of Slade.\(^{330}\) Also, at that time, Hall had been advised to write a brochure on psychic phenomena and queries James as to what literature he has that might aide him in the endeavor. Interestingly, however, James provides a very moody response saying that “he has nothing about Spiritism—and should think that you’d better steer clear of that scrape altogether.”\(^{331}\) Hall, in turn, pursues the subject no further but does express his wish that James could accompany him to Breslau “to see Heidenhein’s wonderful discoveries about animal magnetism which have excited the

\(^{330}\) See James to Granville Stanley Hall, Prout’s Neck, Maine, 3 September 1879, in *Correspondence*, ed. Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, vol. 5, 1878-1884 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 61-62 and Hall to James, Leipzig, 27 December 1879, in *Correspondence*, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 5, 1878-1884 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 72-74. Slade would later be investigated by the Seybert Commission, which, in 1887, would report that he was a fraud. Supposedly James, himself, sat with Slade (see calendared correspondence Minot Judson Savage to James, *Correspondence* Vol. 6, 583). According to Savage, James’s sitting was not “fortunate,” whereas Savage’s experience was significantly more exciting because of Slade’s “being lifted two feet while seated in a chair” and “obtaining writing on a slate that Slade did not touch” (583).

\(^{331}\) James to Granville Stanley Hall, Cambridge, 16 January 1880, in *Correspondence*, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 5, 1878-1884 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 82.
whole city.”332 Heidenhein, a German physiologist teaching at the University of Breslau was conducting hypnotic experiments with the aim of debunking Spiritualist phenomena.

Despite James confessed interests between his 1869 review of *Planchette* and his 1885 work with the SPR, we have comparatively little evidence that documents James’s early study of mediums and Spiritualist phenomena. I have highlighted three episodes that suggest that James was engaged in the literature and that he seriously considered the possibility of a more systematic study of mediumistic phenomena. However, because of the lack of historic evidence, we cannot conclusive say whether or not he actually did pursue this interest. Needless to say, however, it is clear that roots of his “spooky” pluralism reach back to the late sixties, possibility even further. As Murphy and Ballou noted, however, these inclinations were not the eloquent thoughts that are scattered throughout his 1885 writings and onward.

**Mental Healing and the Mind-cure Movement**

Turning toward other nineteenth century movements, the second entry point for further exploration of James’s “spooky” interests is the Mind-cure movement. Similar to his relationship to Spiritualism and psychical research, scholarship that pieces together James’s interest, experience, and theoretic musings on this movement is comparatively minimal. In what follows, I shall provide a brief overview of the movement, a discussion of his pre-*Varieties* engagement with the mental healing movement, and address the problem of measurement (or verification) of mental healing. Before moving on, however,

---

332 Granville Stanley Hall to James, n.p., 15 February 1880, in *Correspondence*, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 5, 1878-1884 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 86.
a brief word must be said about what is not covered in this section. Because of the scholarship that has already addressed James’s writings on the movement, I will not be providing an account of James’s most famous treatment which appears in *Varieties*.

The heart of the movement can be traced back to Phineus P. Quimby (1802-1866), a New Hampshire clockmaker and reputable clairvoyant healer, hypnotist, inventor, and spiritual teacher. In 1838 Quimby witnessed Charles Poyen’s demonstration of animal magnetism and resolved to follow Poyen for the next two years until he was able to master the theory and practice of animal magnetism. Afterward, with the assistance of a particularly adept trance subject, Lucius Burkmar, Quimby took to traversing the lyceum circuit and over time developed his own clairvoyant technique, which gave rise to his own healing ministry. It is widely reported that over the course of his healing ministry Quimby attended to nearly 12,000 patients. Just as he had learned all that he could from Poyen only to develop his own path of mental and spiritual therapeutics, so too did his most celebrated students. Through the subsequent idiosyncratic developments of Annetta and Julius Dresser, Warrant Felt Evans, and Mary Baker Eddy (founder of Christian Science), the “New Thought” movement and its various offshoots became more internally diversified, despite being loosely associated by adherence to similar principles.333

In the 1880s during James’s early tenure at Harvard, Boston was the central hub for the mental healing movement. In addition to having started her own movement, Mary

Baker Eddy relocated to Boston to start up a school to train her pupils. At the same time, the Dressers, Evans, and Edward J. Arens also had Boston-based institutions that were devoted to the training of mental healers.\(^{334}\) The Boston Morning Journal captures the mood of the “Boston Craze” through the following 1894 description:

> Mind-cure, or Christian Science, is called by people outside of New England a Boston craze. No other city has developed the system to such an extent as Boston and probably in no other place are there as many disciples of mental healing. Four recognized heads of as many different schools reside in this vicinity and hundreds of followers swell the list of believers. A system of healing, claiming so many adherents and recognized so largely by many eminent men, deserves to be better understood than it is at present by the large majority of people.\(^{335}\)

**James as a Patient and Defender of the Mind-Cure Movement**

Whether on account his close proximity to being in the eye of the storm of the “Boston craze,” a purely intellectual curiosity, or some unknown personal experience, James was drawn toward the mental healing community and quickly became one of its more important commentators prior to writing Varieties. As addressed in the secondary literature, James would go on to write about and defend this popular movement, drawing attention to its mind-over-matter therapeutic techniques and its underlying metaphysics. Most notable and most well documented are his 1894 and 1898 defense against the Medical Registration Act and his depiction of it as a religion of “healthy-mindedness” in Varieties.\(^{336}\) In other works too, James offers largely positive suggestions about the


\(^{336}\) For a brief discussion of his 1894 and 1898 defense, see “Fringe Sensitivity, the Epistemic Underdog, and Rationalizing the Irrational” in chapter One.
movement. At the same time, in his publications, lectures, and personal correspondence James is quite critical of the mental healing movement, particularly in terms of their metaphysical explanation for why healing occurs.

Bits and pieces of James’s mental healing narrative have been filtered through the biographical literature; meanwhile the bulk of commentary comes from scholars interested in the history of psychology or religious experience. The most common feature of this type of scholarship is divided between analysis of his 1894 and 1898 defense of mental healers and his 1901-02 treatment of the movement in Varieties, where he associates mental healing with “the religion of healthy-mindedness.”

What has received comparatively little attention in the scholarly literature is the collection of mental healing texts that belong to James’s “Crank literature” collection. Of the books and pamphlets documented in James’s private collection, the earliest dated

337 See James, TT, 129 and James, PU, 138.


340 Books and Pamphlets Selected from the Library of William James and Presented to Harvard College Library in 1923, bMS Am 1092 (4579), William James Papers, Houghton Library, Cambridge, MA. The list is housed in Houghton, but the books are scattered amongst Countway, Houghton, and Widener libraries.
entry is E.W. Taylor’s pamphlet, *The Mental Element in the Treatment of Disease*, meanwhile the last entry, T. Troward’s *The Edinburgh Lectures on Mental Science*, was published in 1908.\textsuperscript{341} It is fair to assume that the bulk of the texts were gathered while James was preparing for his Gifford Lectures—published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. However, we cannot say with certainty that this is the case.\textsuperscript{342} Circumstantial evidence suggests that James was well acquainted with the mental community and its literature prior to his *Varieties* research and thus he may have collected these texts prior to his initial research for the Gifford lectures.

In 1894, before James publically defended the mental healers against the State of Massachusetts, he published a review of Leander E. Whipple’s *The Philosophy of Mental Healing*.\textsuperscript{343} Although we do not gain much information about James’s understanding of the mind-cure movement, here, he gives the impression of already being immersed in the literature.\textsuperscript{344} While criticizing the analytic aspect of Whipple’s text, he writes that “[a]lthough the theoretic exposition seems to the more carnal and school-bred mind of the present reporter to lack technical sharpness, it is much more assimilable than any previous statement which he has read.”\textsuperscript{345}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{341} Under the heading “Mental Healing” are listed 47+ volumes. Also included elsewhere in the 1923 donation list are copies of the periodical *Mind: the leading exponent of the New Thought*.

\textsuperscript{342} James began preparing for the Gifford lectures as early as 1897.


\textsuperscript{344} Ibid., 475.

\textsuperscript{345} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
In addition to this review, evidence by way of other reviews, articles, and book chapters evince the fact that James also kept up with the psychological literature, specifically the French school of abnormal psychology and the work of the ASPR on trance states of consciousness, both of which provide causal psychological explanations of the therapeutic phenomena. While this information is documented elsewhere, it is also gleamed from his remarks about the lack of any “detailed [explanatory] account of the practical method...[of]...metaphysical healing.” According to James, most psychologists are inclined to discuss the mental healing in terms of how the subliminal self acts upon the conscious self.

As already suggested, James gives the impression of having a firm grasp on the heart of the popular religious movement as early as 1894. In part, this early interest most likely stems another important aspect of James’s engagement with the mind-cure movement: his first hand experience as a patient. As is well known, James and his family (particularly his brother, Henry) were subject to a plethora of ailments and complex medical issues. As a sign of the times, as well as the location of the James’s social and economic status, he and his siblings routinely pursued treatment by way of a cacophony of remedies. Simon and Richardson provide the best accounts, each carefully detailing the mental and physical ailments and how James and his family sought to remedy them.

346 For a thorough account of how James’s study of French abnormal psychology bears on his interpretation of the mental healer, see Taylor (1996) and Sutton (2012).

347 James, review Philosophy of Mental Healing, 475.

348 From a distance, reading the correspondence between William and Henry as they shares the various cures, treatments, and techniques that they subjected themselves to in the name of finding mental and physical stability is quite comical. It is not too far of an exaggeration to say that more often than not any given letter between the two will contain some form of health complaint and/or its treatment.
For our purposes, we want to pay close attention to James’s experience as a patient of mind-cure therapeutics. Sutton calculates that between 1887 and his death he underwent 10 different treatments, each ranging from 10 to 20 sessions. She writes:

There are more details about some of his mind-cure experience than others but, briefly, his mental healing case history was comprised as follows: in 1886, he sought treatment for insomnia; in 1893 for melancholy; in 1894 for insomnia and headache; in 1898 and 1899, he went seeking relief for unspecified symptoms; for nervous prostrations in 1900; insomnia again in 1906; two separate courses of treatment for “anginoid pain” in 1907; and in 1909, he visited a Christian Scientist complaining of chest pains, respiratory problems, and nervous prostration.349

The most historically significant treatment is his first in 1887.350 According to Sutton evidence suggests that James was treated by none other than Annetta Dresser, wife of Julius Dresser and mother of Horatio Dresser.351

Boston in the 1880s was the hub of the mind-cure movement, and there was no dearth of mental healers.352 How exactly James came across Mrs. Dresser is unknown—


350 See James’s letters to Kitty Prince (3 Feb. 1887), to Alice (5 Feb. 1887), and to Henry (10 March 1887) in Correspondence, Vol. 6 for the former two and Vol. 2 for the latter. In opposition to this, there seems to be evidence that James might have had a treatment prior to this. In a letter to Henry, dated 24 August 1886, James was on vacation and seems to have gotten sick. He writes “Tomorrow we go back to Jaffrey, my vacation vigor rather shattered by this unforeseen attack—but I hope ten days will see me as spry as ever again.—George Dorr, by the way, seems to have been completely restored to health by the ‘mind-cure!’” The reference to Dorr’s cure gives us a reference to understand the “ten days” which was a common length of treatment that James have for his mind-cure therapy sessions.

351 The Dresser family were prominent members of the early New Thought Movement. In VRE and afterward, James would draw heavily upon the work of Horatio Dresser. According to the 1923 donation records, of the forty-seven books under the heading of “Mental Healing,” nine were written and/or edited by him. Alongside of Wood and Trine, Dresser is cited as breathing new life into the New Thought movement.

her son, Horatio, did not enter Harvard College’s undergraduate program until 1891 and later began his graduate studies under James in 1903—but the fact that he began his mental healing experiences with someone so close to the source is striking. Nevertheless, it seems as though some treatments, even those with Annetta Dresser, were more successful than others—for himself, as well as his family members and friends. The occasional lack of response or recuperation on James’s part, however, did not necessarily affect his conception of mind-cure movement and its role in healing.

Mental healing appears to have been an interest shared by James and his wife, Alice. In March of 1888 James mailed Alice a copy of Mulford’s *Your Forces, and How to Use Them*. He writes that he has not time to read it and requests: “Pray read it if you can and tell me what is in it when we meet. Mark any good passages and note the pages of ‘em in the fly-leaf.” In addition to reading the literature, Alice also had treatments.

---

353 In his February 5th letter to Alice he explains his treatment: “I have been paying 10 or 11 visits to a mind-cure doctress, a sterling creature, resembling the Venus of Medecine [sic], Mrs. Lydia E. Pinkham made solid and veracious-looking. I sit down beside her and presently drop asleep, whilst she disentangles the snarls out of my mind. She says she never saw a mind with so many, so agitated, so restless etc. She said my eyes, mentally speaking, kept revolving, like wheels in front of each other & in front of my face, and it was 4 or 5 sittings ere she could get them fixed. I am now, unconsciously to myself, much better than when I first went, etc. I thought it might please you to hear an opinion of my mind so similar to your own.” James to Alice How Gibbens James, Cambridge, 5 February 1887, in *Correspondence*, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 6, 1885-1889 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 199.

354 James to Alice Howe Gibben James, Cambridge, 29 March 1888, in *Correspondence*, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 6, 1885-1889 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 357.

355 For example, see his letter to his son, Alexander. He writes that “Your mother's activity and power are extraordinary. I think them to be in part the gradually cumulative effect of her mind-cure thoughts and practices. She certainly is more powerful than she was 4 or 5 years ago.” James to Alexander Robertson James, Salter’s Hill Top, 29 October 1908, in *Correspondence*, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds.,
Mind-cure therapy seemed to be such a commonplace thing in their lives that on occasion James would gently tease Alice about it.\footnote{In his letter of 25 February 1888, James writes to Alice reflecting on her previous letter and how she has been thinking about Mrs. Dresser and her mind-cure therapy. He writes: “And now I must get to bed. I must turn over a new leaf. Earlier hours, fewer parties, more work, more writing especially. If you were only here and we quiet, what a relief ’t would be. But no complaints! When you spoke of lying in bed wondering if Mrs. Dresser had made you so lighthearted it was a heavenly beautiful picture which it raised. I feel now as if I had never seen you at the waking hour. I must hereafter. But alas! Your lightheartedness is due not to Mrs. Dresser, but to the fact that I the millstone, I the marplot, the complainer, the maker of impossibilities the worrier, the contradicter, denyer & forbidder, am no longer there—and the freedom from wear and tear is unbelievable and has these constitutional effects. I see it too well. But good night! good night!” James to Alice Howe Gibben James, Cambridge, 25 February 1888, in \textit{Correspondence}, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 6, 1885-1889 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 329-30.}

In this regard, Sutton’s research exposes humorous but also revealing evidence about the contrasting opinion within the James family regarding the merit of the mental therapeutics. In James’s copy of Ralph Waldo Trine’s \textit{In Tune with the Infinite}, there is a passage wherein he preaches the benefits of “sending out” thoughts of good-will, love, and peace.\footnote{Levinson (1981) and Albanese (2007) report that James enjoyed the book so much that he actually gave his son, Henry, a copy for his birthday.} According to Trine, “your sleep will be more quiet and peaceful, and refreshing.” James’s experience with mental healing therapy does not seem to cure his long term problem with insomnia, as his marginalia clearly refutes these claims by his insertion: “lies.” Alongside of James’s commentary, appears to be Alice’s response: “Not lies—it is possible.”\footnote{Sutton, “Interpreting ‘Mind-Cure,’” 126, ft. 19.} While the lack of long term recovery probably frustrated James, as he frequently suffered from bouts of insomnia and depression, it speaks toward his...
contention that “[i]t matters nothing that, just as there are hosts of persons who cannot pray, so there are greater hosts who cannot by any possibility be influenced by the mind-curer’s ideas…the important point is that so large a number should exist who can be so influenced.”

Measurements and Exposure: the Problem of Formal Study

Considering the nature of his first-hand experience, the sizable collection of mental healing texts in his private library, his willingness to risk his reputation in defense of the movement, and the number of statements that James made that lent both legitimacy and prestige to the popular religious movement, it is clear that he was convinced of the facts surrounding mental healing and the mind-cure movement. Not unlike mental mediums, telepaths, and slew of other psychical phenomena that the SPR studied, James was initially dubious of the possibility of a formal investigation into the therapeutic effects of mental healing. While he does eventually alter the tune of his concern—later on he advocates that the mental healers should be able to legally continue their practices in order to amount more data—it is critical that we understand why James believes it problematic to study the “concrete therapeutics” of the mental healers.

On 22 April 1888, in a letter to Christine Ladd Franklin, a kindred philosopher and psychologist, James responds to her inquiry about mental and magnetic healing.

359 James, VRE, 85.

360 Following James’s writings on the mind-cure movement, it becomes clearer that he advocates for the study of the movement, however it is not evident as to how he thinks such studies should be conducted.

361 James to Christine Ladd Franklin, Cambridge, 12 April 1888, in Correspondence, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 6, 1885-1889 (Charlottesville:
He explains that the reputation of a “certain Mrs. Weatherbee” is widely known and that she has “charmed away pain” for various members of his extended family. Likewise, he reports that a certain Dr. Crockett enjoys a solid reputation, despite the occasional failures to satisfactorily cure his patients. Despite the fact that there were occasions with positive results, he goes on to explain the problems and complications of carefully study of the mental healing phenomena:

I am very dubious of the poor little Soc. for Psych R. accomplishing much by seeking to “investigate” these things. Of all earthly things, therapeutic effects are the hardest to run to ground, and convince a skeptic of. There will always be a dozen loopholes of escape from any conclusion about therapeutics, and the mind will take which ever one it prefers. I think the history of opinion about homeopathy (or about the single drug alcohol) is enough to make anyone hopeless of making therapeutic evidence satisfactory to all… Practical physicians are the only ones who can say an influential word in these matters; and they must have already made themselves influential in other matters, or they will simply discredit themselves by speaking of such things as those of which you write. A. Charcot can afford to risk his reputation in this way; a common practitioner cannot. Meanwhile such experiences as yours, mentioned by such a person as yourself, will accrete with others and little by little invite the attention of the competent.362

As James points out here, the difficulty with which one might pursue the study of mental therapeutics qua objective phenomena is exceedingly difficult—particularly when the phenomena and the investigation of it are epistemically opposite. His parallel between homeopathic medicine and mental healing is instructive.

Homeopathy is an alternative system of healing created by Samuel Hahnemann in Germany in the late 1790s. Frustrated with orthodox medicine and the “heroic” method of allopathic prescription, Hahnemann was critical of the practices of severe dosing of

University of Virginia Press, 1998), 374-75.

362 Ibid., 374.
multiple medications. In objection to these practices, Hahnemann came to believe that it was the subtle and dynamic interaction of similarity that best aided the natural healing process. Rooted in a thinly veiled vitalism, homeopathy was driven by “the law of similarities” (similia similibus curentur) and “the doctrine of infinitesimals.” Hahnemann believed that a patient’s symptoms could be cured by the application of miniscule doses of medicine that produce similar effects. Under the guidance of Hans Gram, homeopathy spread to American in mid 1820s and quickly flourished on account of its less invasive practices.363

While there are many reasons as to why homeopathy enjoyed widespread attention among the American public before and after the Civil War, the most important aspect was that it touched upon an inner mind-body dynamic that was beyond the purview of allopathic medicine and its Enlightenment rationality. The therapeutic effect on the patient was two-fold: metaphysically, it purported to revitalize the individual by enabling the higher laws of the spirit to work on the lower laws of the body—which James and other psychologists interpret as a being rooted in the working of the subliminal self; psychologically, it provided the patient with a greater degree of control over his/her own health.

The point, then, of James’s remarks regarding the ineffective investigations of mental healing and homeopathy is that the results are highly partisan based upon alternating facts and competing rationalities. The orthodox medical and scientific

communities seek repeatable experiments that are capable of providing objective evidence that conclusively prove the viability of such therapeutic practices. Critical as he is of “Science,” James believed that when the data is not in accordance with metaphysical and epistemic presuppositions of the orthodox approach, any “positive” results are to be thrown to the wayside. Thus whatever healing effect that the patient encountered, whether temporary or long term, was patently dismissed by the orthodox medical and scientific community. In modern times, the problem remains much the same: scientific evidence repeatedly discredits any likelihood of such an infinitesimal amount of “medicine” as having causal powers: yet, like other alternative mind-body methodologies, homeopathy continues to receive widespread appeal amongst certain communities that subscribe to a very different set of epistemological and metaphysical assumptions.\[^{364}\]

In stark contrast to allopathic medicine, the homeopathic and mental healing communities work within an entirely different set of metaphysical and epistemological assumptions, thereby taking a very different stance with respect to the facts in question. Looking toward the metaphysics of correspondence, Fuller comments that in homeopathy we can see the affinity (and partial influence) of mesmerism and Swedenborgianism.\[^{365}\] Similarly, we can see that Quimby’s thought functions as a practical translation of the metaphysics of mesmerism and Swedenborgianism into everyday life.\[^{366}\] While a detailed account of this shared metaphysics of correspondence is beyond the scope of this chapter,\[^{364}\]

\[^{364}\] Other contemporary examples are Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Ki-therapy, naturopathic medicine, etc.


\[^{366}\] Ibid., 60; for a broader conception of this relationship see Ibid., 53-65.
it is sufficient to point out that both homeopathy and the mental healing movement, in one way or another and at various stages in their respective development, drew from and manipulated to their own liking this shared background. In each case, we find a reversal of the materialist causality: primacy is placed on the spiritual plane of existence and how it may bring about the harmonious (and healthy) existence of the physical.

James’s contention is that in contrast to the orthodox medical community, the heterodox practices of homeopathy and mental healing are drawing upon a different set of rationalities and thus approaching facts from very distinct perspectives. Their membership in the “unclassified residuum” puts them in touch with a wealth of other phenomena that require, in James’s mind, more careful and critical scrutiny from those scientists and philosophers who are capable of examining the “wild facts” that “threaten to break up the accepted system.”367 In James’s mind, we can see that he equates the activities and practices of the mental healers with animal magnetism.

The most recent and flagrant example of this is “animal magnetism,” whose facts were stoutly dismissed as a pack of lies by academic medical science the world over, until the non-mystical theory of “hypnotic suggestion” was found for them, when they were admitted to be so excessively and dangerously common that special penal laws, forsooth, must be passed to keep all persons unequipped with medical diplomas from taking part in their production. Just so stigmatizations, invulnerabilities, instantaneous cures, inspired discourse, and demoniacal possessions, the records of which were shelved in our libraries but yesterday in the alcoves headed “Superstitions,” now, under the brand-new title of “Cases of hysteria-epilepsy,” are republished, reobserved, and reported with an even to credulous avidity.368

In “The Hidden Self” he prophesizes that the “mystics” or mental healers are correct with the facts and that it is only a matter of time until the scientific community provides an

367 James, “The Hidden Self,” 249.

368 Ibid.
adequate humanistic explanation.\textsuperscript{369} Despite his best efforts to navigate this factual and rational divide, it still exists within the fields of medicine, philosophy, psychology, and religion. Nevertheless, it is clear from the sheer amount of energy expended on such matters that the mind-cure movement constitutes a central place in James’s “spooky” pluralism.

Cautionary Tales: the Case of Perry, James, and Phrenology
As we have seen in the preceding sections, James expresses sympathetic tendencies toward a wide variety of disparate traditions that many contemporary scholars would classify as pseudo-science, occult, or just plain quackery. What we also witnessed is that in virtually all accounts of James’s spooky pluralism, there is some form of scientific and psychological interest that undergirds his investigations. Thus while we can assuredly say that James’s pluralistic inclination lead him to many unusual and strange phenomena, we must be critical to the degree to which we impute the proximity of association.

The best example of uncritical attribution derives from the great biographer and chronicler of James’s thought, Ralph Barton Perry. In his \textit{Thought and Character}, Perry advances a handful of assertions that, while accurate to some degree, certainly need to be more critically examined. Case in point, depending upon how thoroughly one reads Perry's account, we may be tempted to interpret James as being sympathetic to phrenology as an “art” of character study.

In his chapter on the “General Sources of \textit{The Principles}” Perry writes that

\[\text{[James] saw man in the round—as he presents himself to the clinician, the biologist, the traveler, the artist, the novelist. He was willing to learn about}\]

\textsuperscript{369} \textit{Ibid.}
many from any source, however disesteemed by orthodox science. His more or less shady excursions into psychical research are well known. He “believed there was much truth in phrenology.” He had strong interests in physiognomy…\textsuperscript{370}

And again, in the chapter entitled “Psychical Research,” he makes the following passing comment that:

psychical research was only one of many examples of James's fondness for excursions to the scientific underworld. This general sympathy with every line of inquiry, however speculative or irregular, that might by any chance throw light on the nature of man is illustrated by his early interest in phrenology.\textsuperscript{371}

Before evaluating these claims, we must first note that Perry does, in fact, point out that James ultimately rejects the phrenological conception as a science of mind. This can be evinced by tending to James’s publications that treat the topic of phrenology: an 1875 review of Nicolas Morgan’s *The Skull and the Brain* and a subsection of chapter of his *Principles of Psychology*.\textsuperscript{372}

The Skull and the Brain and “The Phrenological Conception”

James’s review of Morgan presents a critical commentary on the state of phrenological inquiry. On the one hand it praises Morgan for his awareness of “the provisional nature of

\textsuperscript{370} Perry, *Thought and Character* Vol 2., 51.

\textsuperscript{371} Ibid., 156 (emphasis added).

formulas in general and of the formulas of his own art in particular.”373 These remarks refer to the manner in which Morgan’s critique of how Gall and Spurzheim emphasize the “faculties” and “organs,” when in reality phrenological findings merely suggest “cranial indications of special talents, emotions, aptitudes…”374 According to James’s interpretation, these “indications” may be aligned with physiognomy and the “useful art” of character reading—a position which does not admit of scientific character. On the other hand, James expresses an attitude which is critical of phrenology, in general, by his remarks about phrenology’s “almost grotesque” analysis of the “faculties” as being a “crude empiric art.”375 In particular, James challenges Morgan’s failure to provide a serious engagement of Alexander Bain’s devastating psychological critique of phrenology which he claims has “thrown a flood of light over this whole matter.”376

In addition to the critical content of the review, textual evidence suggests that James was rather disappointed by the fact that Morgan’s book was phrenological. In a letter to W. P. Garrison, the editor of *The Nation*, James commented that had he known in advance that this text was phrenological in nature, then he would not have offered to review it.377

373 James, review *The Skull and the Brain*, 308.

374 Ibid.

375 Ibid.

376 Ibid., 309.

Moving forward, it is evident that the language of James’s critique in “The Phrenological Conception” is toned down considerably: instead, he raises the analytic bar by offering a far more extensive critique of the limitations and failures of the phrenological method. In “The Functions of the Brain,”—a chapter that is now largely overlooked by scholars or read only for historic interest—James provides a physiological and functionalist account of the brain. Between explanations of the general notion of the brain hemispheres and cerebral localization of the hemisphere, he provides a critical interlude that systematically deconstructs the phrenological conception of the brain and its reduction to thirty-seven homunculous faculties. Citing the work of English neurologist John Hughlings Jackson and the German anatomist Theodor Meynert, James walks his reader through the importance of understanding the physiological and psychological importance of recent discoveries regarding sensory and motor nerves as a way of “formulating the facts” with regard to the mind-brain relationship.

In addition to the physiological and psychological critique of the 1890s passage, James does go on to offer a positive statement that despite phrenology’s inability to tell us about the scientific functions of parts of the brain, it “may still be, in the hands of an intelligent practitioner, a useful help in the art of reading character.”378 Whatever may be said of James’s critical attitude toward phrenology in the 1875 review and his 1890 treatment, Perry showcases the passage about James's positive comments as a way of highlighting his attraction to the “spooky” side of the mid to late nineteenth century scientific thought.

More awkward, however, is Perry’s citation that suggests that James was, in some capacity or another, a believer in the truth of phrenology. While we cannot entirely rule out this possibility, it is important that we examine the source from which Perry attributes this claim. The quote Perry makes use of, which claims that James “believed there was much truth in phrenology,” derives from the prefatory remarks of Thomas A. Hyde’s *How to Study Character.* Perry notes that Hyde was a former student of James and that his book began as an essay that he wrote for one of James’s 1881 classes.

According to Hyde’s introduction, “the essay, when read before the Professor of Psychology, was favorably commented upon by him, and he declared that he believe there was much truth in Phrenology.” While it is not be difficult to confirm Hyde’s placement in the class and thus validate that James was the “Professor of Psychology,” a later passage in Hyde book clearly singles out remarks that are ascribed to James. Thus, it is not identification, but verification of the remarks that concern us. In a subsection entitled, “Reading Character as an Objection,” Hyde writes the following:

> An objection has been made to Phrenology, even by the present professor of psychology in this university (Harvard), that Phrenology is not a

---

379 The other issue with Perry’s account is that he attributes an “early interest in phrenology” to James. The problem is that Perry does not provide any factual or textual evidence for this assertion. While it may be the case that James did read Gall, Spurzheim and Combe (see Hyde’s account below), I have yet to find any evidence that supports this claim.


382 Hyde, *How to Study Character,* 8. Most likely, the course was “Philosophy 5: Psychology” which read Bain’s *Mental and Moral Science.*
science of the mind, but merely an art of reading character; but of all objections made against Phrenology this is the weakest. Is the science of medicine less of a science because it has given rise to the art and practice of medicine? Is geology less a science because from its principles practical geologist can survey tracts of country and draw geological maps and write reports? If that objection holds good against Phrenology, it applies with equal force against every science which has its principles so well defined that they can be put into practice, for an art is only an applied science. This objection, instead of being an argument against Phrenology, is the crowning proof that its principles are derived from nature itself.  

The end of this passage is marked with an asterisk. The footnote goes on to explain that sometime after the course James later qualified what he meant by his remark about phrenology as an “art” of character reading.

It is only just to mention that the professor of psychology before whom this essay was read, since the reading of the essay has explained that by his assertion that Phrenology was not a science but merely an art of reading character, he did not mean an art in the real and true sense—as an art of medicine, etc.—but simply an art in its degraded sense, as applied to fortune-telling, astrology, etc. It would have been well if he had given this definition of art to his students in class assembled, as his words then conveyed a condemnation of Phrenology as an art in the true sense of the word. It does not seem possible that the professor of psychology, after a careful reading of the works of Gall, Spurzheim, Combe, and Bain, which he says he read with great interest, could entertain so low an estimate of Phrenology, especially as Prof. Bain, who is not at all partial to Phrenology, admits it to be a science of character as well as an art.  

In this passage we get a new sense of the meaning of James’s comments regarding the merit, or lack thereof, of phrenology. According to Hyde, James’s use of the term “art” is derogatory in nature: it is equated with the fraudulent pseudo-sciences of fortune-telling, astrology, and the bulk of material mediumship. This information, if accurate on Hyde’s part, casts new light on James’s 1875 review, as well as his critique in Principles.

383 Hyde, How to Study Character, 48-49.
384 Ibid., 49.
Caution must be taken, however, given that Hyde’s account is nothing more than oral history. Yet, when considering the nature and scope of Hyde’s *How to Study Character*, we can ascertain the unlikelihood that he is fabulating his narrative due to the conflict of interests. While Hyde claims to not be a card-carrying phrenologist, we can certainly see that his study is that of an apologist, as a mere glance at the full title of his text would affirm. This is also evident in the introduction to Hyde’s book, when he describes himself as maintaining a grounded interest in “pure” truth. He explains that he has “no especial partiality for Phrenology…[rather his interest is]…the desire to obtain the best information possible upon a science which he considers next in importance to a knowledge of God, the science of Mind and Character.”

385

Taken as a whole, Hyde’s book seems to be little more than a series of polemics against those individuals that challenge the merit of the phrenological enterprise. Thus when we consider the weight of James’s critique and the type of impact that his later clarification had on Hyde, it suggests a complication with respect the weight of Perry’s account wherein James supposedly praises phrenology as an art of character reading. As is evident in the footnoted passage cited above, Hyde’s frustration with James is that he originally misunderstood James’s comments and assumed that the assertion of phrenology as an art carried honorific implications. However, upon further review, Hyde realized that James’s critical commentary is more damning than he originally thought: James’s critique, it seems, leaves no room for positive thinking insofar as phrenology is neither a rigorous science nor a respectable art.

385 Hyde, *How to Study Character*, 8-9. He concludes the introduction with the following closing remarks: “That the essay may be read with profit, and increase a spirit of earnest longing to know as much as possible of the nature and constitution of Man, is the author’s sincere wish” (9).
Based upon the immediate textual evidence, we cannot soundly verify Perry's claim that James exhibited an "early interest in phrenology." However, when we take a wider view of the relationship between physiological discourse and the underlying premise of phrenology as a historicized medical and scientific enterprise that precedes the emergence of scientific psychology in America, it is possible to envision that James might have expressed an early interest in phrenology. This line of inquiry, I would suggest, would need to differentiate between what Bakan describes as the “vulgar-phrenologists” and the “ortho-phrenologists,” the latter being possessed of a genuinely scientific interest, whereas the former are characterized as “those who exploited phrenology for their own profits.” Such a distinction would draw a solid line between the Fowler brothers’ popularized pseudo-scientific side of phrenology and the more anatomical, physiological, and psychological work of Gall, Spurzheim, Combe, etc.

When viewed from this perspective we can see a more cogent reason as to why James may have expressed an interest in the phrenological tradition. By attending to the anatomical and physiological discourse that extends from the late eighteenth to mid nineteenth century, we can see a concerted effort on behalf of the scientific community to investigate the relationship between the brain and the mind. By returning to James’s treatment of phrenology in “The Phrenological Conception,” we can readily note that it is


\[\text{387 Lorenzo Niles Folwer (1881-1896) and his brother Orson Squire Fowler (1809-1887) were largely responsible for popularizing phrenology qua head charts and bump readings across middle class America. This endeavor stood in contrast the work of Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828), the so-called founder of Phrenology, Johann Gaspar Spurzheim (1776-1832), Gall’s most famous pupils who, alongside of George Combe (1788-1858), would spread phrenology throughout Europe and America. For general accounts of the phrenological movement, see Taylor (1999) and Albanese (2008).}\]
textually surrounded by a rich history and analysis of the physiological structure and function of brain. While extremely dated to the modern reader, James went to great lengths to ground his functionalist psychology in the contemporary understanding of neurophysiology. Read contextually, it suggests that, though dismissive of the phrenological conception, James understood its basic role as belonging to the problem of cerebral localization which he remarks as being the larger narrative of “the most stirring controversy in nerve-physiology which the present generation has seen.”\footnote{James, \textit{PP} Vol. 1, 42.} When historicized as belonging to “the most stirring controversy” and further contextualized by James’s mastery of the physiological literature, it is conceivable that James actually read the works of the phrenologists.

Concluding Remarks

In the course of this chapter I have provided a glimpse into James’s engagement with heterodox religious experiences that constitute the foundation of a spooky pluralism. Using Spiritualism and the Mind-Cure movement as entry points, I have illustrated how these movements and their associated phenomena gripped James’s interests during the 1870s all the way up to the publication of \textit{The Will to Believe}. Readers familiar with James’s corpus will recognize that there are many other doorways into this side of James thinking. As I have briefly discussed in Chapter One, meanwhile, James devoted a considerable amount of time and energy to abnormal psychology and the discussion of hypnotism, automatism, hysteria, multiple personality, mediumship, witchcraft, and genius in the mid 1890s. Throughout the 1890s James continues to argue on behalf of

388 James, \textit{PP} Vol. 1, 42.
what he calls the “unclassified residuum,” and by 1897 he provides us with rough sketches of a theory that seeks to make theoretic, practical, and social sense of these exceptional experiences (see Chapter Five). Post 1897, James begins to conduct his research for the Gifford Lectures and there encounters a wealth of material that treat experiences that require an alternative metaphysical and epistemological frameworks. While there is much here to romanticize, it is crucial to understand that in virtually all of these cases, an important aspect of James’s engagement with these alternative communities is that he believed that through “scientific” study something positive may be gained about our understanding of the self and human experience.

To illustrate this point one can turn to Bordogna’s illustration of James’s engagement with psychical research embodied what he considered to be the practice of good science (and good philosophy). These practices enabled James (and others) to attempt to “not only open the boundaries of science to marginal phenomena but also to transgress social divides and to create a new type of community of inquirers.” This activity is in direct contrast to what James’s considered to be “bad science,” or more specifically, the activity of bad scientists—those individuals who sought to close communication between different fields inquiry, thereby attempting to shut down discourse, thereby effectively separating and marginalizing particular communities of inquirers. As I argued in my first chapter, one way of understanding James’s early radical empiricist attitude is to look at it through the lens of an epistemic sensitivity to the “alogical” other. This socio-epistemic awareness, no doubt, develops in part due to his “spooky” interests throughout the 1870s, 80s, and 90s.

389 Bordogna, William James at the Boundaries, 95.
One of the goals of this chapter is to illuminate that James’s interest in the dark or spooky side of pluralism is but one of many sides of his thinking in the 1890s that has its roots in alternative religious communities and psychical research, all of which informs his early radical empiricism. Dewey’s neglect to comment that considerable portions of James’s attention was being diverted to the “spooky” side of pluralism while he was at the forefront of pluralist philosophy in the mid 1890s is characteristic of much of the contemporary secondary literature on James’s pluralism. This is a peculiar state of affairs insofar as when we consider the nature of James’s pluralistic thinking, his interest in the “unclassified residuum” brings together all three dimensions of his philosophy.

We would do well to remind ourselves that James’s engagement with the “spooky” also embraces all three categories of Putnam’s characterization of James’s pluralism. She explains that:

Pluralism…is itself not a single doctrine; it is in fact three doctrines. First, there is the metaphysical doctrine concerning real possibilities, etc. Second, there is what one might call the epistemological doctrine, that there is no single point of view from which the whole plurality can be apprehended. Finally, there is the moral doctrine of tolerance.

First, even though James did not agree with the metaphysical explanations that were given, he took seriously the fact that these were real experiences of peculiar persons. Not only is this evident in his consideration of the mental healing community, but it also reflects his concerns with mental mediumship, his experiments with hypnotism, and


392 While there were many mental mediums that were just as guilty as the physical mediums of conducting fraudulent activity for self-prosperity and/or fame, his
relationship with Piper suggests that he firmly believed that there was at least “one white crows.”

As for first- and second-hand experiences, within the twelve volumes of Correspondence and the psychology-oriented volumes of Works there are regular reports of James hypnotizing subjects. Circumstantial evidence suggests that James was a skilled hypnotizer. In some cases he was merely attempting to confirm and/or refute theories that were being published in the field of experimental psychology. For example, he conducted hypnotic experiments on Harvard seniors which formed the basis of two reports for the society: “Report of the Committee on hypnotism” and “Reaction-Time in the Hypnotic trance,” the latter being a refutation of Hall and Wundt’s theory about reaction time in trance states (see James, EPR, 200-203). In other cases, it was not uncommon for James to hypnotize someone in his own home or elsewhere and for what seem to be very different purposes.

For example, at a meeting of the ASPR, James hypnotized Gouverneur M. Carnochan, also one of the committee members on hypnotism, in order to display the effectiveness of suggestion while in a trance state—also to show that trance was rooted in reflex action and inhibition, not some Odic or other supernatural force—Odic force being a vitalistic theory purported by Baron von Reichenbach to explain the trance state obtained by animal magnetism. During this performance James was able to alter Carnochan’s state of perception effectively making him blind to certain stimuli (See James, EPR, 382; for a more thorough account see the article in Science 7 [January 29, 1886], 91-92).

Elsewhere, in a letter to William Sturgis Bigelow, a Boston physician and financial contributor to the ASPR, James discusses matters of the ASPR and comments that he hypnotized a student in his library and that the student agrees to “develop”—a term that was typically used in connection with development of mediumistic abilities (See James to William Sturgis Bigelow, Cambridge, 19 January 1887, in Correspondence, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 6, 1885-1889 [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998], 580.) The associations of the term “develop” and its connection to the progress of mediumship was brought to my attention by the editors of Correspondence when discussing an odd reference that Henry makes about Alice trying to “develop” for James’s use. See Henry James to James, 13 De Vere Mansions West, 9 March 1886, in Correspondence, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 2, 1885-1896 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993), 33-36. Again the subject is broached in July of 1889 when Alice reports that she was having “spiritual experiences.” James recommends that she be more careful about differentiating “natural noises” from “raps and moans” that mark the truly paranormal. See James to Alice Howe Gibben James, 34 De Vere Gardens West, 19 July 1889, in Correspondence, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 6, 1885-1889 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 511.

The most interesting case of hypnotism seems to be that of Ansel Bourne. Bourne was an itinerant preacher in Providence, Rhode Island. On January 17th, 1887 he disappeared for two months. In February, according to investigators, Bourne was reported to be in Norristown, Pennsylvania operating a general store. What is peculiar is that while there, he had no recollection of his identity as Ansel Bourne; rather, he called himself
his work in abnormal psychology. As previously mentioned, the observations about James’s engagement with Spiritualist phenomena and the Mind-Cure movements are just a few of the “alternative metaphysical religions” that inform the historical, socio-political, and religious landscape of fin de siècle America. My sense is that Jamesian studies has much to gain by further investigating the historical and cultural connections between James and alternative religious traditions. Second, James routinely espoused the idea that facts need many cognizers and that no single point of view is capable of absolute certainty. This perspectival critique is one that applies in both directions: even though James frequently singles out scientists and other philosophers as blind monists, it is equally applicable to the dogmatizers of religious thinking. Lastly, and perhaps most important for our immediate purposes, James’s thought displays a profound sympathy toward the marginalized and overlooked. As will become clearer in the remaining chapters, textual evidence suggests that James’s infamous defense of religious faith that is guided by the “spirit of inner tolerance” applies just as well to the community labeled as the “unclassified residuum.”

A.J. Brown. Reports have it that Bourne returned to Providence and was seen by his neighbors in mid-March of that year. When questioned he showed no recollection of the Norristown-Brown episode. James and other members of the ASPR paid Bourne to come to Harvard to be hypnotized. According to Hodgson’s report, “James conceived the idea that if Mr. Bourne could be hypnotized we might obtain from him while in the hypnotic trance a complete history of the whole incident, and at the same time, by post-hypnotic suggestion, prevent the recurrence of any such episode” (See “Notes on Ansel Bourne” in Essays in Psychology, Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 269; in particular, see note 269.2, 372).

CHAPTER 4
THE RELIGIOUS HYPOTHESIS RECONSIDERED

Introduction

One of the most popular, and controversial, themes of The Will to Believe is James’s defense of religious faith as presented in the title essay, “The Will to Believe.” Well over a century after its initial publication, scholars of religion and philosophy are still battling over the “correct” meaning of James’s so-called will to believe “doctrine.” A perusal of the secondary literature reveals a predominant interest in James’s philosophical justification of belief. Comparatively speaking, very few authors have focused on the religious side of James’s essay. The unfortunate consequence of this one-sided interest is that the depth and breadth of the religious dimension of his defense are frequently cast as reductionistic stereotypes. From the standpoint of religion, the most frequent misreading of the text is that James’s defense is reduced to a justification of faith in God. 395

Fortunately Ludwig Schlecht, like a small group of others before him, correctly notes that James does not directly invoke God or theism—although this topic will be discussed in

395 Unfortunately it is not uncommon to see a philosopher reducing the religious hypothesis to a defense of believing in God. For example, see Richard Rorty’s reduction: “There [James] argued that one had a right to believe in the existence of God if that belief contributed to one’s happiness, for no reason other than that very contribution.” Richard Rorty, “Cultural Politics and the question of the existence of God” in Nancy Frankenberry, Radical Interpretation in Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 56. Frankenberry also makes a similar reduction when she writes that “In the notorious essay ‘The Will to Believe,’ James claimed that belief in God was a live, momentous, and forced option, a presumption less likely to be favored today” (Frankenberry, Religion and Radical Empiricism, 87). See my “Introduction” for a brief discussion of Hunter Brown’s treatment of “live theism” which is, in my opinion, one of the more interesting and nuanced readings.
more detail below—and that in order to be faithful to the text one must look toward similar issues that James writes in other texts. He explains that:

James discusses religion, broadly understood, and its relation to faith in many other works written about the same time and later—indeed it is a central and continuing topic of concern for the rest of his life. His emphasis on the importance of faith, and his argument on its behalf, recur frequently, and with remarkable consistency. Consideration of these other sources can help us clarify and elaborate on what James writes in “The Will to Believe.”

While Schlecht’s article provides us with a resourceful account of making sense of faith in James’s other writings on religion, specifically those found in The Will to Believe and after, it does not significantly further our understanding of James’s conception of religion or those things that are deemed religious.

H. S. Thayer suggests that the openness of James’s conception of religion encourages further critical exploration: “[James’s] attempt to remain ‘generic and broad’ on the subject, so as to avoid divisive partisan zeal and fanaticism, incurs the opposite danger of vagueness and elusive formulation; the treatment thus invites the interpretive effort.” By taking up Thayer’s challenge, I want to explore an overlooked dimension of James’s conception of religion and his defense of the religious hypothesis. Given the complex history, I make no effort to settle the matter of what a definitive reading might look like; rather, it is my intention to offer an alternative voice to the literature by drawing attention to an overlooked factor. Of all the differing interpretations that constitute the secondary literature, I have not come across one that makes any attempt to


significantly incorporate any element of James’s interest in psychical research, his research into abnormal religious facts, or to engage with his spooky pluralism. In response to this lacuna, and in conjunction with my reading of James’s early radical empiricism, I would like to advance several suggestions that open new avenues of research into the historical and thematic dimensions of James’s mid 1890s defense of the religious hypothesis.

In the pages that follow, I argue for a revisionist account that aims to historically and thematically broaden the scope of James’s defense of the religious hypothesis. I suggest that one way of making historical and thematic sense of this relationship is to explore the meaningful differences that arise when “The Will to Believe” is repackaged as the leading essay in The Will to Be. I contend that it broadens our understanding of James’s conception of the religious field and thus his defense of religious faith. In part, 398

398 At the outset, it is best to clarify that this perspective does not address the immediate problems of James’s philosophical defense as rooted in the passional nature and the encounter of a genuine option. For a provocative revisionist account of James’s philosophical defense of the will to believe, see Gavin (1984, 2014). There he argues that the border(s) between the soft and the hard sciences is porous when it comes to the application of “the will to believe.”

399 James does in fact use the term “religious field” twice in his published writing. It first appears in the 1896 preface to WB (9) and then again in VRE (32). Whereas the former use of the term carries both psychological (subjective) and social (objective) relations, the latter usage speaks of the field as being divided between institutional and personal lines. In either case, the “religious field” as a sociological term is not developed—as far as I can tell—in James’s work. In contrast, he does develop the notion of field in his psychology, e.g., the field of consciousness, and also constructs a metaphysical field theory with respect to the notion of selves. For a detailed study of the latter, see Fontinell (1986) and Lamberth (1999).

At present, I am unaware of any studies that flesh out and contrast James’s notion of the religious field. My sense, however, is that there is much common ground between James and Pierre Bourdieu and that the latter can assist in fleshing out latent sociological dimensions of the former. See Pierre Bourdieu, “Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field,” trans. Jenny B. Burnside, Craig Calhoun and Leah Florence, Comparative Social Research, 13 (1991), 1-44.
this occurs because of how James recontextualizes the essay in light of the 1896 preface and his early radical empiricism. In addition, when “The Will to Believe” is read alongside of his treatment of the “unclassified residuum” in “What Physical Research Has Accomplished” (WPRHA), textual evidence that suggests that the epistemic outsider of the latter essay is intimately connected to his conception of religion and the defense of the religious hypothesis. In contrast to what James himself writes in the 1896 preface, there is good reason to believe that he included WPRHA for additional reasons beyond its mere “convenience and utility” or because of his love of “sportsman-like play.” By bringing these three texts into conversation with one another it sheds light on the range and scope of his conception of religion and the multivalent ways that he seeks to defend the religious hypothesis.

Hereafter I will refer to the 1897 revised edition of “What Physical Research Has Accomplished” as WPRHA and the 1892 original as “WPHRA.” In this chapter I argue that James’s association of the “unclassified residuum” with the mystical, in addition to its subtle connection with his supernaturalist account of religion and its most basic category of personality, reveals a wider conception of religion that is equally applicable to his defense of the religious hypothesis per “The Will to Believe.”


James, “Preface,” 10.

When we take a step back and look at the correlations between James’s defense of religion as it appears in both “The Will to Believe” and WPRHA, it leaves open the
The chapter is divided into seven sections. The first briefly lays out James’s loosely theistic definition of religion in “The Will to Believe” and suggests that a more inclusive conception of religion *qua* supernaturalism is depicted in “Is Live Worth Living?” as the reality of the “unseen order.” Section two points out that when we read “The Will to Believe” alongside of the 1896 preface it suggests that James framed his theistic definition to suit a particular target audience. Section three builds upon the supernaturalist definition of religion as faith in an “unseen order” and suggests that we take seriously an even broader conception of religion as “anything that for him is a life hypothesis in that line,” which James articulates in his correspondence with Edwin Godkin. Sections four through six draw upon James interest in the intersection between religion and psychical research. I look toward the correlation between James’s wider conceptions of religion and his treatment of the “unclassified residuum” in WPRHA. Section four provides the requisite background information for understanding the significance of WPRHA and the revisions that James made in order to make it fit with the other essays in *The Will to Believe*. Section five provides a careful examination of James’s 1890s conception of mysticism, while section six addresses the “unseen order.”

important question of which composition influenced the other. We know that the bulk of the material for WPRHA precede the composition of “The Will to Believe.” Both “The Hidden Self” and “WPRHA” were published four years prior to “The Will to Believe.” Furthermore, it is clearly documented that James mailed a completed copy of his Presidential “Address” to Myers on January 1st of 1896 and that James cribbed sections, particularly the one that distinguishes between mechanical-rationalism and the personal-Romantic view of life, for the new WPRHA. We also know that James first presented “The Will to Believe” in late April of 1896. What we do not know is when he did the revisions of WPRHA and whether or not they preceded the composition of “The Will to Believe” or were incorporated afterward. Despite not knowing the precise direction of influence, I aim to show that there is a historical and thematic continuity between these two essays and that when taken in the broader context of *The Will to Believe* they illustrate a more diverse conception of the religious hypothesis and its defense.
Taken together they argue that James’s treatment of the “unclassified residuum” can be relocated within a religious continuum that exhibits a better historical representation of James’s 1890s conception of the religion. In the closing section I return to the 1896 preface to illustrate how James’s defense of religion and the “unclassified residuum” is situated within a pragmatic and radical empiricist framework that is guided by meliorism.

Defining Religion In “The Will To Believe” And “Is Life Worth Living?”

When James first gave the “The Will to Believe” lecture in April of 1896, he presented it to philosophical clubs at Yale and Brown. By June of that year he published it in *The New World: a Quarterly Review of Religion, Ethics and Theology*. Finally, James republished it in his 1897 collection of essays, *The Will to Believe*. In section ten of “The Will to Believe” James lays out his conception of religion. There he explains that “Religions differ so much in their accidents that in discussing the religious question we must make it very generic and broad.” Out of this open platform James pulls two “essential” characteristics of religion:

First, she says that the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. "Perfection is eternal”… The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.

---


404 James, “The Will to Believe,” 29.

405 Ibid., 29-30.
Following this characterization James applies his logical conditions for defending the religious hypothesis as a genuine option. Readers need to keep in mind that he routinely qualifies his conception of the religious hypothesis under the conditions that a genuine option must be a “living option.” This means that whatever the option may be, it must have an existential and psychological appeal to the individual wherein the religious hypothesis is a “real possibility.” Concretely speaking, James asserts that “the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider.”

Immediately after having reiterated that a genuine option must be a living option for that individual, James takes a moment to further qualify his essentialization about how the “best things are the more eternal things.” He writes:

The more perfect and eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having personal form. The universe is no longer a mere It to us, but a Thou, if we are religious; and any relation that may be possible from person to person may be possible here.

In the secondary literature, much has been made of James’s observation about religion in these two passages. In many cases, scholars merely identify these remarks about eternality and its personal form as allusions to defend belief in God and then move on to

---

406 In “The Will to Believe” James stipulates certain conditions that must be met in order for a genuine option to be a legitimate religious hypothesis. A genuine option is defined as being live, forced and momentous. A live option, he explains, is not the result of some intrinsic property of the experience, but refers its relational appeal to the individual. A forced option is one wherein the individual is logical compelled to make a decision, “with no possibility of not choosing,” as opposed to postponing the decision for another day. And finally a momentous option is one that is unique, significant, and irreversible. See James, WB, 14-15.

407 James, “Is Life Worth Living?,” 32.

408 Ibid.
more philosophically important aspects of James’s argument. Other scholars recognize the importance of cataloging his statements about religion and thus seek to correlate this definition with his other religious writing.409

In the qualification that James offers, it is unclear what precisely he has in mind when he makes reference to the universe converting to a “Thou.” Listeners and readers of the 1896 lecture and article that was published in New World who are familiar with James’s other work may pick up on the connection that he is most likely not referring to the traditional conception of the Christian God of monotheism, but is referring to his more generalized conception of the theist God as articulated in “Reflex Action and Theism,” which was published fourteen years prior. For the attentive reader it is fairly clear that the above passage alludes to the very same personal transformation of the universe in “Reflex Action and Theism.” For example, while explaining the relationship between volition and conception, he writes:

Now theism always stands ready with the most practically rational solution it is possible to conceive. Not an energy of our active nature to which it does not authoritatively appeal, not an emotion of which it does not normally and naturally release the springs. At a single stroke, it changes the dead blank it of the world into a living thou, with whom the whole man may have dealings.410

Despite the implied difference in terms of how James described God in “Reflex Action and Theism,” in both essays this transformation is framed in theistic terms. Given this correlation and the basic transformation of the universe into the personal Thou-form, the

409 E.g., Schlecht’s “Rereading ‘The Will to Believe.’”
probability that his “The Will to Believe” audience takes away a theistic conception of religion is significantly high.

My contention is that this poses a complication in that James’s initial description of religion in “The Will to Believe” may be readily perceived as containing an inherent theistic bias. It makes sense that a more historically inclusive defense of the religious hypothesis would be one that does not cater to a specific audience and does not presuppose a bias toward one style of religious thinking over another. In “Is Life Worth Living?,” which in many ways is the essay that precipitated the composition of “The Will to Believe,” James offers a less alienating conception of religion. There he calls attention to the fact that religion has been defined in many ways and the way that he intends to use the concept to refer to its “supernaturalist sense.” He explains this in the following manner:

Religion has meant many things in human history; but when from now onward I use the word I mean to use it in the supernaturalist sense, as declaring that the so-called order of nature, which constitutes this world’s experience, is only one portion of the total universe, and that there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we now

---

411 In the textual notes of WB there is reference to Boodin’s “William James as I Knew Him” article that recounts the relationship between the two essays. According to Boodin, during a philosophical club discussion at Brown University which was focused on James’s “Is Life Worth Living?,” Boodin “attacked James, who was so profoundly stirred that instead of waiting until the end of the discussion, as proposed, James replied immediately in a long and impassioned speech in defense of his position.” As a result, Bodin continues, “When [James] was called upon the same year to give the annual address before the same society, he explained that he had built out his theory to meet the attack at his previous visit and gave us the famous address ‘The Will to Believe’” (Bowers, “The Text of The Will to Believe,” 311). Given the fact that this is oral history and the only documentation comes from Boodin, we cannot take the genealogical account seriously—how grand would it be that one can take responsibility for instigating the composition of one of James’s most famous essays. Whether there is any historical truth to Boodin’s claim does not really matter insofar as an uncareful reader will note the strong correspondence between the two essays.
Having defined religion in this way, James spends the remainder of the essay trying to prove that life is worth living and that there is a cure for the religious disease of pessimism and suicide. He explains that he:

wishes to make [the reader] feel…that we have a right to believe the physical order to be only a partial order; that we have a right to supplement it by an unseen spiritual order which we assume on trust, if only thereby life may seem to us better worth living again. \(^{413}\)

As is evident in this passage, James already laid the framework for his defense of the religious hypothesis in “Reflex Action and Theism,” one year prior to “The Will to Believe.” Furthermore, this definition of religion qua supernatural is more helpful for framing his basic concerns—and, later, it will be helpful for understanding how “What Psychical Research has Accomplished” relates to James’s defense of the religious hypothesis—in regard to the religious field in its entirety, as opposed to one subsection of it. While both definitions attend to some form of sacred dimension, the supernaturalist definition does not imply the theistic connotations of the former and therefore does not segregate based upon associations of more popular or familiar forms of religiousness.

**Targeted Audiences And Pedagogical Contexts**

As suggested in previous chapters, it is critical that one takes note of James’s style of thinking within a particular space: context is absolutely critical for understanding how and why he makes use of a particular idea. To illustrate this point in relation to his

---

\(^{412}\) James, “Is Life Worth Living?,” 48 (emphasis added).

\(^{413}\) Ibid., 49.
reflections on religion, the religious field, and his defense of the religious hypothesis, this
section establishes three main points of context: (1) that James’s defense of the religious
hypothesis is aimed at a very specific subset of persons; (2) that in order to understand
the range and scope of his argument, it is imperative to grasp his idiosyncratic notion of
religion and how he pedagogically caters to the so-called “college-bred gentry” by
crafting definitions and examples that would be appealing, or at least familiar, to them;
and (3) that were he presenting his defense to a different audience he would probably
make use of different definitions, analogies, and examples.

Taken together, these points illustrate the contextualist account of religion that
James offers in “The Will to Believe,” which thereby opens the hermeneutic door to
return to the broader definition of religion that is offered in “Is Life Worth Living?.” In
turn, by utilizing the latter definition as a more basic construction of religion and the
religious field, it helps make sense of a later section of this chapter that points out the
bridging connections between WPRHA and his defense of the religious hypothesis
through the lens of the epistemological outsider.

The first order of business is to show that what stands out about James’s defense
of religion is the way in which the essay was, in a sense, repackaged by way of the
December of 1896 preface. Through the initial context of “The Will to Believe,” as an
address to students, one gets the sense that his address may be compared to a modern-day
commencement speech. In this capacity the lecture gravitates towards the themes of
existential courage and self-actualization, and is meant to spur the individual in order to
motivate them to take charge, live strenuously, and act heroically.
This reading, of course, is easily supported by an appeal to the social and cultural conditions of the late nineteenth century. Cotkin’s externalist reading of James as a public philosopher, is but one of the many secondary sources that provides us with key insights into this aspect of James’s engagement with the larger cultural trends of fin-de-siècle America and the problems of neurasthenia (nervous exhaustion), skepticism, and the feeling of “unreality” that is caused by the “metaphysical tedium vitæ which is peculiar to reflecting men.”

If my understanding is correct, James certainly sought to defend religion when he initially gave the address to the undergraduate students; yet, it is the activity of heroism, to stand up for one’s beliefs, that is the central message of the lecture. In other words, from its initial conception as a lecture to students, the will to believe takes precedence over the right to believe.

The sentiment of this subtle shift in emphasis is echoed in a letter to Miss Amy Lorthop Coolidge, who is believed to have attended James’s “The Will to Believe” address at Harvard in April of 1896. He explains to her what he sees himself doing in the lecture noting that different audiences call for different tactics.

There is a sort of bullying of the human soul by scientific agnosticism that goes on on a great scale now-a-days and that takes advantage of a very noble feeling in people—“love of truth” “intellectual honesty” etc. I confess that I like to do what I can to set myself and others free from the paralysis it often brings about. Of course when one takes mankind at large

---

414 James, “Is Life Worth Living?,” 39. For an astute assessment of the role of these two cultural themes, see Cotkin, Public Philosopher, 73-94. Similarly, one should have no problem appealing to an internal context that expresses the “rugged individualism” of James’s philosophy.

415 Ultimately, the will to believe goes hand in hand with the defense of the right to believe. That said, I believe that a subtle emphasis of one over the other surfaces when contextualized by James’s intended target audience.
the preaching that is most needed is the preaching of intellectual criticism & doubt—the function of belief looks after itself and is far too easily indulged. *But with student audiences it is just the reverse, so my preaching, I think, is opportune,* as indeed what you write shows. ⁴¹⁶

This general concern is echoed in other places. For example, James later repeats these ideas in his correspondence with Dickinson Miller, his “most penetrating critic and intimate enemy,” in response to having published the article in *New World.* James defends himself by saying:

> Of course if any one comes along and says that men at large don't need to have facility of faith in their inner convictions preached to them, [that] they have only too much readiness in that way already, and the one thing needful to preach is that they should hesitate with their convictions, and take their faiths out for an airing into the howling wilderness of nature, I should also agree. But my paper was n’t addressed to mankind at large but to a limited set of studious persons, badly under the ban just now of certain authorities whose simple-minded faith in “naturalism” also is sorely in need of an airing—and an airing, as it seems to me, of the sort I tried to give. ⁴¹⁷

While these letters clearly illustrate that James is sensitive to the perceived needs of his audience, there is further evidence to suggest that his message and target audience shift when the text is repackaged and billed as the leading essay of *The Will to Believe.* My contention is that the content of the essay is cast in a new light here whereby the 1896 preface accentuates its social and epistemic emphasis. In other words, it seems like the heroic *will* to believe takes a back seat to the *right* to believe. The social and epistemic accentuation is drawn out by framing his stance within the context of the radical


empiricist critique and the pragmatic principles of the religious field. By keeping in mind that, for James, any hypothesis—whether it is metaphysical, moral, religious, etc.—is tentative and always subject to revision in terms of its compatibility with the collectivity of past, present, and future experience, it is clear that the religious hypothesis is but one of many epistemic propositions that provisionally claims to understand how certain facts hang together in a particular way. That is to say, from the radical empiricist perspective we are dealing with “possibilities” of truth, not necessarily truth itself.

This sense emerges more clearly in the latter half of the preface as James turns his attention more fully to the religious hypothesis. At first the original emphasis comes to the forefront of the text. He explains to his readers that the first four essays are “largely concerned with defending the legitimacy of religious faith” and that they are intended only for a very particular type of audience. Here we see that he is directing his comments to a specific subset of academics that are critical of religious faith:

academic audiences, fed already on science, have a very different need. Paralysis of their native capacity for faith and timorous abulia in the religious field are their special forms of mental weakness, brought about by the notion, carefully instilled, that there is something called scientific evidence by waiting upon which they shall escape all danger of shipwreck in regard to truth.  

As we read more of the preface we see that his focus narrows even further to the academics and the scientists that “interfere” with religious faith in the market place. We can recall from our discussion of the radical empiricist attitude that James’s “quarrel openly lies…with all such scientists, as well as with their allies outside of science.”

While it is critical to understand that he is still attempting to empower the individual, the

418 James, “Preface,” 7.

419 Ibid., 9.
preface takes on a more defensive posture through the articulation of the “spirit of inner
tolerance.” James’s concern is that the mentality of the blind monist blocks the free
competition of competing hypotheses by arbitrarily establishing his epistemic claims as
universal.

Now that we have a rudimentary grasp of the subtle shifts that occur with each
new targeted audience to which James addressed in *The Will to Believe*, it is crucial to see
that the examples that he uses are strategic and pedagogical methods to engage a
particular audience in order to illustrate the importance of his view. In regard to the larger
concerns of the religious field and his defense of faith, James is very transparent about
the fact that were he speaking to an audience of believers, such as the Salvation Army,
his arguments and overall message would be diametrically opposite. He maintains that if
his text were addressing a more liberal [religious] audience it would be a “misuse of
opportunity” and that instead he would voice his concerns that “what mankind at large
most lacks is criticism and caution, not faith.” He takes it a step further by maintaining
the position that as human beings our “cardinal weakness is to let belief follow recklessly
upon lively conception, especially when the conception has instinctive liking at its
back.” Thus he asserts that what is needed most for such audacious believers is that
“their faiths should be broken up and ventilated, that the northwest wind of science
should get into them and blow their sickness and barbarism away.”

420 James, “Preface,” 7. At first glance this appears to conflict with James’s original
publication of “The Will to Believe” in *The New World*. The problem is that I am having
difficulties gathering data on this journal and cannot confirm or disconfirm this suspicion.

421 Ibid., 7.

422 Ibid.
Based upon these preliminary observations it is clear that James’s defense of religious faith is one that is intended for a specific audience and that a different audience would require an alternative pitch. Now, the question that we must ask ourselves is that if James is preoccupied with proving to this particular crowd that religious faith is a valid and rational point of view, then would he design his argument in such a way that it caters to the needs and interests of this particular community in order to win them over to his opinion? The likelihood of the matter is that when arguing about a contentious issue James would employ examples and analogies that are relatable rather than draw upon points that would alienate him from his audience.

For example, in “The Hidden Self” James draws his audience’s attention to a world of experience that is well documented by literature which is outside of the purview of what he calls the “college-bred gentry.” In this essay he is talking about the “unclassified residuum” and what he calls the “mass of phenomena generally called mystical.” He explains that contemporary physiology, psychology, and medicine want nothing to do with these experiences and then launches into a digression about how they are abundantly peppered throughout all of written history. Then, he metaphorically turns to his audience and says the following:

We college-bred gentry, who follow the stream of cosmopolitan culture exclusively, not infrequently stumble upon some old-established journal, or some voluminous native author, whose names are never heard of in our circle, but who number their readers by the quarter-million. It always gives us a little shock to find this mass of human beings not only living and ignoring us and all our gods, but actually reading and writing and

423 James, “The Hidden Self,” 248. His audience is the readers of Scribner’s Magazine. He also repeats these very same lines in the 1897 version of WPRHA which is published in The Will to Believe.

424 Ibid.; also see James, “What Psychical Research has Accomplished,” 223.
cogitating without ever a thought of our canons and authorities. Well, a public no less large keeps and transmits from generation to generation the traditions and practices of the occult; but academic science cares as little for its beliefs and opinions as you, gentle reader, care for those of the readers of the *Waverley* and the *Fireside Companion.*

Here James is deliberately calling attention to the so-called mystical phenomena that exist off the radar of the “educated” upper class, predominately white gentlemen’s club that permeated the universities and laboratories of *fin de siècle* America. Generally speaking, James’s claim signals the exclusivity of the “college-bred gentry” and how their understanding of the religious field pertains to select sets of experience, gods, and authoritative literature. The overt over-simplification of the matter suggests that James’s dichotomy is a pedagogical tool intended to showcase the rift between his audience and the group of persons and experiences that are under consideration. The fact that these words are repeated verbatim in WPRHA suggests that James anticipates that the readers of *The Will to Believe* are of a similar mindset. As such, it raises an important question that may be applied to “The Will to Believe” essay and how James addresses what the educated elite might expect to hear in a lecture that defends religious faith.

*Diversifying Religion As “Anything...In That Line”*

The primary question that is guiding this chapter is what religion means to James circa 1896-97 when he published *The Will to Believe*, and whether or not this historically situated conception of religion alters our understanding of the nature, range, and scope of

---

425 James, “What Psychical Research Has Accomplished”, 223.

426 The only difference between the WPRHA and the “The Hidden Self” version is that the latter audience is qualified as “gentle subscribers to *Scribner’s* magazine” (248), where as the former reads, “gentle reader.” (224).
James’s religious hypothesis? As I argued above, what is important for our discussion is that one of the things that seem to be completely overlooked in the scholarly literature is that James is not distilling the essence of religion in general, but is merely providing a context that his audience is able to relate to and understand. As pointed out in the previous section, he presented “The Will to Believe” to multiple audiences before republishing it in *The Will to Believe*. In virtually all of those cases, his audience of upper-class Americans would have been more comfortable with a loosely Christian conception of God than something that has a broader orientation.\footnote{Recall James’s previous comment about the “college-bred gentry” and how their gods, cannons, and textual authorities are very different than those of the “unclassified residuum,” particularly those traditions that do not have religious gods at all. To say that religion is oriented to the eternal and that it is “represented” in the personal form of a “Thou” does not leave much room for unconventional religious belief—otherwise it carries the unfortunate implication that all religions would appear to be tinged with a theistic framework.}

After its publication and for the remainder of his life James continued to received letters that specifically addressed ideas expressed in *The Will to Believe*. A strong mixture of both praise and critique, this ongoing correspondence provides us with insight into James’s intentions behind *The Will to Believe* and the defense of the religious hypothesis.\footnote{Compare his remarks to the Unitarian Minister’s Institute at Princeton where he delivered “Reflex Action and Theism.” There he specifically draws the connection between the theistic orientation of the transformation of the universe: “Now theism always stands ready with the most practically rational solution it is possible to conceive. Not an energy of our active nature to which it does not authoritatively appeal, not an emotion of which it does not normally and naturally release the springs. At a single stroke, it changes the dead blank it of the world into a living thou, with whom the whole man may have dealings” (James, “Reflex Action and Theism,” 101).}
Most famously, these correspondences point out the fact that he deeply regrets the name of the lead essay, “The Will to Believe;” a more appropriate title, he often explains, would have been “The Right to Believe.” Of equal significance is the fact that James refuted the idea that “the will to believe” should be interpreted as a “technical term.”

The secondary literature has made much of these ideas, but what has been overlooked is a significant exchange of letters between James and Edwin L. Godkin that focuses on James’s loose definition of religion. In order to expose the underlying depth and breadth of James’s 1890s conception of religion and his defense of the religious hypothesis, I now turn to the correspondence between Godkin and James, shortly after the publication of the collected essays.

Godkin was an Irish-born American journalist and friend of the Jameses, who is famously known as the founder of the widely respected weekly The Nation, and also served as editor-in-chief of New York Evening Post. On June 30th, 1897 he writes to James:

I have been reading your essays, with great pleasure—your vocabulary is delightful—but the first one puzzles me. What do you mean by “religion”? This term covers the fetichism of the African Savage, as well as Emerson's pantheism, the Cotton Mather Methodism of the Tennessee farmer, as well as your philosophy. There is in fact nothing in the world called religion, in which theories of the Universe are not mixed up, with scientific theories,

428 Both of these concerns appear in James’s letter to James Mark Baldwin dated October 24, 1901. “It seems to me absurd to make a technical term of the W. to B. Would God I had never tho't of that unhappy title for my Essay. but called it a Critique of Pure Faith! / Why not define the Will to swim or to get rich or to sit down? I can't define such a term differently from the way you have defined it. What I meant by the title was the state of mind of a man who finds a[n] impulse in him towards a believing attitude, and who resolves not to quench it simply because doubts of its truth are possible. Its opposite would be the maxim: Believe in nothing which you can possibly doubt. Pray leave it out of your dictionary! It can't be treated technically, and has been the source of utter misunderstanding of my essay. If that couldn't explain the title what could?” (James, WB, 310).
& historical facts. I cannot swallow Christianity, or ‘will to believe it,’ without also willing to believe an immense mass of tradition, gossip and “evidence,” of all sorts about a certain man alleged to have lived 1897 years ago. Can it be that I have ‘a living option,’ to believe all this, or not? What I believe about the Universe, for instance, is not called “religion,” at all by religious people. Believe me you must define “religion,” to make your essay really effective.⁴²⁹

As expressed in his letter, it is clear that Godkin’s concern is directly attributed to what he thinks is James’s puzzling approach toward the religious hypothesis. He, correctly, notes that James’s definition of religion establishes a wide berth for the religious hypothesis. Godkin goes on to explain that James’s conception of religion is equally applicable to Emerson’s philosophy of Transcendentalism as it is to what nineteenth century religious scholars considered “primitive religions.” His concern seems to be one of application and that what James is arguing for is a vague reconstruction of religious belief. In short, Godkin seems to be asking the following question: what does not fall into James’s category of religion?

In response to Godkin’s query, James directly confronts the charge. The heart of his argument hinges on the fact that the general nature of the religious hypothesis is abstract and ambiguous: the experience of the religious hypothesis, in contrast, must be firmly grounded in the concrete perspective of the individual believer and as such it opens the door for a seemingly infinite number of expressions. He explains:

> Thanks for your kind note in rē Will to Believe. I suppose you expect as little a reply to it as I expected one from you to the book, but since you ask what I du [sic] mean by Religion, and add add [sic] that until I define that word my essay cannot be effective, I can’t forbear sending you a word to

---

⁴²⁹ Edwin Lawrence Godkin to James, Ewhurst Place, 30 July 1897, in Correspondence, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds. vol. 8, 1896-June 1899 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 289.
clear up that point. I mean by religion for a man anything that for him is a live hypothesis in that line, altho it may be a dead one for anyone else.430

From James’s response we can see that he goes straight to the point: what he refers to as religion is profoundly open—if you will, it is a reinstatement of the vague to its proper place. As he maintains in “The Will to Believe” the “living essence of the religious hypothesis” is rooted in a “feeling, forced upon us we know not whence” and by acting upon it we are “doing the universe the deepest service we can.”431 Translated into the concrete perspective of the potential believer, the religious hypothesis must be a living option for that individual. By abstracting and making an argument for the justification of the religious hypothesis, it becomes clear that the nature, range, and scope of that which is deemed “religious” is proportionally associated with the number of ways that each individual is religious drawn to live options. Taken along these lines we can see why James might choose to use such an open-ended term such as “anything.” He stresses the

430 James to Edwin Lawrence Godkin, Stonhurst, Intervalle, N.H., 15 August 1897, in Correspondence, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 8, 1896-June 1899 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 294-95. In this letter James further tries to explain the risk that is involved in the religious hypothesis: “And what I try to show is that whether the man believes, disbelieves or doubts his hypothesis, the moment he does either on principle and methodically, he runs a risk of one sort or the other from his own point of view. There is no escaping the risk; why not then admit that one’s human function is to run it? By settling down on that basis, and respecting each other’s choice of risk to run, it seems to me that we should be in a clearer headed condition than we now are in, postulating as most all of us do a rational certitude which doesn’t exist and disowning the semi-voluntary mental action by which we continue in our own severally characteristic attitudes of belief. Since our willing natures are active here, why not face squarely the fact without humbug and get the benefits of the admission.”

431 James, “The Will to Believe,” 31. Later in VRE James makes a similar appeal religion as rooted in feeling. Interested readers should consult the abundant criticism that revolves around this choice of prioritizing experience over doctrine, practices or institutions. For example, see C. Taylor (2002).
fact that he maintains that religion may be “anything” so long as it is a live option for that particular individual.

What is peculiar about James’s statement about the definition of religion is how he qualifies it: “anything that for him is a live hypothesis in that line.” For our purposes, the immediate question that we need to ask is whether this final characterization of “in that line” is one that merely refers to the multi-layered conditions that James establishes in the essay, e.g., the philosophical defense which argues that if it cannot be intellectually decided, then it must be a genuine option which must be living, etc., or if there is something else that he has in mind. While it is quite possible that James is referring to the conditions of the justification of religious belief, it seems more likely that the qualification refers to the character of experience deemed religious.

In order to open up this notion of the characteristics of things deemed religious and to distance ourselves from the loosely theistic view presented in “The Will to Believe,” it is important to keep in mind that James does not subscribe to essences as the fundamental nature of a thing. As is evident of his treatment of essences in Principles, he prefers to think of them within a contextualist and teleological framework: how an essence is determined characterizes the thinker more than the object of study. Once again this suggests that his treatment of religion in “The Will to Believe” is a restricted or partial account: the heart of religion is not captured by a theistic “representation” but in the experiential transformation of the universe from impersonal to personal.
Contextualizing WPRHA

To see how James’s conception of the religious field embraces a more diverse swath of persons and ideals, I turn toward his discussion of mysticism, the unseen order, and the personal-Romantic view as presented in WPRHA. I suggest that this view integrates his concern for the epistemic outsider that permeates his 1890s orientation, while also providing us with a more nuanced sense of the diversity of his defense of religious hypothesis as one which squares up with his supernaturalist definition of religion, as well as his conception of religion as “anything…in that line.”

In “Religious Belief and Naturalism” Wayne Proudfoot provides a historical overview of James’s use of the unseen order and how it changed over time. In this brief review he shows how this concept is put into conversation with other ideas that James proposes throughout his career, spanning a range from 1892 until his death in 1910. For the purposes of this chapter, our attention is drawn to the fact that Proudfoot’s account overlooks James’s thematization of this concept in connection with his psychical research as expressed in WPRHA. Proudfoot’s review instead moves from Principles to James’s 1898 lecture “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results.”

In order to understand the historical and thematic continuity between “The Will to Believe” and WPHRA, it is critical to take note of some relevant background information. First, WPRHA is a compilation of three different articles: “The Hidden Self,” “What Psychical Research Has Accomplished,” and “The Address of the President Before the Society for Psychical Research.” The common thread that ties these essays

---

together is that they all focus, in one way or another, on the merit of psychical research (and experimental psychology) and on how James argues that “Science” needs to take its facts into account.

A second noteworthy fact about WPRHA is that James added additional elements that do not appear in the 1892 version. Nor, one might notice, does the language sync with the 1896 “Address of the President before the Society for Psychical Research.”

Burkhardt’s “Foreword” to _The Will to Believe_ explains that WPHRA is a synthesis of existing articles and that “the result is a new and more substantial essay on the subject, with a noteworthy change to a more cautious tone and a more qualified statement of [James’s] views.” Similar observations are made by Bowers in “The Editorial Problem.” He explains:

> Partly because of the amalgamating for book collection, perhaps, but partly because of James’s shifting views of the subject matter, the revision of the sources documents [of WPRHA] was more extensive and more deeply rooted in modification of the substance than in the other essays in the collection save for “The Sentiment of Rationality.” Granted, that the basic “What Psychical Research Has Accomplished” in the _Forum_ was something of a publicity or a propaganda piece, and hence written with a tone of some extra confidence, the cautious qualifications introduced in the (I) revisions strike a markedly different note on many occasions. Thus, more than elsewhere in the collection—not forgetting “The Sentiment of Rationality,” however—the book version has an independent interest apart from stylistic matters as reflecting something of a change in attitude from that exhibited in the original article.

---

433 According to the editors of _The Works of William James_, when James republished his essays in _WB_, WPRHA is one of two essays that James committed himself to making substantial revisions—the other essay being “The Sentiment of Rationality.”

434 Burkhardt, “Foreword” to _WB_, vi.

As far as I can tell, the reasoning behind these revisions is not addressed by James in his correspondence with family and friends, nor with his colleagues and editors.

Nevertheless, the fact of the matter is that he completed substantial revisions to WPRHA in order to republish it alongside of the other essays in *The Will to Believe.*

Historicizing James’s 1890s Conception of Mysticism

The first entry point of WPRHA is to see that James’s underlying contention that the religious hypothesis is not to be solely relegated to a discussion about theistic faith. This much has been gathered by drawing attention to the idea that for James religion may refer to “anything that for him is a live hypothesis in that line, altho it may be a dead one for anyone else.” This loose definition suggests that the category of religion is subsumed by an even wider category of experiences and things deemed religious. To understand this implication it is crucial to note that at the time of the publication of “The Will to Believe,” James’s conception of “the mystical” dramatically differs from our contemporary understanding.

436 While beyond the scope of this chapter, a worthwhile investigation would be to tease out the connections between WPRHA and the other essays of *WB.*

The category of mysticism comes to the forefront of James’s essays, “The Hidden Self” and WPRHA. In the previous chapters I referred to James’s plea for the scientific study of the “unclassified residuum.” In the opening pages of “The Hidden Self” he classifies this group of outliers as “mystical” in multiple places:

No part of the unclassed residuum has usually been treated with a more contemptuous scientific disregard than the mass of phenomena generally called mystical. Physiology will have nothing to do with them. Orthodox psychology turns its back upon them. Medicine sweeps them out; or, at most, when in an anecdotal vein, records a few of them as “effects of the imagination,” a phrase of mere dismissal whose meaning, in this connection, it is impossible to make precise. All the while, however, the phenomena are there, lying broadcast over the surface of history. No matter where you open its pages, you find things recorded under the name of divinations, inspirations, demoniacal possessions, apparitions, trances, ecstasies, miraculous healings and productions of disease, and occult powers possessed by peculiar individuals over persons and things in their neighborhood.438

This identification results in the reclassification of certain types of persons and experiences as belonging to the religio-philosophic class of experience known as “mystical.” In the paragraphs that follow James’s initial use of the category of mysticism is divisible into two different components: one referring to an epistemic attitude or orientation that is to be contrasted with the academic-scientific type of thinking; and then later as an identification of a specific type of persons that undergo experiences that are outside the study of “Science.” In reference to both categories, he asserts that this mystical style “goes with a gift for meeting with certain kinds of phenomenal experience” and that science would be wise to consider them.

The problem for most people, particularly the skeptically minded academic-Scientist, is that they know not how to approach facts of experience that lie outside of the

438 James, “The Hidden Self,” 248-249.
dominant epistemic purview and thus backslide into defensive dogmatics. James explains this point in the following manner:

Each one of our various ologies seems to offer a definite head of classification for every possible phenomenon of the sort which it professes to cover; and so far from free is most men’s fancy, that, when a consistent and organized scheme of this sort has once been comprehended and assimilated, a different scheme is unimaginable. No alternative, whether to whole or parts, can any longer be conceived as possible. Phenomena unclassifiable within the system are therefore paradoxical absurdities, and must be held untrue.  

This description points to the problem of the blind monist’s point of view. In contrast, James asserts his own perspective and that through his engagement with the “unclassified residuum” and that through a decade of work with the SPR he has been “forced” to deeply reconsider the facts of experience from a new point of view. He goes on to suggest that the individual “who will pay attention to facts of the sort dear to mystics, while reflecting upon them in academic-scientific ways, will be in the best possible position to help philosophy.”

A contemporary reading of James’s 1890s treatment of mysticism may charge him with committing a category mistake; however as I argue below, this would be a misunderstanding of what James was seeking to accomplish. In order to grasp the subtlety of his point we need to address an additional point of context so that we may properly restore his use of the term to its historical context. As noted above, these passages originally appear in the 1890 publication of “The Hidden Self.” What should

---

439 James, WPHRA, 222-23. The quote continues and leans toward the promotion of the scientific work that is being done by the SPR. He explains, “When, moreover, as so often happens, the reports of them are vague and indirect; when they come as mere marvels and oddities rather than as things of serious moment—one neglects or denies them with the best of scientific consciences” (ibid).

440 James, “The Hidden Self,” 249.
draw our attention is the fact that seven years later James incorporates these assertions into his repurposed version of “WPRHA,” repeating verbatim the very same passages from “The Hidden Self.” The likelihood that the identification of the “unclassified residuum” qua mystical is an editorial mistake on James’s part is easily extinguished by the fact that it was not an isolated incident: as pointed out, he uses the category in multiple places in connection with an epistemic orientation as well as a classification system for a specific group of persons and phenomena. Moreover, given the fact that he spent a considerable amount of time revising the article in order to republish it in The Will to Believe, it is highly unlikely that he would overlook such a gross editorial error.

The question that we want to ask ourselves here is about the degree to which James associated psychical research and his interest in the “unclassified residuum” with the broader realms of religion, religious experience, and things deemed religious. One way of teasing out the intimate details that connection these ideas is to take note of the complications involved in James’s conception of mysticism. To my knowledge, Barnard is the first scholar to pick up on this association and point out that what may be an inappropriate connection for contemporary scholars was, in fact, a legitimate consideration for James.441 He explains that we must be careful to not oversimplify James’s theoretical separation between mystical experiences and psychical phenomena. For example, Barnard notes that in Varieties James establishes theoretical differences between the two groups and that his final characterization points toward the long-lasting inner significance of the “mystical” experience, whereas the experiences associated with psychical research typically do not have any lasting impact on its subject. However,  

441 Barnard, Reality of the Unseen, 16-17.
Barnard also observes that James frequently maintains that it is rather challenging to differentiate the *practical* experiences based upon a written or oral narrative and that we need to be more cautious about the boundaries we place between them.\footnote{Ibid., 17. Upon reflection it is easy to see that the terminology used to classify these *events* are already biased. Rarely does one ever read about mystical “phenomena;” rather, it is almost always rooted in a personal experience. Reciprocally it is an uncommon ascription to describe a psychical event in terms of the individual’s experience; instead, it is almost always refers to the object, or external phenomena, that can be objectively studied.} To illustrate this point Barnard points out James’s use of “mystical” to describe the experiences of the “unclassified residuum” and suggests that:

> These two categories (“mystical” and “psychical”) are simply not rigidly demarcated for James; for instance, there are many times in his writings that James will use the label “mystical” to refer to phenomena that he more typically would put under the category of “psychical,” for example, the sense of a ghostly presence or a medium’s clairvoyant knowledge. While this blurring of the boundaries between what is “mystical” and what is “psychical” may, at times, be based on a careless use of terminology by James, it is just as likely that his liberty with the terms “mystical” and “psychical” is rooted in his awareness of how many spiritual experiences are typically a complex fusion of both psychical and mystical components.\footnote{Ibid., 16.}

To further corroborate this view Ann Taves historicizes this connection by suggesting that during the 1890s there is a strong correlation between the fields of religion, psychology, and psychical research, and that this is not merely an idiosyncratic characteristic of James’s thinking only. She notes that:

> Although William James and his collaborators in the Society for Psychical Research thought of spirit-possession and mediumship as intimately related to the broader realms of religion and religious experience, they downplayed those connection in their published work and were not able to overcome the emerging division of labor between religious and
theological studies on the one hand, and the anthropology of religion on the other.  

To put this view into historical perspective one must note the context within which James was writing. During the 1890s the academic and scientific division of labor that we know today was not yet firmly established: the line of demarcation between fields and their respective objects of study were in the process of solidification, yet these boundaries were still relatively porous. For example, even though psychology was able to break free from philosophy and establish itself as its own scientific discipline, the division between psychical research and other research in psychology was not clearly distinguished. However, by the turn of the century, through collaborative effort during the International Congresses, psychology gradual edged its way toward a more clearly defined field of study, one which drew a solid distinction between psychology and psychical.

---

444 Taves, Religious Experience Reconsidered, 6.

445 For a general historical account of the culture of professionalization as well as its application to James’s rhetoric, see Stob (2013). For a specialized account of this process in the field of psychology see Bordogna (2008). Also see Croce (1995).


447 Ibid. In general this distinction refers to the respective meanings and objects of study for each field. Taves explains that “[t]he chief problem, as the disputants recognized to varying degrees, was the difficulty inherent in studying seemingly similar expressions to which both subjects and researchers attached a range of different meanings. While in the short run the problems could be avoided by turning to more controlled laboratory methods, the primary strategy for dealing with the problem was simply to define the ‘expressions’ [Fr. manifestations]—no matter how similar experientially—in terms of the meanings ascribed to them, thus, constituting them as different objects of study. Different objects of study could then be assigned to different sub-disciplines in psychology, that is, to the psychology of religion or clinical psychology, or defined out of psychology altogether” (ibid).
Taves notes that parallel processes of assessment were taking place in the field of religion and that scholars were debating what constitutes their object of study. Of the many discussions involved it was decided that religion was to be demarcated from magic, superstition, and the occult, and that the latter groups would eventually fall to the study of anthropology and folklore. For our immediate purposes of examining a wider conception of James’s defense of religion and the religious hypothesis, it is crucial to see that an understanding of the religious field during the 1890s, for certain thinkers like James, was more accommodating than it was at the turn of the century. At that time the term “mysticism” carried with it a broader, more sweeping range of phenomena than when compared to the narrower definition that gained currency at the turn of the century. Taves observes that “the idea that mystical experience represented the highest and most rarified form of transformation and a potential inner core of all religious traditions was…[a] new concept premised on a radical redefinition of the concept of mysticism.”

She goes on to point out that the pre-1900 meaning of the term “mysticism” “encompassed virtually any unusual experience with spirito-occulto-supernormal overtones.”

When we correlate the observations of Barnard and Taves, it becomes clear that during the 1890s psychical phenomena, for James and others, was understood as

448 Ibid., 385.
449 Ibid., 388.
450 Ibid., 385. In a sense, it reflects her contemporary building-block approach to the study of “special things deemed religious” in which religion and religious experience are interpreted through an attributitional lens whereby what is deemed “religious” as well as things deemed “non-religious” may be studied from a comparative standpoint, see Taves (2009).
belonging, in part, to the wider field of religion, religious experience, and things deemed religious. The point, then, is that if we are looking at a Jamesian defense of religion proper, it is likely to take personal form in ways that are not necessarily compatible with a theistic orientation, so long as it is a “live” option for that individual. For example, amongst the many subdivisions of the “unclassified residuum” are listed such things as “apparitions,” “trances,” and “occult powers possessed by peculiar individuals over other persons and things in their neighborhood,” all of which need not apply to a theistic conception of religion, but fit rather well with James’s more generic description of the reality of the “unseen order.”

**WPRHA and the “Unseen Order”**

Whereas the previous section looks toward a more expansive conception of the mystical that overlaps with a James’s wider conception of religion, this section delves further into WPRHA as a way of teasing out more direct textual correlation between his historicized notion of religion and what is presented in his defense of the religious hypothesis.\(^{451}\) The discussion focuses on the manner in which James draws parallels between the

\(^{451}\) Another point of exploration that I do not develop is to consider the way in which James furthers the parallel between his defense of the “unclassified residuum” as a legitimate form of the religious hypothesis. The point is to see that he emphasizes that these facts belong to “real experiences of persons” and that the individuals who study these experiences, as well as those individuals that are subjected to them “not only easily may find, but are logically bound to find, in them valid arguments for their romantic and personal conception of the world’s course” (James, WPRHA, 240). In many respects, the way that James argues about how an individual would be logically compelled to believe in worldviews parallels the idea of the passional nature in “The Will to Believe.” This idea can be developed further by relocating both ideas within the framework of the reflex action theory and the “sentiment of rationality.”
“unclassified residuum” and belief in an “unseen order.”\textsuperscript{452} To illustrate these points of comparison we can direct our attention to the revisions that he made to WPHRA.

James opens WPRHA with an appeal to the “unclassified residuum,” associates it with the mystical, and then proceeds to provide his readers with a who’s who of psychical research and the advances that have been made in the field. Toward the end of the article he levels an attack against the dogmatic and infallible stance of “mechanical rationalism.”\textsuperscript{453} The general framework of the argument originally appears in his 1896 “Address of the President” and is subtly refined in WPRHA. In both essays James contends that, \textit{in abstracto}, the essence of science is that it is a method and that scientists do not adhere to fixed beliefs; however, \textit{in concreto}, this is rarely the case insofar as the individual orientation habitually slips into the mentality of the blind monist.

What is peculiar about WPRHA is the way in which James incorporates additional qualifications as a means of correlating it with his supernaturalist conception of religion as an “unseen order.” The first extract is taken from his 1896 “Address of the President:”

\begin{quote}
\ldots Science taken in its essence should stand only for a method and not for any special beliefs, yet as habitually taken by its votaries Science has come to be identified with a certain fixed general belief, the belief that the deeper order of Nature is mechanical exclusively, and that non-mechanical categories are irrational ways of conceiving and explaining even such a thing as human life.\textsuperscript{454}
\end{quote}

Now compare it with that which is written in WPRHA.

\textsuperscript{452} There is another correlation that I will explore in a subsequent project. It focuses on his “The Will to Believe” conception of religion and the “personal-Romantic view of life” that the “unseen order” assumes as it is presented in WPRHA.

\textsuperscript{453} See James, WPRHA, 239-242; James, “Address of the President,” 134-137.

\textsuperscript{454} James, “Address of the President,” 134.
Although in its essence science only stands for a method and for no fixed belief, yet as habitually taken, both by its votaries and outsiders, it is identified with a certain fixed belief—*the belief that the hidden order of nature is mechanical exclusively*, and that non-mechanical categories are irrational ways of conceiving and explaining even such things as human life.\(^{455}\)

In both of these passages James is drawing out a vision of scientism, what he calls “mechanical rationalism,” that has moved away from its “dispassionate method” and slipped into the perspective of “Science” by dogmatically proclaiming its way of viewing the world as the only correct interpretation. For the so-called mechanical rationalist, the idea of “our true significance” deriving from our faith in an “unseen world of which we now know nothing positive” is an absurdity. Yet, as James argues in “Is Life Worth Living?,” “we have a right to believe the physical order is only a partial order…[and] that we have a right to supplement it by an unseen spiritual order which we assume on trust.”\(^{456}\)

A line by line comparison of the two passages shows that James reformulated WPRHA in order to further qualify what he had written in the 1896 “Address of the President”: the former, unlike the latter, is very explicit about drawing a connection between the scientistic rejection of a non-mechanical hidden order of nature and the supernatural reality of the unseen. The religious correlation is brought to the surface by the tension that contrasts the two opposing points of view: on the one hand, there are individuals that believe that the “hidden order of nature” is purely mechanical and obeys

\(^{455}\) James, WPRHA, 239 (emphasis added).

\(^{456}\) James, “Is Life Worth Living?,” 49.
only natural laws; on the other hand, there are individuals that believe “the physical to be only a partial order…supplement[ed]…by an unseen spiritual order.”\textsuperscript{457}

In addition to alluding to his supernaturalist definition of religion, James also seems to be invoking the logical conditions of “The Will to Believe” and its defense of the religious hypothesis as a confrontation of genuine options. For the mechanical rationalist, the option need not apply as the idea of an “unseen order” is a dead hypothesis that beckons no interest to the individual; however, for the member of the “unclassified residuum” the possibility of an “unseen order” is one that may be a living option.\textsuperscript{458} To put this allusion into a broader perspective, we can note that James maintains that “[t]housands of sensitive organizations in the United States to-day live steadily in the light of these experiences” and that these individuals are all deemed “irrational” in the eyes of the mechanical-rationalist.

In light of my radical empiricist reading, the “irrational” appellation and its subsequent epistemic (and social) alienation should bring to mind the ongoing dichotomy

\textsuperscript{457} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{458} Compare his defense of the religious field with his initial description of the “unclassified residuum”: “Round about the accredited and orderly facts of every science there ever floats a sort of dust-cloud of exceptional observations, of occurrences minute and irregular and seldom met with, which it always proves more easy to ignore than to attend to. The ideal of every science is that of a closed and completed system of truth. The charm of most sciences to their more passive disciples consists in their appearing, in fact, to wear just this ideal form. Each one of our various \textit{ologies} seems to offer a definite head of classification for every possible phenomenon of the sort which it professes to cover; and so far from free is most men's fancy, that, when a consistent and organized scheme of this sort has once been comprehended and assimilated, a different scheme is unimaginable. No alternative, whether to whole or parts, can any longer be conceived as possible. Phenomena unclassifiable within the system are therefore paradoxical absurdities, and must be held untrue” (James, WPRHA, 222).
between the blind monist and the epistemic underdog. What is taking place beneath the text parallels the type of defensive philosophical justification that James is articulating in “The Will to Believe.” That is to say, James is invoking the idea that individuals of the “unclassified residuum” have a right to believe in something beyond the partial order of the physical universe and that they also have a right to supplement this partiality by an “unseen spiritual order” as a way of pragmatically and melioristically bettering their lives.

Concluding Remarks: Meliorism And Epistemic Fairness

In this chapter I have tried to show that James’s treatment of religion as presented in the infamous “The Will to Believe” is intentionally one-sided. It, unlike many of his other articles that defend the epistemic outsider, does not bring in his prolonged studies in the field of psychical research, nor does it appeal to alternative conceptualizations of religion. Rather, it offers a stereo-typical theistic framework for arguing the rational legitimacy of believing religiously. My contention is that the form of religion that James presents to his audience in this essay is one that is specifically crafted for that audience. If he were speaking to/writing for a different crowd, then it is highly probable—though entirely dependent upon James’s perception of his audience—that he would not have alluded to a loosely theistic conception. I support this view by appealing to James’s alternate conceptions of religion as discussed in “Is Life Worth Living?” and his correspondence

---

459 James, WPRHA, 238-39. This is another revision that James adds to the 1897 version. It prefaces the above passage that speaks of the essence of science. It reads, “Thousands of sensitive organizations in the United States to-day live as steadily in the light of these experiences, and are as indifferent to modern science, as if they lived in Bohemia in the twelfth century. They are indifferent to science, because science is so callously indifferent to their experiences.”
with Godkin, his orientational comments in the 1896 preface, as well as in the manner that he makes allusions to the religious hypothesis in the revised version of WPHRA.

This suspicion gains further credence if we look toward an earlier lecture that James gave in Lowell in 1895 when treating the topic of exceptional mental states. In the conclusion of this lecture he makes the following comment about how we have a tendency to divide the world into “clean” categories:

There is a deep and laudable desire of the intellect to think of the world as existing in a clean and regular shape. The mass of literature, growing more abundant daily, from which I have gathered my examples, consisting as it does almost exclusively as oddities and eccentricities, of grotesqueries and masqueradings, incoherent, fitfull, personal, is certainly ill calculated to bring satisfaction either to the ordinary medical mind, or to the ordinary psychological mind... So the Universe of fact starts with the simplest of all divisions the respectable and academic system, and there mere delusions. Thus is the orderlyness which is the great desideratum, gained for contemplation.

Applied to the question of religion and the religious hypothesis, we can readily see that the much desired clean and orderly mentality is what James was confronting when he broached the topic in “The Will to Believe.” The theistic conception of religion serves as an intentional example to bridge the skeptical barrier between the “respectable and academic” system of thinking from that of the “mere delusions” of a psychical researcher.

---

460 Additionally, in a later lecture that James gives in 1902 on “Intellect and Feeling in Religion” we get the sense that his conception of religious is profoundly pluralistic. There he explains that “if the world is wide enough to produce the individualities of character in all their variety, it ought surely to afford a large enough map of spiritual truth to allow each of them to carve out of it what suits his own necessities…. We need all types in order to garner in the plenary revelations. The broad and the deep, the hot and the cool, the emphatic and the equable all play their part in working out the problem. We need not narrow the sphere of application of such a word as ‘religion’” (James, ML, 85).

461 James, ML, 63.
In bringing this discussion to a close, one final point needs to be examined. Philosophically speaking, this broadening of James’s conception of the religious field does not alter the strength nor weakness of his right to believe argument—although some might be predisposed to think that it would lessen its strength, as well as its appeal. What it does do, however, is to help us relocate James’s central concerns with regard to the religious hypothesis. At this point in his career, he has not yet publically voiced his pragmatic philosophy—although intimations of this perspective are peppered throughout many of his early writings.

One of the dominant themes of his later pragmatic thinking is that it is deeply rooted in the idea of meliorism. In *Pragmatism* James explains that “[m]eliorism treats salvation as neither necessary nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility.” The idea is that meliorism functions as philosophical alternative to the moods of pessimism and optimism that deeply permeate our worldviews. It represents a middle ground that avoids the extremes of blind faith and nihilism by offering the possibility of hope that is grounded in the creative bettering of ourselves and the world through our own actions.

In regard to the religious hypothesis, a careful study of *The Will to Believe* and its preface make it very clear that James’s treatment of religion (and science and philosophy)

---

462 James, *P*, 137.

463 Koopman suggests that meliorism is a combination of pluralism and humanism. He explains that “Meliorism, holding together pluralism with humanism, is the thesis that we are capable of creating better worlds and selves. If pluralism is the thesis that better futures are possible and humanism the thesis that possibilities are often enough decided by human energies, then meliorism combines the two in asserting that better futures are made real by our effort. Meliorism, then, is best seen as humanism and pluralism combined in a confident mood” (Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition*, 19).
are being guided by an undeveloped pragmatist and meliorist point of view. For example, in *The Will to Believe*, particularly in the first and last essays, i.e. “The Will to Believe” and WPRHA respectively, one gets the sense that he is continually navigating between the optimist and the pessimist in regard to the possibility of objective certitude of the religious hypothesis. James is very clear that he is not blindly affirming nor denying its possibility; rather, he trying to create a space whereby we can genuinely investigate its possibilities. This sentiment is captured in his discussion of the differences between the rationalist and the empiricist:

when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth. We still pin our faith on its existence, and still believe that we gain an ever better position towards it by systematically continuing to roll up experiences and think.

This perspective becomes all the more clear when framed in terms of James’s appeal to the facts of the “unclassified residuum.” He attempts to navigate the line between the blind devotion of the overzealous religious practitioner and the closed-minded skepticism of the dogmatic scientist by suggesting that we take seriously these experiences and study them as a way of further exploring the depths of the human experience.

______________

464 Officially, James does not publically announce his pragmatic philosophy until the following year in his 1898 lecture, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results.” Similarly, he does not explicitly use the term “meliorism” until he gives his 1906-07 Lowell Lectures, which were subsequently published as *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*.


466 Given James’s penchant to lash out at the pessimistic point of view, it is easy enough to see how one might mistakenly ascribe to him an optimistic orientation (c.f. the long list of scholars that feel that James’s is advocating a form of “wishful-thinking”).
The classic example that he cites in WPRHA is that of animal magnetism and the
theory of hypnotic suggestion. On the one end of the spectrum were the Spiritualists who
believed that “animal magnetism opened a psychologically grounded and empirically
verifiable doorway between the human world and the world of experience.”\footnote{Taves, \textit{Fits, Trances, \& Visions}, 206.} On the
other end of the spectrum was a significance portion of the scientific and intellectual
community who “stoutly dismissed [the experiential facts] as a pack of lies.”\footnote{James, WPHRA, 224.} Working
at the boundaries of these two extremes we see James’s careful work as part of a larger
project whereby the SPR “attempted to bridge the worlds of popular religion and medical
science. Refusing to assume a materialistic stance \textit{a priori}, the psychical researchers
formed a tenuous bridge between popular religion, neurology, and the new frontiers of
psychical research.”\footnote{Taves, \textit{Fits, Trances, \& Visions}, 206.}

To further substantiate the claim that James’s investigations sought to
melioristically navigate the borders of religion and science we may turn to the latter half
of the 1896 preface to \textit{The Will to Believe}. As I pointed out earlier, James frames his
defensive essays within the context of addressing the blind monist and the narrow
thinking of the pessimist that believes that “science has already ruled all possible

\footnote{Bordogna astutely points out, James’s work with the SPR represents a form of “boundary work” that enabled him to navigate between these differing fields of inquiry and the communities that blindly universalized their interpretation of exceptional phenomena. She explains that James’s investigations “were a means to challenge boundaries that many of his scientific and philosophical colleagues posited as natural and absolute: the boundaries separating ‘orthodox science’ from ‘superstition’ and ‘heterodoxy,’ those separating the ‘academic’ scientist, the ‘specialist,’ and the ‘expert’ from the amateur and the ‘average man,’ as well as the uneducated working-class or lower middleclass constituencies” (Bordogna, \textit{William James at the Boundaries}, 94).}
religious hypotheses out of court.” In response to this, he maintains that “the scientist has nothing to fear for his own interests from the liveliest possible state of fermentation in the religious world of his time.” His reasoning is that the religious hypotheses that have any sense of staying power will be those that integrate the facts of science—certainly not Science—into their worldview. What is crucial about James’s recommendation is that it is not grounded in an optimistic view of religion that believes that religion(s) is/are unequivocally true. He is well aware of the potential problems of religion and states as much when he says that although “religious fermentation is always a symptom of the intellectual vigor of a society…,” religious faith(s) are equally capable of harm when “they forget that they are hypotheses and put on rationalistic and authorities pretensions.” The point of the latter half of the preface is to show that James’s defense of faith as a legitimate possibility for truthfulness hinges on the possibility that some religious hypotheses may be true.

When we understand this requirement it becomes clear why James defends the “unclassified residuum” just as readily as he defends the theist. He theorizes that:

If religious hypotheses about the universe be in order at all, then the active faiths of individuals in them, freely expressing themselves in life, are the experimental tests by which they are verified, and the one means by which

---

470 James, “Preface,” 9.

471 Ibid., 8-9.

472 A negative historical example might be the way in which physical mediumship sought to empirically “prove” the existence of the unseen order. In a diametrically opposite and contemporary direction, James would be pleased with the prospering relations between religion and neurology that are captured in the work of Andrew Newberg, as well as the social scientific and historical work of Ann Taves through her most recent book, Religious Experienced Reconsidered.

473 Ibid., 9.
their truth or falsehood can be wrought out. The truest scientific hypothesis is that which, as we say, “works” best; and it can be no otherwise with the religious hypothesis. \(^{474}\)

He goes on to explain that the history of religion confirms this claim insofar as many religions have floundered, “crumbled at contact with a widening knowledge of the world,” and been erased from history. James surmises the current predicament by suggesting that given the steady rise of scientific understanding, religious hypotheses are not being given a fair hearing. Along these lines, his defense seeks to level the playing field by democratizing the epistemic claims of the blind monist in order to provide a fighting chance for the epistemic underdogs.

\(^{474}\) Ibid. 8.
CHAPTER 5
THE 1897 INGERSOLL LECTURE ON HUMAN IMMORTALITY:
AN EXPERIMENT IN EARLY RADICAL EMPIRICISM

Introduction
In the preceding chapters I have provided a revisionist account that points toward an alternative framework whereby James’s early radical empiricism can be understood as being driven by a socially-aware epistemology. In order to understand the trajectory of his 1896 preface, I argued that one must take into account his standpoint as both a “definite philosophic attitude” and an epistemological methodology that is sensitized to the moral and social repercussions of the blind monist’s universalizing vision. In keeping with this hermeneutic trajectory, I argue that the first objection of James’s 1897 Ingersoll Lecture serves as an attempt to epistemologically liberate religious minorities from the dogmatic and monistic tendencies of the late nineteenth century scientific and philosophical communities that reject the notion of immortality, declaring that it is irrational to believe otherwise.475 By attending to the moral and social reverberations of

475 On this account, my focus draws away from commonly discussed themes in the secondary literature by suggesting that its import is not a platform to preach the metaphysical doctrine of the transmission theory—the most common scholarly interest in James’s Ingersoll Lecture—nor is it directly concerned with his personal over-beliefs regarding life after death. For accounts that primarily address the metaphysics of the transmission theory as the focal point of the 1897 Ingersoll lecture, see Perry (1935); Levinson (1981); Fontinell (1986); Gerald Myers, William James: His Life and Thought (New Haven: Yale University Press,1986); Laura Westra, “The Religious Dimension of Individual Immortality in the Thinking of William James,” Faith and Philosophy 3:3 (July, 1986), 285-97; Barnard (1997), and Wesley Cooper, The Unity of William James’s Thought (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002). For the secondary literature that focuses on James’s over-beliefs, see Bixler (1926); Perry (1935); Gavin (1984); and Barnard (1997). Both Philstrom (2002) and Tadd Ruetenik, “Last Call for William James:
his epistemological argument, it becomes clear that James’s agenda, at this point in time, is that of democratically defending contextualized epistemic minorities.

In accordance with my previous arguments, if we are to grasp the import of the Ingersoll Lecture as rooted in a radical empiricist framework, we need to recognize the importance of his work within subaltern cultures, e.g., psychical research, alternative medical practices and religious beliefs, all of which are the crucial themes of James’s 1890s publications. Previously, I argued that the 1896 Lowell Lectures on “Exceptional Mental States,” the 1896 publications, and both the preface and the text of the *The Will to Believe* all display a continuity of concern for the epistemic validity of the perceived “alogical” other and his/her right to believe. My contention is that the trajectory of his religiously sensitized radical empiricist thinking carries over and provides us with a guiding framework for interpreting the epistemic sensitivity expressed in the Ingersoll Lecture.

The chapter opens with a manifest reading of the lecture and directs our attention to the first of James’s two objections: the defense of the right to believe in immortality. Having a basic understanding of the lecture and its key components will enable us to see how a radical empiricist reading is embedded deep within the text. Recognizing the difficulty of making the claim that the Ingersoll Lecture is best understood as an experiment of his early radical empiricism, the next section attempts to bridge the hermeneutic gap by drawing attention to a series of correspondence that took place

On Pragmatism, Piper, and the Value of Psychical Research,” *The Pluralist*, 7:1 (Spring, 2012), 72-93 offer new readings that focus on James’s pragmatism and ethics. Over and against some of the previous comments on the Ingersoll lecture, my argument demonstrates that whether or not James actually believes in immortality is beside the point.
between James and George Holmes Howison. While largely looked over in the secondary literature, I argue that these letters provide us with compelling evidence that associates James’s Ingersoll Lecture with his early radical empiricism.

Next, I suggest that we can get a clearer picture of James’s radical empiricist argument by identifying one of his several target audiences and the assertive tactics by which he refutes the dominant epistemological opinion regarding the impossibility of an afterlife. Based upon James’s personal correspondence with William Sloane Kennedy, Charles Augustus Strong, and James Ward, I identify and focus on the audience against which James is speaking. This target audience is portrayed as the dogmatic, scientifically-cultivated community variously associated with extreme forms of materialism, positivism, realism, etc., and can be linked to the perspective of the blind monist.

Having identified this group, the following section returns to the text and fleshes out the latent radical empiricist themes. Once we have the basic orientation, we are prepared to identify and discuss the second target audience, or what I am calling the epistemic underdogs. They are the epistemologically and psychologically repressed audience of believers for which immortality is “one of the greatest spiritual needs.”

The final section of the chapter turns toward the epistemology of the transmission theory and argues that James’s underlying agenda goes beyond the question of immortality. It demonstrates that the “wider advantage” of the transmission theory is that it serves as a rational defense of religious experience and cases of what James’s calls “obscure and exceptional phenomena.”

476 James, Human Immortality, 77.

477 Ibid., 92.
The 1897 Ingersoll Lecture: A Manifest Reading

On 10 November 1897, James delivered the second annual “Ingersoll Lecture on the Immortality of Man” to an audience at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Broadly construed, the lecture, “Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine,” serves two purposes: first, it stands as a democratic defense of the rational legitimacy of religious belief in regards to the logical possibility of human immortality, and second, it rejects an aristocratic view of immortal existence in favor of a democratic demographic.

In order to flesh out the basic structure of James’s argument, a manifest reading of the text will provide the reader with the foundational premises and format of James’s first objection. The text itself is divided into two parts, consisting of two objections that, according to James, were stumbling blocks to the modern mind. For the sake of brevity and for the narrow purpose of this chapter, I will not spend much time addressing the second objection.

For interested readers, a brief summary is as follows. In the second objection James remarks that the traditional view of immortality—he calls it the “Aristocratic view of immortality”—is based upon the quantitative understanding that eternity is the destination of the “élite, a select and manageable number.” When this quantitative view is combined with our own inner qualitative appeal, i.e. a personal desire for immortality, and situated within a Darwinian framework that is predicated upon a notion of deep time and therefore results in an uncanny number of historical beings, then the idea of immortality becomes less personally meaningful. James observes that if an

478 Ibid., 96.
individual is to believe in immortality, it “demands of us nowadays a scale of representation so stupendous that our imagination faints before it, and our personal feelings refuse to rise up and face the task.”

In other words, the objection is that immortality, on such a scale, has lost its meaning and significance.

James argues that this problem is rooted in a psychological structure of objectification and projection, and that the desire for immortality can once again become an acute psychological possibility if we can see through this self-imposed limitation. From a qualitative perspective, he maintains that we are blinded to the inner significance of the life of the other and thus while we can imagine an afterlife for ourselves—we cannot imagine a possible afterlife scenario that would include such a gross number of others. In response to this, he argues for a democratic view of immortality which is rooted in equality and recognition of the inner significance of the “alien” other. On this account, when we see through our objectification of the other, we can recognize that the desire for immortality is just as pressing for the other and that a meaningful afterlife is possible even on such a vast scale.

To return to the first objection, the heart of the problem of immortality is rooted in the psycho-physiological understanding of the relationship between the mind and the body. Manifestly interpreted, the first objection responds to the idea that the modern scientific understanding of the brain refutes the possibility of immortality. The argument, James explains, and the subsequent objection to an afterlife is “relative to the absolute dependence of our spiritual life, as we know it here, upon the brain.”

479 Ibid., 97-98.

480 Ibid., 79.
question that if the inner life of subjective experience is a function of the materiality of brain, then how is it possible to have any sort of experienced afterlife if the brain, which is responsible for consciousness, is destroyed? James furthers this view by an appeal to common sense, as well the ongoing investigations and discoveries of science:

Everyone knows that arrests of brain development occasion imbecility, that blows on the head abolish memory or consciousness, and that brain-stimulants and poisons change the quality of our ideas. The anatomists, physiologists, and pathologists have only shown this generally admitted fact of dependence to be detailed and minute. ...The assurance that observation will go on to establish them ever more and more minutely is the inspirer of all contemporary research. And almost any of our young psychologists will tell you that only a few belated scholastics, or possibly some crack-brained theosophist or psychical researcher, can be found holding back, and still talking as if mental phenomena might exist as independent variables in the world.\footnote{Ibid., 79–80.}

Given the overwhelming evidence of the mechanical relationship between the mind and the body, James draws out the major premises of what he calls the production theory of consciousness.\footnote{Ibid., 84.} Simply stated, consciousness is conceived of as a product of the brain and when the brain ceases functioning, it is no longer capable of its productive function. Taking stock of his audience and the argument that he is about to put forward, James implores his audience to unequivocally subscribe to the "the great psycho-physical formula: Thought is a function of the brain."\footnote{Ibid., 81} He then poses the following question:

Does this doctrine logically compel us to disbelieve in immortality? Ought it to force every truly consistent thinker to sacrifice his hopes of an hereafter to what he takes to be his dust of accepting all the consequences of scientific truth? ...This, then is the objection to immortality; and the next thing in order for me to try to make plain to you why I believe that it has in strict logic no deterrent power. I must show you that the fatal consequences are not coercive, as is commonly imagined; and that even
though our soul’s life (as here below it is revealed to us) may be in literal strictness the function of a brain that perishes, yet it is not at all impossible, but on the contrary quite possible, that the life may still continue when the brain itself is dead.\footnote{Ibid., 81-82.}

The remainder of the first objection is devoted to establishing the fact that several types of function, e.g., transmissive or permissive/releasing function, occur in the natural world and that we are not restricted to one frame of reference, \textit{i.e.} the production function of material causality. Due to the nature of other types of function, it is \textit{logically} possible that the notion of human immortality is compatible with one or more of these alternative types of function. We cannot empirically determine, one way or another, which theory is right; rather, all that we can note is that function is nothing more than “bare concomitant variation.”\footnote{Ibid., 88. The term simply refers to the idea that two events occur simultaneously. James uses this term to illustrate his point about the mind-body relation and that we must be careful as to how we determine the status and value of the relations, because not only do they carry particular metaphysical and epistemological ramifications, but that these decisions also have moral and social effects.} Therefore, we are not logically compelled to disbelieve in immortality. From a manifest point of view, the argument is fairly simple and straightforward. Immortality, according to his analysis, is a rational and logical possibility when viewed from a different metaphysical and epistemological standpoint.

Given the manifest content of the lecture, it is easy to see why this is an oft overlook text. When positioned between such great works, e.g., \textit{The Principles of Psychology}, \textit{The Will to Believe}, \textit{The Varieties of Religious Experience}, \textit{Pragmatism}, and \textit{A Pluralistic Universe}, it is easy to understand why the commentarial literature on the Ingersoll Lecture is comparatively sparse. Cotkin once commented that “given the varied appeal of James and his work, it is not surprising that the cultural and philosophical
arbiters of our day increasingly turn to James for inspiration, direction, or justification.” In the sections that follow I attempt to revitalize the text and its arguments. While being faithful to the context, range, and scope of the text as a minor work, I intend to show that the Ingersoll Lecture on Human Immortality serves as an important, albeit overlooked, connecting thread between James’s religious, philosophical, and social thought.

Historical Background That Situates A Radical Empiricist Reading

On February 15th of 1897, the Harvard Corporation voted that James would be the next Ingersoll Lecturer. Given the historical proximity between the composition of the 1896 preface to *The Will to Believe* and the formal announcement that James would be the second person to deliver the annual Ingersoll Lecture, one can imagine the possibility of the former influencing the latter. Justifying this assumption, however, is another matter. It is one thing to suggest that James’s early radical empiricism functions as a hermeneutic bridge between texts and contexts, but it is quite another to provide factual evidence that associates his Ingersoll Lecture with his early radical empiricism.

Prior to my putting forward an early radical empiricist reading of the 1897 Ingersoll Lecture, there is some preliminary ground that must be covered in order to legitimate the application of the former to the latter. Several scholars, notably Myers and Cooper, have speculated that central features of the transmissive theory may be associated with James’s later metaphysical developments of radical empiricism, *i.e.* as an

---

entry to “pure experience.” To my knowledge, no one has looked at the underpinnings of the lecture as an entryway into the social and moral epistemology of his early radical empiricism. This is not to say, however, that this observation was entirely lost among James’s critics and supporters: in 1901, just a few years prior to his flurry of articles that define his mature radical empiricist standpoint, George Holmes Howison (1834-1916), an American Personalist philosopher, mathematician, friend and colleague of James, notes the correlation between his Ingersoll lecture and his early radical empiricism.  

In addition to the James-Howison correspondence, further groundwork must be covered in order to understand the role and significance of James’s use of the transmission theory. First, we need to understand that within the text itself, James adopts a multivalent approach that appeals to different audiences for different reasons. At the superficial level, James’s immediate audience is his readers and the specific crowd attending the lecture. More discretely, two targeted audiences emerge from the text: one which he is arguing against (the blind monist) and the other to whom he is arguing for (the epistemic underdog). Both audiences, I suggest below, emerge more clearly when

---

487 Myers suggests a possible connection between the subliminality of the “transmission theory” and the religious experience of a wider self of “pure experience.” See Myers, *William James*, 383. Cooper goes further and explains that he reads *Human Immortality* as a text which “ground[s] the brain and its activity in pure experience, such that although the mind is dependent on the brain, as James’s cerebralism stipulates, the brain is also dependent upon the mind *qua* pure experience….” See Cooper, *The Unity of William James’s Thought*, 158.

488 Howison founded and served as chair of the department of Philosophy at the University of California. However, most James scholars will recognize that he is the individual responsible for bringing James to Berkeley in the summer of 1898: there James gave birth to American Pragmatism in his lecture, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results.” For an overview of Howison’s life and significant ideas, see Randall Auxier, “Howison” in *The Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers*, John R. Shook, ed. (Bristol: Continuum, 2005), 1179-1185.
grasp the radical empiricist underpinning of the text and this may be done by appealing to James’s personal correspondence with Charles Augustus Strong, James Ward, and Henri Bergson.

George Howison’s Critique and the Association of Radical Empiricism

In order to situate the historical and theoretical context of the relevant James-Howison correspondence, we can note that know prior to James’s composition, delivery, and publication of the Ingersoll Lecture, Howison was already familiar with James’s early radical empiricism. One year prior to James’s famous lecture, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results,” Howison hosted a series of formal discussions that examined James’s empiricism as presented in The Will to Believe essays. On 27 August 1897 Howison inaugurated the series by giving the opening lecture, which discussed “the general character of Professor James’s philosophy, with some account of its sources, and some suggestions towards the criticism of it. [The book at large, but particularly the Preface.]” Unfortunately, there are no copies of Howison lecture notes, thus we do not know the extent to which he praised or critiqued James, much less how well he understood the philosophy of radical empiricism.491

489 James, WB, 441.

490 Ibid.

491 The Howison papers at UC Berkeley archives have virtually all other addresses from “Empiricism and The Will to Believe.” Curiously, the Howison lecture is absent. According to Skrupskelis’s notes the program description, and not the lectures, are printed in Bulletin no. 18 of the Philosophical Union, University of California. Thus, until new archival evidence surfaces, we are left with only basic facts.
As we shall see in the correspondence which follows, the two are discussing Howison recent book, *The Limits of Evolution*. After receiving a letter in which James both praises and criticizes it, Howison responds asserting that James is stubborn in his own belief and that he is so blinded by his own radical empiricism that he fails see the point that Howison is arguing. Howison writes:

As for your criticism, that the book overrides or ignores the horrid irrationality and evil in the world, instead of facing and explaining it, and capers away in a fatuous confidence in an ultimate idealism, I must say that I do not think it is correct. *You feel that it is so, because you have so dead-set a confidence in your “radical empiricism” that arguments however careful and however emphasized for a priori certainties make no impression on you at all.*

---

492 George Howison, *The Limits of Evolution and Other Essays Illustrating the Metaphysical Theory of Personal Idealism* (London: The MacMillan Company, 1901), emphasis added. Section six of *The Limits of Evolution* is entitled “Human Immortality: It’s Positive Argument” and the basis of the chapter serves as a rebuttal to James’s 1897 Ingersoll Lecture. The title, itself, is significant insofar as it purports to be the exact opposite of James’s: “Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine.” While James’s text defends the possibility of human immortality from two objections, Howison’s chapter advances a more positive thesis insofar as it, according to Howison, rationally proves the possibility of personal immortality.

In the William James Papers at Houghton Library, there is a copy of *Limits* which belonged to James’s personal library. While there are marginal notes in James’s handwriting, section six is completely free of marginalia! Judging by James’s critical comments in the letters, it is clear that he read Howison’s criticism of his 1897 Ingersoll Lecture. How he managed to *not* mark up the text is worth considering.

493 George Holmes Howison to James, Shasta Springs, California, 21 July 1901, in *Correspondence*, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 9, July 1899-1901 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 520. As far as textual evidence goes, we need to be careful of hermeneutically stretching ourselves thin. This series of correspondence dates back to July of 1901, whereas James’s Ingersoll Lecture was written and delivered in 1897. Howison’s comment cannot refer to James’s mature radical empiricism, because those essays were written between 1904 and 1905. As pointed out previously, based upon Howison’s 1897 address, he was one of the few individuals that may have picked up on James’s early radical empiricism and the significance of it for James’s thought as a whole. That said, it might be the case that Howison’s comment refers to some other writing of James, which took place after the publication of *Human Immortality*. *TT* is ruled out insofar as it does not begin from the standpoint of irrationality, nor does it appeal to the standpoint of radical empiricism. *VRE*
At first glance, Howison’s criticism does not stand out: James himself already anticipated that his colleagues would take his radical empiricism as an “irrationalism.”

What is significant is what James said to Howison that elicited this response and the fact that this comment has been entirely overlooked in the secondary literature. Tracing this slight skirmish between James and Howison sheds new light on James’s radical empiricist orientation—one that puts the Ingersoll Lecture in a new perspective.

The story begins with Howison’s reading of James’s Ingersoll Lecture. He writes to James with the following praise:

I think it, on the whole, the best thing you have done yet,—which, I know, is saying a great deal, but it seems to me to be true…and yet, noble as the essays is, & truly beautiful & helpful, I think it shows the unsatisfactory limitations of empirical philosophy in a way that the human spirit interested in the question of immortality cannot be satisfied with. The one weak point in your exposition, as it appears to me, is your failure to connect your argument securely with the possibility of individual immortality.

seems like a more likely candidate, however, by the time that the correspondence was taking place, James had only recently finished the first half of the Gifford lecture series. Thus, unless James was sending Howison copies of his lectures—and thus far I have not found evidence of this—it rules out this possibility as well. Thus the only reasonable explanation is that this comment refers directly to the position that James advances in WB.

494 Perry (1935, Vol. 2) quotes from the letter but offers no commentary. As far as I can tell, no one in the secondary literature has addressed this insight.

495 George Holmes Howison to James, Berkeley, 18 November 1898, in Correspondence, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 8, 1896-June 1899 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 456. Howison then proceeds to elaborate as to the limitation of the lecture: “…Especially in your note 5, to page 23, does this gap show. There you do not make the possible ‘many minds behind the scenes’ identical with our minds; for you unfortunately say, that ‘all the transmission-theory requires is that they should transcend our minds,—which thus come from something mental that pre-exists, & is larger than themselves.’ But if these transcendent minds are not ours, of what earthly avail is their survival of the death of the brain to us? Then ‘somethings’ you indeed show may live on in spite of the death of our brains, but what is that to us?” (Ibid.,456). Note the difference between Howison and James on the point of
This unusually high praise is quite strange if we keep in mind that the Ingersoll Lecture is a minor text in comparison to James’s *Principles and/or The Will to Believe*—two major texts that drew considerable attention. Nevertheless, despite such lofty compliments, he does criticize James for not “positively” securing the argument for the proof of individual immortality. In what appears to be a direct response to James’s limitation, Howison devotes a full chapter of his *Limits of Evolution* to explaining his own argument for the conditions of human immortality, while also critiquing James’s empirical objections. Howison feels that he corrects James’s mistake by offering an *a priori* argument, as opposed to James’s *a posteriori* argument that attends to the personalistic side of life after death.

When we unpack the correspondence between the two regarding Howison’s recent publication, it becomes clear that they are speaking in cross-purposes. In a letter dated 17 June 1901, James praises Howison’s book saying that “[w]hat seems to be its strength is the radical and direct and uncompromising way in which it lays down a conception of the world on lines of *rational fitness*.“ He continues by saying that:

> [t]he weakness of this book seems to me to lie in the purity with which the considerations of teleological fitness disport themselves. You seem almost unconscious of the *primâ facie rebelliousness of the world of facts*. You simply override them, strong in your conviction of the ultimate ideality; whereas with most of us their brutality and madness are the interest: where Howison is seeking rational satisfaction, James is quick to point out how interest, i.e. the passional nature, has dramatic influence on the standardization of rationality (c.f. “Sentiment of Rationality” and “The Will to Believe”).

496 This was so common a complaint of James’s text that he addresses this point in the preface to the second edition.

principal stimulus to thought, and untying the knot, not cutting it, is what we want help in doing, from teachers like yourself... I must say that for my mind your deduction of evil from the logical necessity of some defect, in the definition of every finite, doesn’t meet the want; I find myself more and more disposed to believe in irrationality as the prius, out of which ideality slowly and empirically emerges by a de facto process of evolution—or if you wish of improvement by alteration.  

James closes the letter with the following encouragement:

…the book is a noble book and you on the right flank and I on the left flank will execute one of Kitchner’s sweeping movements, & clear the country of all boors, monist fatalists, and annex it in the name of the pluralistic philosophy.  

Regarding James’s commentary, two points must be observed before grasping the significance of this correspondence as a hermeneutic bridge between his early radical empiricism and the 1897 Ingersoll Lecture. First, notice how he centers his commentary on Howison’s omission of “the primâ facie rebelliousness of the world of facts.” For James, as we saw in previous chapters, facts are many and varied. When considering the scientific milieu of the late nineteenth century, whether looking toward the increasing popularity and respectability of Darwinian thinking, the rising tide of the new psychology, or any number of new developments in other academic and scientific fields, it is no wonder that James is adamant about the importance of keeping abreast of new

498 Ibid (emphasis added).

499 Ibid., 503. The reference is to the military success of British general Herald Horatio Kitchner and his re-taking of the Sudan in 1898 during the Battle of Omdurman. It seems that we can draw an analogy to this battle insofar as the critical juncture of the battle was the difference in weaponry. While the Sudanese fought with older, traditional weaponry, the British came to the battle with newer, more refined technology: modern rifles, machine guns, and artillery. On this account, we may appeal to James’s radical empiricism as the “new technology” which contrasts with British empiricism and German idealism.
facts. “New facts,” he writes, “burst old rules; then newly divined conceptions bind old and new together into a reconciling law.”

This leads to the second point, that James asserts that the “brutality and madness” of facts should be the starting point, not the end point: “I find myself,” he writes “more and more disposed to believe in irrationality as the prius.” To clarify this important observation, it is crucial that we understand the idea of “irrationality” that James is allocating to his philosophy. When he says that irrationality is the starting point, it is indicative of his epistemic sensitivity to the alogical other and his idea that philosophy is the habit of always seeing an alternative. That is to say, it is irrational from one point of view, but that need not signify an objective or universal claim: from an opposite philosophical standpoint, the epistemology of irrationality appears very different. In the case of the Ingersoll Lecture, as we shall see below, the end point or conclusion of the dogmatic materialist is that immortality is incompatible with its worldview and is therefore deemed irrational—nothing more need be said. For the radical empiricist, however, this so-called irrationality is the mere starting point of thinking through the problem of immortality. In other words, for James, important philosophy—that is to say philosophy that makes a practical and meaningful difference—begins where other standpoints end.

In Science, Community and the Transformation of American Philosophy, 1860-1930, Daniel J. Wilson remarks that for James the origin of ideas is more or less irrelevant: what matters most is that hypothesis is tested and verified. He explains that, whether a scientific formulation arises in the course of ordinary experimentation or in reflection on “wild facts” of the fringe has little

500 James, WPRHA, 236.
impact on its sustaining power and influence. Any scientific theory must be put to the test of being verified, of being submitted to judgment of those competent to judge its viability.501

The tension between epistemic origins and consequences surfaces frequently in James’s pragmatic and epistemic essays. While critiquing the rationalist in “The Will to Believe,” James writes that:

when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself….Our great difference from the scholastic lies in the way we face. The strength of his system lies in the principles, the origin, the *terminus ad quo* of his thought; for us the strength is in the outcome, the upshot, the *terminus ad quem*. Not where it comes from but what it leads to is to decide. It matters not to an empiricist from what quarter an hypothesis may come to him: he may have acquired it by fair means or by foul; passion may have whispered or accident suggested it; but if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true.502

Provided with an “irrational” event or belief, James is the type of individual that is likely to examine how and why an individual has an exceptional experience or alternative worldview: not necessarily because it is objectively true, but because it may contain a possibility to provide us with hope for meaningful living or uncover some new truth about ourselves, the natural world, and our relationship to it.

We see this very pointedly in James’s comment to Howison that by severing the knot we lose all possible conditions of investigation. Disclosing his own philosophic temperament, James’s letter expresses a deep and abiding interest or willingness to explore new and/or heterodox ideas: thus he goes on to suggest that it is best that we attempt to untie the knot with the hope that we gain the possibility of learning something


new. Here we are presented with a picture of James’s world as one that is “wild—game flavored as a hawk’s wing.” Once again he anticipates that what he deems to be philosophically important will be considered mere “irrationalism” by his colleagues. In this manner, Howison’s criticism puts us in touch with a fresh insight, or starting point, for understanding James’s Ingersoll Lecture, his early radical empiricism, and the relation between the two.

Targeted Audiences: the Blind Monist and the Epistemic Underdog

In order to develop an appreciation of the sense of the radical empiricist orientation of the Ingersoll Lecture, we need to have a clearer understanding of James’s audience. The immediate question that should arise concerns context: to whom is he speaking and why? When we strip the argument down to its basic features, what is the desired effect that he intends for his audience to take with them? And most importantly, what benefit either theoretical or practical may be derived from his argument?

The first, and obvious, audience identification is that of the immediate type that James is speaking to. They are the group of individuals that occupied Fogg Museum on Wednesday, November 10th, 1897. This group includes additional audiences that he

503 Case in point, one may refer to James’s ongoing investigations in psychical research, particularly his examination of thought-transference and telepathy. Had he merely written off this idea, he would not have made progress in regard to the study of the unconscious mind.

504 James, “Preface,” 6.

505 Ibid., 7.

506 Secondarily, we can extend this group to include those individuals that acquired and read a copy of the published lecture.
spoke to at the Society for Ethical Culture, as well as the Berkeley Philosophical Club. Unfortunately, we have no data on any of these groups. All that we have to go on is James’s description which vaguely associates them with “scientifically cultivated circles.”

Beyond the audience that he is speaking to, James appears to have a more primary agenda vis-à-vis a specific type of audience in mind. As discussed below, James maintains that his argument is directed toward the materialist, the “cerebralist,” and a variety of other –isms. Gathered together, it becomes clear that James has in mind a definite audience that he is speaking against. In addition to this, we can also make an appeal to the radical empiricist attitude and its epistemic sensitivity to the alogical other as a way of fleshing out a third type of audience: those for whom James is speaking for. This latter group, we shall see, benefit epistemically, socially, and morally from James’s justification that the possibility of human immortality may be considered a rational belief.

*Speaking Against Dogma: Evidence for James’s Perspectival Criticism*

James initially considered declining the offer to give the second Ingersoll Lecture. Confessing that he is not particularly keen on the subject matter and that he felt as though he would merely be representing an institutional opinion, James originally believed that he, as “uninspired and official” as he was, would not be an able candidate to contribute to the subject. However, upon reconsidering what he calls the “long perspective,”

---

507 He repeated the lecture in Chicago for the Society for Ethical Culture on December 27th, 1897, and again in September of 1898, in Oakland for the Berkeley Club. James, *ERM*, 233-34.

508 James, *Human Immortality*, 79.
whereby each Ingersoll lecturer contributes to the “minute division of labor” and collectively “remedies” one another, James reconceived his idea of how he might contribute to the lecture series. ⁵⁰⁹

He envisions himself as leveling an argument against the dogmatic, institutionalized manner by which vital beliefs are co-opted by an organized majority. ⁵¹⁰

As we saw in the previous chapters, much of James’s writings and lectures in the 1890s lashed out at various blind monists: the Ingersoll lectureship was no different. Taking cues from the preceding discussions of James’s early radical empiricism, we can see that the second identifiable audience is the one that James is speaking against and that he variously associates this group with “Science,” “the puritanism of science,” the “ordinary dualistic point of view of natural science and common sense,” and the “ordinary” view of psycho-physiology that adopt these belief systems on dogmatic and infallible grounds. ⁵¹¹

He expresses this sentiment in the opening lines of the text when he discusses how institutionalization can suffocate an idea instead of protecting it. He writes:

   "It is a matter unfortunately too often seen in history to call for much remark, that when a living want of mankind has got itself officially protected and organized in an institution, one of the things which the institution most surely tends to do is to stand in the way of the natural gratification of the want itself. We see this in laws and courts of justice; we see it in ecclesiasticisms; we see it in academies of the fine arts, in the medical and other professions, and we even see it in the universities themselves."

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ Readers of VRE will recognize this anti-institutional take on religion as an “arbitrary” but dominant theme of his later treatment of religion and religious experience, see Chapter One, “Circumspection of the Topic,” esp. 32-33.

⁵¹¹ James, Human Immortality, 82 n. 3.
Too often do the place-holders of such institutions frustrate the spiritual purpose to which they were appointed to minister, by the technical light which soon becomes the only light in which they seem able to see the purpose, and the narrow way which is the only way in which they can work in its service.\textsuperscript{512}

While the opening lines are considerably obtuse, his point suggests that dogmatic clinging to truth and power occur all too frequently across the board. James narrows his perspective to the field of physiological psychology in which he is considered to be an expert. Asked to speak as a representative of the discipline, James envisions that by adopting the postulate that “Thought is a function of the brain,” his argument concretely locates itself within the heart of the institutionalized standpoint. After convincing his audience of the absolute authority of this statement, James employs his radical empiricist critique as a way of working his way out of this coercive position.

To support this reading of the text and the way that James initially frames his lecture, there is evidence that suggests that his point of departure is predominantly concerned with countering the dogmatic and monolithically oriented materialist thinker—what I am calling the blind monist. Documentation of personal correspondence between James and his colleagues suggests this much. The strongest evidence of James’s anti-dogmatist, anti-foundalist, and anti-monistic approach to the Ingersoll Lecture is underscored in the correspondence between James and William Sloane Kennedy, an American author and journalist.\textsuperscript{513} Kennedy read James’s lecture and wrote up a brief review in the December issue of \textit{Conservator}, a venue dedicated to the work of Walt

\textsuperscript{512} Ibid., 77.

Whitman. In response to Kennedy’s letter, James mentions that he read Kennedy’s article in *The Conservator* and then spends the remainder of the letter explaining his reasoning behind the first argument in the Ingersoll Lecture.

I use the transmission-theory to bar the dogmatism of the cerebralists…I can’t guess whether you are against immortality or not. I am only against cerebralism calling it impossible. I am against monistic transcendental idealism, with the Absolute represented semi-anthropomorphically…I object to any one way of treating the world. It seems to me that your Agnosticism or manticism [sic] treats it in one way. It is too mixed an affair to submit to any one formula.  

One can easily note the overlap of ideas regarding dogmatic and monistic thinking between James’s response to Kennedy and how he frames his initial announcement of radical empiricism in the 1896 preface. Recall his opening statement that his new empirical position is “‘radical,’ because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as a hypothesis” and because it does not “dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all experience has got to square.” And again, in the 1896 preface James emphasized the pluralist standpoint due to the idea that “there is no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact.”  

The point, then, is that James clearly maintains that the complex issue of immortality is “too mixed an affair” to be understood from any one point of view. Whether immortality is a possibility or not, James argues, depends upon the logic of the perspective taken. For the dogmatic and authoritatively-minded cerebralist-positivist-

---


516 James, “Preface,” 5.

517 Ibid., 6.
materialist-realist thinker, the question of immortality is not an option; however, for the Theosophist, the Christian, and all those who subscribe to “heterodox” epistemologies it is most certainly a possibility—and a rational one at that.

Closely connected to the exchange between James and Kennedy, we can look at a similar type of correspondence that reflects the language of James’s targeted audience. Despite explicitly stating that he is not the individual to address “the conditions of our immortality,” both James Ward and Charles Augustus Strong write to James about the failings of his transmission theory. Each, in his own way, point out that James’s theory neglects to provide a detailed account of the relationship between finite and universal consciousness—that is between the individual and “the mother sea.”

Both thinkers appear to miss the point that James is not intending for the Ingersoll Lecture to be a positive account about the nature of human immortality, that he, instead,

---

518 James Ward (1843-1935) was a British Philosopher and psychologist. For his critique of James’s Ingersoll Lecture, see James Ward to James, Selwyn Gardens, Cambridge, MA, 11 December 1898, James to James Ward, Cambridge, MA, 11 December 1898, in Correspondence, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 8, 1896-June 1899 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 468-69; bMS Am 1092.9 [652]). Also see James’s response: James to James Ward, Cambridge, MA, 28 January 1899, in Correspondence, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 8, 1896-June 1899 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 490-91; bMS AM 1092.9 [3838]).

Charles Augustus Strong (1862-1940) was an American philosopher, psychologist, and former student James. For his critique of the Ingersoll Lecture see Charles Augustus Strong to James, Hôtel du Parc, Cannes, 3 December 1898, in Correspondence, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 8, 1896-June 1899 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 462-66; bMS Am 1092 [1055]). James’s unpublished response is located in the Charles Strong Papers at Rockefeller Archives Center: James to Charles Augustus Strong, Cambridge, MA, 28 January 1899, Series II, Prof. Corr., box 4, folder 59, Charles August Strong Papers, Rockefeller Archives Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY.

519 James, Human Immortality, 93; also see preface. The “Mother Sea” is James’s euphemism for cosmic, or infinite, consciousness. According to the transmission theory, it is theoretically possible that a consciousness “behind the veil” exists (76).
is merely refuting to objections or difficulties “which our modern culture finds in the old notion of a life hereafter.” Nevertheless, James responds to both Ward and Strong that the Ingersoll Lecture was merely an argument “against the materialists.” James fully recognizes that his account of the transmission theory leaves open the question of the mind-body relation and that it puts him into a dualistic standpoint. Be that as it may, he writes, “It is needless to say that the dualistic view is far from satisfying me, but one nail is good enough to drive out another, and that is all I meant.” In other words, this is not the place for him to go into such details: all that he is trying to do is to level the playing field and to show that human immortality, from one point of view, is a logical possibility.

Given the fact that James is willing to concede the dualistic point of view, one that he was not particularly keen on, it is clear that his agenda in the Ingersoll Lecture lies elsewhere. In conjunction with his radical empiricist writings of the 1896 preface, we

________________________

520 Ibid., 79.

521 Compare the above cited James’s letters of 28, Jan. 1899 to Ward and Strong. Both responses were written and mailed on the same day. Both letters were typed and signed by James. And both seem to contain the same exact response: “The first part was a mere argumentum ad hominem to the materialists. Admit, I say, the duality of mind and matter, and the functional relations—still, the individual’s consciousness may survive the brain, for in the Mother Sea the scars of cerebral operations may remain as records of the transaction, like stubs in a checkbook, and form the basis of an eternally remembered account. I should have said more explicitly that there is no objection to considering the Mother Sea in as individualistic a form as you like. We should then (doubtless for wise purposes) be filtered into this world’s experiences, and then be re-united to our deeper, truers selves, which would doubtless, be all the better for the fact” (Correspondence Vol. 8, 491).

522 Ibid.

523 James actually addresses this very point in footnote 3. He writes, “Meanwhile, since the physiological objection to immortality has arisen on the ordinary dualistic plane of thought, and since absolute phenomenism has as yet said nothing articulate enough to count about the matter, it is proper that my reply to the objection should be expressed in
see that James’s concern, first and foremost, is that the monopolization of belief is, for the time being, stunted.\textsuperscript{524}

In accordance with my previous analysis, upon identifying the blind monist, one need not look far to catch sight of the epistemic underdog. In this case, we see the pair interacting behind the scene of James’s Ingersoll Lecture: the blind monist as the individual/group who attempts to universalize his/their perspective by ruling out any possibility of immortality has a direct impact on the epistemic underdog, any individual/group that takes up the minority view of believing in the possibility of immortality.

\textit{Immortality as a Logical Possibility: a Radical Empiricist Critique}

When we take into account the target audience against which James is speaking, we begin to get a sense of the methodological orientation of the text. On the one hand, he uses the lecture as an opportunity to retract the “fangs of cerebralistic materialism;” on the other hand, as we shall analyze in the next section, he attempts to democratically dualistic terms—leaving me free, of course, on any later occasion to make an attempt, if I wish, to transcend them and use different categories.” James, \textit{Human Immortality}, 83.

\textsuperscript{524} While it is one thing for James to defend his manuscript in this manner, it is quite another to actively describe it as such. Three years later James sends Henri Bergson a copy of \textit{Human Immortality} with the following remarks: “I send you a little popular lecture of mine on immortality—no positive theory but merely an argumentum ad hominem for the ordinary cerebralistic objection—in which it may amuse you to see a formulation like your own that the brain is an organ of \textit{filtration} for spiritual life.” Of all the ways that he could characterize this text, James intentionally maintains that one of its primary functions is that of curbing monistic tendencies (James to Henri Bergson, Cambridge, MA, 14 December. 1902, in \textit{Correspondence}, Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., vol. 10, 1902-March 1905 [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002], 167-68; bMS Am 1092.9 [736]).
defend the epistemic underdog by rationalizing the irrational.\textsuperscript{525} Psycho-physiologists, like all scientists, are permitted to extend themselves beyond the range and scope of their discipline, otherwise advances in the field would not be made; however, to pronounce as objective and certain the view that human immortality is a logical impossibility is to over-reach and dabble in the realm of metaphysical speculation.

By following this train of thought, we can see how James’s argument functions as a radical empiricist critique of perspectival limitations. He begins the lecture by asking his audience to assume the truth value of the general psycho-physiological doctrine in which “thought is a function of the brain.” What is critical about this initial step of his argument is that he is adopting the stance of his interlocutor: he is not dismissing their point of view; instead he is merely trying to show how it is not grounded in objectivity and certitude, and, therefore, not forced into the same conclusion. In order to convince the dogmatic materialist that the idea of immortality may be a rational concept, James must provide an account that would be reasonable to the materialist by showing that their interpretation is but one of many legitimate stances. At this point we can see that once again the issue of tolerance features largely in James’s thought:

And, whether we care or not for immortality in itself, we ought, as mere critics doing police duty among the vagaries of mankind, to insist on the illogicality of a denial based on the flat ignoring of a palpable alternative.\textsuperscript{526}

The task that he sets before himself is to assume the method and style of thinking of the blind monist. As a radical empiricist, James is convinced that the universe is not understood in any one particular way. As articulated in the previous chapters, this line of

\textsuperscript{525} James, \textit{Human Immortality}, 88.

\textsuperscript{526} Ibid., 87.
thinking saturates James’s writings of the 1890s, particular the essays in *The Will to Believe*. In his writings on religion, e.g., “The Sentiment of Rationality,” “The Will to Believe,” and “Reflex Action and Theism,” we are reminded of his perspectival critique and that “what is inwardly clear from one point of view remains a bare externality and datum to the other.” Applied to the problem of immortality, James wants to show that questions of rationality hinge upon the perspective taken. What is illuminated by the light of reason from one point of view is internally congruous with how facts and datum are interpreted from *that* particular point of view; meanwhile, the very same facts interpreted from a different metaphysical framework may lead one to the conclusion of contradiction and logical impossibility. Whether appealing to the contextualism of the reflex action theory or what he calls “the sentiment of rationality,” James argues for a relational, contextual, and pragmatic view of knowledge.

In this manner when we consider the psycho-physiological doctrine of thought being a function of the brain, we can see that two people might look at the same fact and come to widely divergent conclusions. Case in point, when most physiological psychologists consider the relationship between the brain and the mind, they are *naturally* led to the conclusion that immortality is logically impossible. James explains this point in the following way:

When the physiologist who thinks that his science cuts off all hope of immortality pronounces the phrase, “Thought is a function of the brain,” he thinks of the matter just as he thinks when he says, “Steam is a function of the tea-kettle,” “Light is a function of the electric circuit,” “Power is a function of the moving waterfall.” In these latter cases the several material objects have the function of inwardly creating or engendering their effects, and their function must be call *productive* function. Just so, he thinks, it must be with the brain. Engendering consciousness in its interior, much as

---

527 James, “Preface,” 6.
it engenders cholesterol and creatin and carbonic acid, its relation to our soul’s life must also be called productive function. Of course, if such production be the function, then when the organ perishes, since the production can no longer continue, the soul must surely die. Such a conclusion as this is indeed inevitable from that particular conception of the facts. 528

The key turning point for understanding the text as experimentation in radical empiricism is the conjunctive language of “if.” If the productive function is an accurate account of the relationship between the mind and the brain, then mortality is the logical outcome and immortality is rationally impossible. The conjunctive term, however, implies that other options are theoretically available. To illustrate this point, James explains that the productive function is not the only type of function available to us in the natural world. He goes on to cite two other types, e.g., permissive and transmissive function, and explains that the transmissive function is logically compatible with a life hereafter. In effect, what James is doing is to rationalize that which is deemed irrational by the epistemic majority. Whether or not the alternatives are considered to “real” and “rational” possibilities is, according to James, a dispositional matter.

To emphasize his point, James goes on to present the audience with multiple analogies whereby function can be understood as the transmission—or movement across a threshold—of material, energy, etc. from one location to another. The best example being that of light refracting in a prism whereby “[t]he energy of light, no matter how produced, is by the glass sifted and limited in color, and by the lens or prism determined to a certain path and shape.” 529 Alternatively, we can think of radio waves being transmitted into audible sounds by a receiver.

528 James, Human Immortality, 84 (emphasis added).
529 Ibid., 86.
The point is that this type of function is empirically verifiable and is thus analogically compatible with the possibility of immortal existence. James offers an intriguing analogy utilizing a line from the great Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem, “Adonais.” For brevity’s sake, however, the point is illustrated more simply when we consider the radio analogy. In this analogy the fundamental point is to see that it is possible that consciousness is capable of existing without a material body. In order to illustrate this idea, we draw a simple analogy between the brain and the radio. If we understand consciousness to be that which is broadcast by the radio, then we can see that the source of consciousness is the radio wave, not the radio itself: the radio only transmits the signal, it does not produce it. Thus, if and when the radio breaks it does not destroy the radio wave itself, only its current manifestation. The point, then, is that according to the transmission theory, it is analogically possible to have some form of continued existence after the death of the body.

James explains that if it is logically compatible, then there is no reason that the materialist opinion is the only “rational” interpretation of the mind-body relation. He writes that if we take seriously the problem of the nature of function, we are not restricted to a one-sided interpretation only:

The supposed impossibility of its continuing comes from too superficial a look at the admitted fact of function dependence. The moment we inquire more closely into the notion of functional dependence, and ask ourselves, for example, how many kinds of functional dependence there may be, we immediately perceive that there is one kind at least that does not exclude a life hereafter at all. The fatal conclusion of the physiologist flows from his

530 “Life, like a dome of many-colored glass, / Stains the white radiance of eternity” James, Human Immortality, 86. For a detailed analysis of the poem and its relation to James’s transmission theory see Barnard, Exploring Unseen Worlds, 163-170.
assuming offhand another kind of functional dependence, and treating it as the only imaginable kind.\textsuperscript{531}

According to James’s argument, the physiological psychologist is not capable of objective evidence and certitude; nor, for that matter, is the believer—or anyone else. James’s radical standpoint emphasizes the fact that empirically speaking, we have no concrete evidence in either direction: neither the production nor the transmissive theory is more credible or conceivable than the other. James asserts that it just so happens that the production theory is more “popular;” however, “for polemic purposes, the two theories are thus exactly on par.”\textsuperscript{532} We can see here that James is pointing to the limits and bias of rationality. As he argued in “The Will to Believe” and “The Sentiment of Rationality,” what is deemed rational is perspectivally biased insofar as elements of “rationality” are often times rooted in the passional dimension. For example, in “The Will to Believe” he writes that “To claim that certain truths now possess [objective evidence], is simply to say that when you think them true and they are true, then their evidence is objective, otherwise it is not. But practically one’s convictions that the evidence one goes by is of the real objective brand, is only one more subjective opinion added to the lot.”\textsuperscript{533}

Beneath this search for objectivity and certitude, we encounter the epistemic juncture whereby metaphysical speculation dogmatically transforms itself into authoritative knowledge.\textsuperscript{534} Through this epistemic intersection we can see a parallel

\textsuperscript{531} James, \textit{Human Immortality}, 82 (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{532} Ibid., 89.

\textsuperscript{533} James, “The Will to Believe,” 22.

\textsuperscript{534} Throughout his writings, James continuously calls attention to this problem. Most famously it appears in final chapter of \textit{PP}. His “The Will to Believe” discussion of the “present phenomenon of consciousness,” however, offers his most cautionary remarks
between James’s radical empiricist remarks in the 1896 preface and how he presents the notion of “concomitant variation” in the 1897 Ingersoll Lecture. Note the parallels between what he writes in the 1896 preface in regard to the limits of understanding with what he writes in the Ingersoll Lecture:

“Ever not quite” must be the rationalistic philosopher’s last confession concerning it [i.e. absolute unity of knowledge]. After all that reason can do has been done, there still remains the opacity of finite facts as merely given, with most of their peculiarities mutually unmediated and unexplained.\(^{535}\)

Compare this with his Ingersoll response to the question about whether or not it is more rational and scientific to assume that the relationship between the mind and the brain is one of productive function:

The immediate reply is, that, if we are talking of science positively understood, function can mean nothing more than bare concomitant variation. When the brain-activities change in one way, consciousness changes in another; when the currents pour through the occipital lobes, consciousness sees things; when through the lower frontal region, consciousness says things to itself; when they stop, she goes to sleep, etc. In strict science, we can only write down the bare fact of concomitance; and all talk about either production or transmission, as the mode of taking place, is pure superadded hypothesis, and metaphysical hypothesis at that, for we can frame no more notion of the details on the one alternative than on the other.\(^{536}\)

In the 1896 passage, he abstractly locates the limits of reason. Written less than a year later, the Ingersoll passage provides us with a concrete example of our finite capacity for facts. In both passages he refers to the edge of mediation whereby we confront the boundary of our inward light of reason and are face to face with the obscurity of being.

\(^{535}\) James, “Preface,” 6.

\(^{536}\) James, \textit{Human Immortality}, 88.
James’s abstract 1896 conception of the givenness of finite facts that are unmediated and unexplained is brought to life through his 1897 assessment of the mind-body problem. When we take seriously the idea of thought as a function of the brain—that is to say, when employing the radical empiricist methodology, we are lead to the notion of concomitant variation. Two events occur simultaneously, yet we have no authoritative pretense for empirically determining one position’s precedence over and against the other: all that we are left with a vague notion of the details of how interaction takes place.

Gavin captures the spirit of James’s early radical empiricism when he remarks that:

to James, a philosopher who found the universe to be “wild—game-flavored as a hawk’s wing,” and who held that “ever not quite” trails along after any philosopher’s interpretation of reality, the temptation to “clean up” the vague, though a strong one, would nonetheless be extremely alarming.

Case in point, we see James reeling against the materialist because of the reckless imposition it places on the believer. As we can see by his pointed argument against the blind monist, James sought to “reinstate the vague and the inarticulate to its proper place” by eschewing notions of objectivity and certainty where there were none. Gavin explains that “when James talks of the need to preserve the vague, he is arguing against certainty, that is, against the usurping of the privileged position of center stage once and

537 “Something is always mere fact and givenness; and there may be in the whole universe no one point of view extant from which this would not be found to be the case” (James, “Preface,” 6).

538 Gavin, Reinstatement of the Vague, 4.

539 Ibid., 2.
for all by any formulation of the universe.” Utilizing Gavin’s strategy, we can observe that James is attempting to reinstate the vague to its proper place through his use of the notion of “concomitant variation.”

As discussed in previous chapters, a central feature of my reading of James’s early radical empiricism as exhibited in James’s The Will to Believe captures the idea that the metaphysical stance we choose to take always carries socio-moral implications. Whether these a/effects are positive or negative, however, depends upon the epistemic receptivity to the plurality of opinion. When hypotheses are sown with the seeds of dogmatism, infallibilism, and universality, the repercussions for the epistemic minority are adversely negative.

As will become clear in the next two sections, the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that are intertwined with the production theory dramatically a/effect the epistemic underdog by dismissing individuals or groups of people as “irrational.” The strength of James’s argument is that he recovers this mis-take by defending the epistemic underdog, rationalizing the “irrational,” and opening up the epistemic discourse by democratically leveling the pluralistic field of knowledge and opinions. To better understand this we can now turn toward the second target audience, the group of individuals for whom James is arguing.

Speaking Up For Spirits: Defending the Epistemic Underdog

Up to this point, we have differentiated between two audiences, e.g., those that James is speaking to and the other as the group to which he is speaking against, and suggested the

Ibid.
existence of a third: the audience that he is speaking for. The immediate audience fails to provide us with important information regarding the key points of the lecture, whereas an identification of the blind monists helps us to see the perspective that James is trying to reign in. In addition to these two groups, we can flesh out a third audience that is revealed when we assimilate the reasons why he is speaking against the blind monists.

Immortality as a Logical Possibility

In order to reveal this third group we need to understand that the active, or assertive, strategy of the text functions as a counter-argument to the institutionally backed scientific materialist, as well as those individuals that are caught up in the broader epistemic paradigm. A latent image of the text reveals a defensive strategy that depicts a socio-epistemic and moral divide between what James perceives as the self-imposed authoritative majority and the repressed minority—those individuals that believe in the possibility of an afterlife. By appealing to a later essay, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” we can readily see how James expresses his concern for the repressed minority and how they are affected at the social level.

We are practical beings, each of us with limited functions and duties to perform. Each is bound to feel intensely the importance of his own duties.

541 A word of caution must be expressed here. I use the term “minority” to refer to the class of individuals that believe in immortality. In point of fact, one would be hard pressed to define these religiously-inclined groups as a minority. The point, however, is purely contextual: in relation to the audience that James is speaking against, we may deem the believers as the minority and the skeptics as the majority. Were he taking a different approach, and therefore targeting a different type of audience, the roles may well be reversed.

542 According to Bowers’s notes, the date of composition of this lecture is unclear. Based upon circumstantial textual evidence, he determines that it was most likely written sometime after midyear 1898, see James, TT, 242-43.
and the significance of the situations that call these forth. But this feeling is in each of us a vital secret, for sympathy which we vainly look to others—the others are too much absorbed in their own vital secrets to take an interest in ours. Hence the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of alien lives. Hence the falsity of our judgments, so far as they presume to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons’ conditions and ideals.  

It is this falsity of judgment that decides upon the others’ ideals that James is directly concerned with in the Ingersoll Lecture. Frustrated by the “scientifically-minded” blind monists that objectively assume and/or assert that any sort of afterlife is strictly impossible, James defends those individuals whose ideals are subjected to the socio-moral repercussions associated with maintaining an ‘irrational’ belief. It is on behalf of this type of reasoning that we can identify our third audience, the one that James is speaking for.

The group is a composition of individuals and minority groups whose ideals are externalized and rejected by the dogma of Science, individuals whose social fate has already been decided by the epistemic majority as being “confused” and “irrational.” In short, they are a class of people that bear the burden of being epistemic underdogs. In the second objection, James provides us with a more explicit context for recognizing the tension between the blind monist and the epistemic underdog. Addressing the former, we readily see James’s attempt to epistemically and psychologically liberate the latter:

You take these swarms of alien kinsmen as they are for you: an external picture painted on your retina, representing a crowd oppressive by its

---

543 James, *TT*, 132. Also, see James, *Human Immortality*, 99, footnote 10. In reference to R. L. Stevenson’s essay, “The Lantern Bearers,” James tries to portray this perspectival problem. He writes that “[t]he truth is that we are doomed, by the fact that we are practical beings with very limited tasks to attend to, and special ideals to look after, to be absolutely blind and insensible to the inner feelings, and to the whole inner significance of lives that are different from our own. Our opinion of the worth of such lives is absolutely wide of the mark, and unfit to be counted at all.”
vastness and confusion. As they are for you, so you think they positively and absolutely are…but all the while, beyond this externality which is your way of realizing them, they realize themselves with the acutest internality, with the most violent thrills of life…Not a being of the countless throng is there whose continued life is not called for, and called for intensely, by the consciousness that animates the being’s form. That you neither realize nor understand nor call for it, that you have no use for it, is an absolutely irrelevant circumstance. That you have a saturation-point of interest tells us nothing of the interests that absolutely are.544

Once again we are reminded that James’s radical empiricism *qua* pluralism begs us to readjust our habit of externalizing our own internality. Calling attention to the irrelevance of our own opinion and the manner by which we project it upon the other, James is fully convinced of the legitimacy of afterlife belief and thus argues that the interests of the believer are just as valid as those of the non-believer.

Having identified the latent audience, we turn toward the intended effect of James’s text. In the context of *The Will to Believe* we can see that James’s “right to believe” argument pragmatically empowers the epistemic underdog at both the personal and social level. The personal element is representatively captured within the melioristic worldview that James speaks of in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” and “The Will to Believe.” As individuals of faith, taken in the Jamesian sense of “a readiness to act,” these persons are encouraged to act upon what he envisions as genuine options “in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced.”545 That is to say, James’s right to believe simultaneously excites the will to believe to follow one’s passional nature and to act “as if” immortality is a genuine possibility. In this manner, his perspectival critique of the materialist provides an energetic boost of confidence to the


545 James, “The Will to Believe,” 13.
believer by acting upon one’s faith in a melioristic world that “treats salvation as neither necessary nor impossible.”546 His epistemic argument, in this case, secures the personal “right to believe” with the hope that the courage to act upon their belief will help make the world a better place.

We see that through James’s rationalization of the “irrational” the intended audience also reaps a social benefit by being epistemologically normalized. We come to see that his keen interest in fringe facts and “mysterious phenomena” come to play a larger role in the development of a more complex social rationality.547 In terms of social status, James’s argument provides his intended audience with a new degree of epistemic respectability. According to my argument, one way of looking at James’s use of the transmission theory is to see it as a concrete parallel of his right to believe argument that was offered in the previous year. It is geared toward an epistemic liberation of those individuals that believe in the possibility of immortality and theoretically, and if James’s argument works, then it should free believers from the social shroud of irrationality insofar as they must no longer bear the stigma of being “alogical.”

The “Advantage” of the Transmission Theory: Making Sense of “Obscure and Exceptional Phenomena”

Now that we have seen both sides of James’s argument and how it seeks to contain the claims of one epistemology while simultaneously attempting to liberate another, we can attend to an additional feature of his argument in order to make sense of a latent feature

546 James, P, 137.

547 Once again, Bordogna’s analysis of James’s boundary work lays out this argument, though in a different text and context. My excavation of this idea in the Ingersoll Lecture is merely an elaboration and nuancing of her position.
of the transmission theory. After noting the legitimacy of the transmission theory James is abundantly clear that an explanatory account of it is “unimaginable” and that we can only speculate about its internal relations.

Despite this fact he goes on to make the observation that the transmission theory, unlike the permissive theory, has the added bonus that it contains “certain positive superiorities, quite apart from its connection with the question of immortality.” What we need to keep in mind is that at this point he has moved away from the immediate question of immortality as it relates to his two targeted audiences and speaks toward an additional group of individuals, the “unclassified residuum,” that are also an epistemic minority. As will be demonstrated more clearly below, it is critical that we understand that he is addressing this new audience from within a melioristic and pragmatic point of view when he suggests that the “outer relations, so to speak, of the process encourage our belief.”

Before delving into James’s argument, a word of caution must first be expressed. Many readers may scoff at the idea of correlating James’s pragmatism with an argument that advocates the rationality of belief in the logical possibility of human immortality. Readers unfamiliar with his pragmatism will note that James will go on to define the pragmatic method as “primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable.” Moreover, is it significant to recall that his first public presentation of pragmatism is framed in terms of settling a religio-philosophical dispute

548 James, Human Immortality, 89.
549 Ibid.
550 James, P, 28.
between materialism and theism. When he concludes that argument, James reminds us that “the theistic controversy, trivial enough if we take it merely academically and theologically, is of tremendous significance if we test it by its results for actual life.” His point, and this will become clearer below, is that the abstract point makes a concrete difference for the individual; thus, when we look toward his pragmatic advantages as applied to the “unclassified residuum” one must always keep in mind that while his argument is academic, his target is the concrete individual who is subjected to “obscure and exceptional phenomena.”

To return to the argument at hand, James goes on to highlight “certain superiorities” by providing us with a list of three “advantages” of the transmission theory—that is, in addition to its compatibility with the afterlife. While the first two benefits (e.g., [1] a conception of consciousness that is not created “de novo” but exist coeval with the world, and [2] agreement with the threshold theory of cognition) are historically and philosophically interesting, it is the third idea that demands our

551 See James, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results,” 261-266.

552 Ibid., 266.

553 Ibid. One way of looking at this quote is to see it as a reflection between the differences of interpretation between Charles S. Perice and James on the question of pragmatism. While Peirce maintained that the pragmatic maxim is a logical principle that could be used to clarify concepts on a general level, the underlying purpose is to dissolve metaphysical problems in intellectual disputes by showing how a particular concept is meaningless or absurd. James, on the other hand, wants to extend the maxim into a method of resolving metaphysical disputes at the level of the particular, in terms of concrete, practical experiences of the individual. In this sense, a stereotyped version of the two approaches would indicate that James is moving out of Peirce’s laboratory conditions and into the street. The idea is that James sought difference in the concrete and practical realm of human experience insofar as he sought to incorporate the method to pragmatically navigate moral and religious values. For James, there can be no difference in ideas which does not make a concrete, practical difference in the experience of the individual.
immediate attention as the other two are already bound up with the latter.\footnote{The first “advantage” is that consciousness is not \textit{de novo}, or mysteriously generated from nothing, but “exists already, behind the scenes, coeval with the world” (James, \textit{Human Immortality}, 89). While this theory is not without its problems, James is content to admit that it puts itself in touch with idealism far better than the metaphysics of the production theory. In regard to the second “advantage,” James is all too pleased to introduce Gustav Fechner’s psychophysical threshold theory of consciousness to the English-speaking world. For a detailed discussion of James’s use of Fechner’s theory of consciousness in the Ingersoll Lecture and how it relates to his mysticism, see Barnard (1997).} He writes that:

The transmission-theory also puts itself in touch with a whole class of experiences that are with difficulty explained by the production-theory. I refer to those obscure and exceptional phenomena reported at all times throughout human history, which the ‘psychical researchers,’ with Mr. Frederic Myers at their head, are doing so much to rehabilitate; such phenomena, namely, as religious conversions, providential leadings in answer to prayer, premonitions, apparitions at the time of death, clairvoyant visions or impressions, and the whole range of mediumistic capacities to say nothing of still more exceptional and incomprehensible things.\footnote{James, \textit{Human Immortality}, 92-93.}

Before launching into an explanation of the significance of James’s suggestion of the added benefits, we need to unpack several key points that linger in the backdrop of James’s thoughts on the transmission theory.

First, one must understand that James’s appeal to the experience of these “obscure and exceptional phenomena” is not a mere speculative endeavor: recall his plead for taking seriously the “unclassified residuum.” He does believe that many of these phenomena are to be considered facts and he admits this much in this Ingersoll Lecture. For example, earlier in the 1890s he went on record by asserting that, in his opinion, telepathy is an established fact.\footnote{James, \textit{Human Immortality}, 92-93.}
Second, once we understand how serious James was about the “unclassified residuum” and its “obscure and exceptional phenomena” we need to understand that these “facts,” for James, were more commonplace than most academics are willing to admit. Toward the end of his career, in “The Confidences of a ‘Psychical Researcher,’” James goes on record as being supportive of the idea of the “commonness and typicality” of these phenomena by writing that “the first difference between the psychical researcher and the inexpert person is that the former realizes the commonness and typicality of the phenomena here, while the latter, less informed, thinks it so rare as to be unworthy of attention.”557 Without explicitly making this claim, it is clear that his publications of the late 1880s and early 1890s equally attest to this conviction.

Third, unlike many of his colleagues and readers, James firmly believed that these phenomena are worthy of attention. In an 1895 review of Frank Podmore’s *Apparitions and Thought-Transference*, James makes a very direct statement about the commonness of these “baffling” phenomena and why it is that so many people do not believe in their legitimacy. He say that “It almost seems as if it were intended in the nature of things that these events should always be present in sufficient measure to tempt belief, but always in insufficient measure to justify it.”558 He goes on to suggest that there is a means of

---

556 See “What Psychical Research Has Accomplished,” his “Telepathy” article for *Johnson’s Universal Cyclopedia*, as well as his “Presidential Address before the Society for Psychical Research.” This, however, is one of those points that James makes that can easily cause widespread embarrassment. For example, as for the other phenomena, James’s writings from early 1890s suggest that it is only a matter of time before they too are admitted as fact.

557 James, “Confidences of a ‘Psychical Researcher,’” 372.

558 William James, Review of *Apparitions and Thought-Transference, an Examination of the Evidence for Telepathy*, by Frank Podmore, in *Essays in Psychical Research*,

242
justifying belief, but that we are faced with the conflict that “our philosophies and sciences have absolutely no place for them and no context to supply them with.”

Lastly, context and continuity, for James, are essential for making sense of our experience. Thus, when the working assumption is that the production-theory is the metaphysical underpinning of the mind-body relationship and how we understand our experience, it is no wonder that these “obscure and exceptional phenomena” seem contextless and discontinuous with our normal experience. As far back as 1886 James writes that “what science wants is a context to make the trance-phenomena continuous with other physiological and psychological facts.”

In 1895 while discussing reports on phantasms, James explains that:

> Taken simply by themselves, as separate facts to stare at, they appear to be devoid of meaning and sweep, that, even were they certainly true, one would be tempted to leave them out of one’s universe for being so idiotic. Every other sort of fact has some context and continuity with the rest of nature.

His point is that phantasms, like telepathy, trance-phenomena, and a whole host of other experiences, simply do not make sense in certain perspectives. Much like the notion of immortality, these phenomena are logically impossible under certain metaphysical conditions: there is no place for them in an impersonal universe. But, James explains, “It is evident that what is needed to make the mind close upon telepathy, veridical


559 Ibid.


561 James, WPRHA, 234.
apparitions, and ghosts, [etc.] and embrace them, is a philosophical theory of some kind which has a use for such facts. ¹⁵⁶² This is the underlying advantage of the transmission theory: not only does it provide an epistemological sanctuary for the belief in the afterlife, but it also creates a space and context in this life wherein the marginalized experiences of the epistemic outsider are made continuous with reality. His point, then, is that a plurality of exceptional experience may require different metaphysics which in turn necessitates a broader diversity of epistemological frameworks and that these alternative epistemologies imply unique types of knowledge, knowledge-producers, and experience.

In other words, it is not that James is strictly advocating the transmission theory—though he does in fact do this later in his career—but that he is doing his best to account for the plurality of experience and the diversity of rationality.

Now that we fully grasp the additional import of the transmission theory as a philosophical foundation that is open to these “obscure and exceptional phenomena,” we can see more clearly how and why James attempts to make sense of them in the Ingersoll Lecture. After asserting their importance, he takes few moments to explain several examples of these types of experiences and how they fit together within the context of the threefold advantages of the transmission-theory.

All such experiences, quite paradoxical and meaningless on the production-theory, fall very naturally into place on the other [transmission] theory. We need only suppose the continuity of our consciousness with a mother-sea, to allow for exceptional waves occasionally pouring over the dam...

A medium, for example, will show knowledge of his sitter’s private affairs which it seems impossible he should have acquired through sight or hearing, or inference therefrom. Or you will have an apparition of some one who is now dying hundreds of miles away. On the production-theory

¹⁵⁶² James, Review of *Apparitions and Thought Transference*, 117. .
one does not see from what sensations such odd bits of knowledge are produced. On the transmission-theory, they don’t have to be ‘produced,’—they exist ready-made in the transcendental world, and all that is needed is an abnormal lowering of the brain-threshold to let them through. In cases of conversion, in providential leadings, sudden mental healings, etc., it seems to the subjects themselves of the experience as if a power from without, quite different from the ordinary action of the senses or of the sense-led mind, came into their life, as if the latter suddenly opened in to that greater life in which it has its source.563

Similar to the 1896 Lowell Lectures and how he manages to incorporate his psychical research, James’s Ingersoll Lecture opens to the door to world of “wild facts” by expanding his theoretic dimension to include a wider range of experience.

On this view, the transmission theory addresses those religious and psychical experiences that are incompatible with the normal range of experience—the former type being those experiences that are outside and unincluded from the materialist’s worldview—by providing a rationale for that which is “irrational.” While James is keenly aware of the problems and complications associated with such claims of experience, he is convinced that “the personal and romantic view of life has other roots besides wanton exuberance of imagination and perversity of heart” because “[i]t is perennially fed by facts of experience; whatever the ulterior interpretation of those facts may prove to be….564 What James is arguing is that beyond the hijinx and trickery, beyond the magical and spell-binding, there is some element of significance engrained in these peculiar types of experience. Whether or not we agree with his point, the significant thing to see is that James does and that because of this he develops an epistemological argument that is morally and socially sensitive to the effects of the monopolizing vision

563 James, Human Immortality, 93-94. For purposes of clarification I have taken the liberty to reverse the order of these to passages.

564 James, WPRHA, 210.
of the blind monist. Thus what we find in the Ingersoll Lecture is that not only is James arguing for an open, democratic, and pluralistic world that is sympathetic to the inner significance of “alien” views, but he is also suggesting the plausibility of an alternative metaphysical and epistemological framework that attempts to makes sense of these types of mysterious phenomena. For James, rationality and reasonableness are intimately diversified in shape and form, and thus whether we appreciate it or not, he maintains that “[t]he heart of being can have no exclusions akin to those which our poor little hearts set up.”

Concluding Remarks

This chapter suggests that we can see a deep historical and thematic continuity between James’s early radical empiricism of *The Will to Believe* and his 1897 Ingersoll Lecture on Human Immortality. It argues that his democratic defense of the rational legitimacy of belief in immortality is best understood as an experimental text which employs some of the techniques and methods of his early radical empiricism to the problem of belief in a life hereafter. Drawing upon the themes of the attitudinal orientation and its epistemic sensitivity to the alogical other, the perspectival critique of rationality, as well as the “spirit of inner tolerance” with its abiding engagement with socially ostracized and epistemological suspect communities, this chapter suggest that James’s primary interest in the Ingersoll Lecture is to defend the legitimacy of the religious hypothesis and the right to believe in all of its varied forms.

As suggested in the last section, what is noteworthy is that this defense of the religious hypothesis goes further than the question of immortality: one of the principle goals of James’s lecture is to act upon his 1895 suggestion that what is needed to make sense of the “unclassified residuum” is an alternative philosophical theory that has “use” for obscure and exceptional facts. In this manner, the transmission theory functions as a philosophical theory that is capable of embracing and making sense of the “obscure and exceptional phenomena” of the “unclassified residuum.” While being faithful to the context, range, and scope of the text as a minor work, I have shown that a historical reconstruction and interpretation of the latent content of the Ingersoll Lecture on Human Immortality serves as an important, albeit overlooked, connecting thread between James’s religious, philosophical, and social concerns that are expressed in the 1890s.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

Summary Points of Interest

This project is founded upon an intuition that significant components of James’s early radical empiricism had been eclipsed by his later mature, more technical writings of *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. In order to justify this hunch, I continuously read the 1896 preface of *The Will to Believe* and found that each rereading unveiled a new layer of historical and thematic complexity to James writings of the 1890s. To illustrate these findings I have divided this project into two parts.

Part I one laid the methodological and thematic foundation of the dissertation as a whole. It provides a careful and systematic analysis of three separate, but interrelated, themes: the radical empiricist attitude, the psycho-physiological grounding of perspectival difference, and a deep and abiding interest in heterodox worldviews. Part II variously applied these themes to specific arguments wherein James sought to defend the epistemic underdog—individuals and groups of people that are epistemologically, morally and socially deemed the “irrational” other by the universalizing vision of the blind monist.

Methodologically each chapter historicized a central theme of James’s 1890s defense of the epistemic underdog; taken together they emerge to form a whole narrative that argued for a more interconnected appreciation of the relationship between James’s early radical empiricism, his writings on religion, and his explorations in the field of psychical research, and that this overlooked narrative permeates the pages of his early
Chapter One argued that we need to take seriously James’s first description of his radical empiricist philosophy as a “definite philosophical attitude.” I demonstrated that one way of doing this is to tease out the historical and thematic dimensions of James’s epistemic sensitivity to the so-called alogical other. I fleshed out this perspective by appealing to his 1876 definition of philosophy as “the habit of always seeing the alternative” and showed how this perspectival sensitivity to the epistemic, moral, and social dimensions of the “inward clarity” of the “irrational” offers a new way to make sense of James’s early radical empiricism. In the process of historicizing his 1890s writings, I found that much of his attention is given to the defense of epistemic underdogs—a contextualized group of socially and psychologically objectified, morally overlooked individuals that are relegated to the epistemic fringe by the universalizing vision of the blind monist. My contention was that by paying careful attention to “the spirit of inner tolerance” and the way in which James’s treats the “inward clarity” of the epistemic underdog reveals an alternative vision of James’s early radical empiricism that is predominately concerned with epistemological matters of fact and perspective and their moral and social implications.

Chapter Two followed Pawelski’s thesis that new perspectives emerge from James’s writings when we relocate physiology and the reflex action theory to the center of his thinking. I argued that the radical empiricist attitude of the 1896 preface rests upon and is epistemologically attenuated to the psycho-physiological foundation of James’s reflex action theory. Through a careful reconstruction of James’s interdisciplinary
interpretation of reflex action, I argued that we can see how and why he asserts a contextualist and psycho-physiological account of rationality. The reflex action writings of the 1880s and 1890s illustrate his functionalist contention that all perspectives are necessarily limited on account of their being contextually grounded within each idiosyncratic remodeling of “the given.” As such, the psycho-physiological foundation of the reflex action theory informs James’s radical empiricist attitude, its orientation to perspectival difference, and its willingness to rationalize the irrational. This point is captured by the way in which James’s radical contextualization thesis simultaneously critiques the perspectival limitations of the blind monist while also justifying the reality of “irrational” relations.

Chapter Three built upon the former chapters by adding yet another layer to James’s perspectival sensitivity. I argued here that in order to understand the nature and scope of his epistemic sensitivity to the “irrational” other we need to grasp the fact that James’s early radical empiricism is rooted in a far more complex interpretation of pluralism, and that we need to take seriously his interest in and engagement with the “spooky.” To this effect, I provided a historical backdrop for understanding James’s appeal to alternative facts and heterodox rationalities as represented by his investigations into the Mind-Cure movement, psychical research, and Spiritualism. By focusing on his professional and personal involvement with these three groups during the formative years of the 1870s through the 1890s, I argued that these interactions both shaped and informed his concern for experiences that exist outside the epistemological norm, and thus help pave the way for understanding his defense of the “irrational” other.
Chapter Four selectively applied the preceding themes to an examination James’s defense of the religious hypothesis as presented in “The Will to Believe.” I step back from James’s argument for the passional nature of genuine religious options and looked at how the republication of the essay within The Will to Believe critically reframes the nature and scope of his defense of religion, his conception of the religious field, and his rationalization of the religious hypothesis. My argument rested upon the idea that religion, as it is presented in “The Will to Believe” is a highly crafted concept that is specifically tailored for certain target audiences. Through a careful investigation of James’s other formulations of religion, particularly his correlation of the “unclassified residuum” as belonging to the mystical and therefore religious, I demonstrated that a historicized conception of religion enlarges his defense of faith well beyond that of the theistic stereotype.

Chapter Five argued that James’s early radical empiricism extends beyond The Will to Believe and that it functions as the methodological framework for his democratic defense of the logical possibility of human immortality. Through a close reading of Human Immortality and related personal correspondence that treats the text, I illustrated how James’s 1897 Ingersoll Lecture serves as an attempt to epistemologically, socially, and psychologically liberate the epistemic underdog from the rampant dogmatic and monistic declarations of nineteenth century materialist thinking. Throughout my argument I drew attention to the way in which James sought to defend the epistemic minority from the socio-moral and psychological repercussions associated with epistemic irrationality. At the manifest level, James makes use of the radical empiricist orientation to argue that the import of the transmission theory functions as an epistemological
sanctuary for belief in an afterlife. A latent interpretation of the text reveals a second, though equally primary, agenda. I argued that in addition to democratically defending the rational legitimacy of maintaining belief in the logical possibility of immortality, the transmission theory sketches a rudimentary framework of a philosophical theory that allocates a space and context within which the “obscure and exceptional phenomena” of the “unclassified residuum” makes rational sense and are pragmatically continuous with experience.

Further Explorations

James’s works are well established as a major contribution to the cannon of American thought. Every year new articles and books are published that continue to explore his thinking in its own right, but also as a way of exploring new developments in modern thought. My study of his radical empiricist epistemology as represented through the themes of the defense of epistemic underdog and the “spirit of inner tolerance,” contributes to Jamesian studies on two fronts: first it advances a new lens for making sense of his early radical empiricism; and, second it draws attention to nature, role, and scope of his interests in and engagement with psychical research.

The goal of the project is the exploration of these themes in the context of James’s writings on religion. While there are several avenues to pursue as way of advancing this project, I think that the most fruitful one is through a careful investigation of Pierre Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology. On the one hand, my treatment of James’s theory of reflex action remains purely historical and thematie, and, as such, it is significantly dated. One way of further exploring the import of James’s psycho-physiological
remodeling of “the given” would be to bring it into conversation with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus and how culture both structures and is structured by the individual. More importantly, on the other hand, an examination of the dynamics of the epistemic underdog and blind monist dichotomy can be enriched by a Bourdieuan analysis of the causes (and reproduction) of domination and the how the social structures and epistemic processes mediate the dynamics of power. In addition to this, my study of James’s socially-aware radical empiricist epistemology and his concern for the epistemic outsider could benefit from Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus,” “field,” “doxa” and “illusion.”

The key to this study is that it draws upon both major and minor texts as a way of fleshing out new readings of the nature of James’s work in the 1890s. One of the benefits of this study is that it provides additional tools that may be used to advance contemporary research in other related fields; reciprocally, while these fields may benefit from engagement with this side of James’s early radical empiricism and minor writings, I feel that a systematic exploration of these areas of study will further shape and inform my own project and advance my own understanding of James’s corpus.

For example, while there already exists pioneering work in feminist epistemology that has generated a substantial conversation between feminism and pragmatism, feminist scholars are beginning to systematically explore James’s thought in its own right. I

566 The most appropriate point of comparison between these two thinkers is along the lines of habit. Bourdieu’s “habitus” extends beyond James’s dynamic conception of habit insofar as it takes into account the wider dynamics of socio-cultural process of enculturation that are implicit in James’s thinking. My sense is that Bourdieu’s field theory can function as a powerful tool for fleshing out the limits of the social dimension of James’s thinking.

567 This is reflected in the highly anticipated volume, *Feminist Interpretations of William James*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Erin Tarver, which is going to be published in the Fall of 2015.
suspect that the contextualist and socially-sensitive epistemology that I address can be critically developed by feminist and minority studies.\textsuperscript{568}

Another fruitful application of this study is the continuation of research into the historiography of counter-cultural movements and their experiences. By following Bordogna’s insights into James’s work as a meaningful engagement and reconstruction of boundaries, I have specifically treated this dimension of this thought in relation to his 1890s engagement with epistemic underdogs and his willingness to see “irrationality as as the prius.” My sense is that James’s early radical empiricism can serve as model for genuinely engaging the theoretic and practical dimensions of counter-cultural points of view. In different capacities, respectable scholarship that engages James’s work as a tool for examining counter-cultural movements already exists in the secondary literature, e.g., Moore (1971), Barnard (1997), Taves (1999), and Taylor (1999) to highlight just a few.

Alongside of these studies, I view this project as one that offers new themes for further exploration of contemporary issues regarding “spirituality” and new religious movements, the investigation of paranormal phenomena, and the experimentations of drug-culture \textit{qua} religious experience. In keeping with Carrette’s suggestion that breaking up our disciplinary habits of reading James opens new avenues of research, it

\textsuperscript{568} In a different but equally important line of research, José Medina has already begun to bring James into conversation with gender, racial and minority studies. Unfortunately Medina’s outstanding work has only recently come to my attention, but it seems that it serves as a model for applying James’s thought to advance minority studies while simultaneously expanding Jamesian studies. José Medina, \textit{The Epistemologies of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
seems that framing the discourse within minority epistemologies in terms of James’s early radical empiricism will assist in the development of fresh perspectives.\textsuperscript{569} Focusing on stale approaches to James and religion, Carrette writes, “To break the disciplinary habits of reading James’s thinking on religion is to appreciate how James’s relational world offers new options and how percepts break up his conceptual points of reference. There is no one definition of religion in James, only a plurality of applications and associations in the relational-perceptual field” (Carrette, \textit{Hidden Religious Imagination}, 70).
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archives

Howison, George Holmes, Papers. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA.

Harvard University Archives. Pusey Library, Harvard University Rare Book Collection, Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard University, Boston, MA.


Strong, Charles Augustus, Papers, 1862-1940. Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY.

William James Bibliography

The Works of William James (Standard Edition)


Articles and Books


Book Reviews


Correspondence


Lectures and Course Notes


“Notes for Philosophy 1: General Introduction to Philosophy (1890-1901).” In *Manuscript Lectures*, 186-197.
“Notes for Natural History 2: Physiological Psychology.” In Manuscripts Lectures, 126-129.


“Notes for Philosophy 5: Psychology (1880-1881).” In Manuscripts Lectures, 177-178.


Summer School of Theology Lectures on “Intellect and Feeling in Religion.” In Manuscript Lectures, 83-100.

Notebooks and Source Materials

“1866-67 Medical Notebook.” CB 1869.42. Unpublished MS, Rare Book Collection, Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.


“Index Rerum.” bMS Am 1092.9 #4520. William James Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.


“Reports of James’s ‘Lectures on Abnormal Psychology.’” In Manuscript Lectures, 516-525.


“William James Sources.” bMs AM 1092.9 #4578. William James Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
Other Sources


