2013

373-01 William James

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“To know the chief rival attitudes towards life, as the history of human thinking has developed them, and to have heard some of the reasons they can give for themselves, ought to be considered an essential part of liberal education.”

William James (1842-1910) is without doubt one of the greatest philosophical figures produced in America. Widely read at home and abroad, James’ philosophical interests led him to make valuable contributions to many traditional areas of philosophical concern. Born into a singular American family presided over by a talented and eccentric father, William James traveled Europe as a child, receiving an unconventional education delivered by a succession of tutors, private academies, and his own wanderings through museums. As a young man in his twenties, James vacillated in his choice of profession between art and science. A trained physician, James ultimately secured a teaching position at Harvard University and shortly thereafter produced his monumental *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890. This book established a scientifically based psychology in America, as well as grounding its author’s reputation. James nurtured both a personal and academic sensitivity to the profound tensions in American culture between the growing stature of evolutionary science on the one hand, and its implications for traditional religious attitudes on the other. In the years immediately after the appearance of the *Principles*, James turned to philosophy, a discipline that would occupy him for the rest of his life. He moved to the Philosophy Department at Harvard, where he published and lectured on topics ranging from religion and morality to the practical application of psychology to education. He is most often remembered for his 1907 book, *Pragmatism*, which stated in clear terms a characteristically American philosophical point of view as well as served as the impetus for considerable international debate. James retired from Harvard in that same year, yet continued his philosophical work until his death, focusing on the metaphysical implications of his earlier theories. William James died in August of 1910 at his New Hampshire retreat in Chocorua.

We will read a lot of William James this semester and in the process, we will explore the philosophical tradition that is unique to us as Americans. I guarantee that you will find the experience provocative, stimulating and rewarding. We shall examine the main ideas put forward by James within the context of the American experience, beginning with his ground breaking views from the psychology. We shall then go on to examine his contributions to the fields of morality and religion, and will conclude the course with a consideration of his pragmatism and his metaphysics of radical empiricism and pluralism. Class time will be devoted to the discussion of the assigned readings. Our aim is to achieve a critical grasp of the complexity of James’ thought in the full breadth of its richness, and to appreciate it as a philosophical point of view that is uniquely American.
As an E/RS Focus Elective, we will foreground the intersection of moral ideals, religious experience and social life as we engage James’ ideas. Moral and religious experience was paramount in his thinking, as were the many ways in which commitments made to these ideals became the directing factors in public life. In James’ pragmatic philosophy, this constellation of ideas receives a distinctively American treatment.

Books
The following are the required texts for the course and they are available in the Gallagher Center Bookstore. Please have these books with you at every class, as we shall be working closely with James’ texts. James was a tireless public lecturer, and many of his books are collections of essays that began their lives as public talks. Consequently, his writing is both lively and full of vivid examples and imagery, as befits a man who once apprenticed as a watercolorist.

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*
John McDermott, *The Philosophy of William James*

Additional Readings
Not all of the primary texts necessary for our study of William James are included in the *Varieties* or in the McDermott collection. I will make additional essays available for you through Blackboard under the CONTENT tab.

Requirements
There will be several essays due during the first part of the course. There will be no in-class final examination. The essays due during the course of the semester are described below and should be about five double spaced pages in length. All citations, whether to the primary or to secondary material must be properly documented. It is very important that make sure that you are not simply summarizing ideas, or providing a summation of secondary literature. Such an approach does not satisfy the requirements of the assignment! Rather, you must be critical and evaluative in your essay. Your defended opinion on the topic is what matters.

First Essay—Due: September 30 (CHOOSE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING)

Summarize James’ views on psychology in the following 1892 essay and show how his chapters on Habit and The Stream of Thought make a positive advance towards the goal of a scientific psychology. James’ essay is entitled “A Plea for Psychology as a Natural Science” and it can be found on Blackboard under CONTENT.

OR …

The full title of James’ *Will to Believe* collection identifies the book as containing essays in “popular” philosophy, and James was very much a public intellectual. What do you suppose he means by this and in what sense do the essays in the book make an appeal to a wider American audience beyond professional intellectuals and their students? Choose one essay that we covered as your primary example.

Second Essay – Due October 28

It has been said that *The Varieties of Religious Experience* should be read as the third volume of *The Principles of Psychology*. Some argue that James demystifies religion too much, while others hail his achievement as crucial to the study of the psychological foundations of religion. Write an essay that explores what you believe the consequences of James’ psychological treatment of religious
experience are, using a specific lecture from the book as your primary example.

Third Essay — Due November 25

It has been said that The Varieties of Religious Experience should be read as the third volume of The Principles of Psychology. Some argue that James demystifies religion too much, while others hail his achievement as crucial to the study of the psychological foundations of religion. Write an essay that explores what you believe the consequences of James’ psychological treatment of religious experience are, using a specific lecture from the book as your primary example.

Final Essay — Due on the Final Exam date

USE ROYCE’S APPRAISAL OF JAMES AS AMERICAN

Grading & Attendance Policy

You are expected to be in class and prepared to discuss the material under consideration. Repeated absence without legitimate excuse communicated to the professor constitutes ground for failure in the course. Please refer to the grading standards document adopted by the Department of Philosophy for the meaning of grades. It appears as the final page of this syllabus.

Participation & Academic Honesty

Your active involvement in the course, the discussion of its material and the critical evaluation of its merits is an essential part of this class. Your grade will be a function of your work on the essays, your weekly contributions to class discussion, and your overall effort in this course as judged by the professor. Regular and active class participation is required. It will make for a more profound learning experience for both you and your classmates. I urge you to get involved in the active analysis of what James has to say to you. While quality and depth of class participation is not quantifiable, the class is not so large that your participation level goes unnoticed. In order to earn the highest grade in this class, you must be a regular and active contributor to class discussion. Standards of Academic Honesty that are outlined in the University Catalog will be enforced in this class. Any breach of those standards likewise constitutes grounds for failure in the course. The professor will handle these on a case by case basis.

Office Hours

My office is located in Hinkle Hall, #210. I list my official hours below. My telephone numbers appear at the top of the first page of this syllabus. Please do not hesitate to call me at home should you need to get in touch with me. If these hours are not convenient for any reason, please speak with me and we can arrange an appointment time that is mutually convenient. In addition, my email address appears above and is linked on the Blackboard page for your convenience.

TR 12:30 – 3:00

William James is an engaging and innovative thinker. I am looking forward to a fascinating semester with you.
Weekly Schedule of Readings

August 26 - This week will cover the general introduction to the course. First, we shall discuss the unique characteristics of the American Mind as they are rooted in the settling of New England in the 17th century. The early Puritan experience left its indelible mark on American intellectual culture, and it will surface in James' thought two centuries later. We will also discuss James' biography as it is intimately connected with his developing thought. His unconventional early education spent in Europe and America, his apprenticeship as a watercolorist, his study of natural science at Harvard while his younger brothers and close friends served in the Civil War, his physical ailments – real and imagined, his mental crisis of 1870-72, all of these served as fertile ground for his philosophical speculations. Several brief autobiographical statements set the tone for James' thought. James suffered from a deep depression that immobilized him both personally and professionally. His self awareness of this episode becomes the permanent backdrop for his philosophy. In many ways, James' depression mirrored the more general malaise that afflicted the upper region of American society during the later decades of the nineteenth century. James was very aware of this and believed that his case was typical enough to give rise to a philosophical statement that would be applicable to all.

Readings
George Cotkin, "Judged Not to Have Lived", in William James, Public Philosopher
On Blackboard under COURSE DOCUMENTS

William James
William James, Feb. 1, 1870
William James, April 30, 1870 (in McDermott)

Sept. 2 – Labor Day Holiday

Sept. 4 and 9 We begin our study of James' work with his psychology. The following essays are on E-Reserve and serve to orient us in James' psychology. James studied psychology as that discipline struggled to break free from philosophical and spiritualistic influences to become an independent science. His travels in Europe and linguistic abilities enabled James to study the emergent science first-hand from those who were at the center of project in France, Germany and Britain. These essays attack the influential psychology of Herbert Spencer, an English evolutionary philosopher and positivist, and at the same time find James constructing his alternative model of consciousness.

Readings
Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence (1878)
in Essays in Philosophy On Reserve, pp. 7-22

Reflex Action & Theism (1881)
in The Will to Believe On Reserve, pp.90-113

Sept. 16 Our discussion of themes taken from James' psychology begins with the crucial section on the Stream of Consciousness. These selections are found in the McDermott volume.

Readings
The Stream of Thought
Habit

Sept. 23 After completing the Principles, James turned his attention towards philosophy, a subject for which he felt a life long affinity, and one which provided him with the proper domain for dealing with numerous problems which had arisen during the writing of the psychology. A collection of essays appears in 1897, The Will to Believe & Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, which find James working out a range of problems in the
areas of religion, ethics and human psychology.

Readings
The Sentiment of Rationality
The Will to Believe
The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life
On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings  (in McDermott)

Sept. 30 The Will to Believe & Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, continued.

Readings
The Sentiment of Rationality
The Will to Believe
The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life
On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings

Oct. 7 and 8 – Fall Break

Oct. 9 James’ psychology is extended into the region of religious consciousness in his The Varieties of Religious Experience, a work sometimes referred to as volume three of The Principles of Psychology. The subtitle is “A Study in Human Nature”. Consequently, we will examine this text not merely as a psychology of religion, but rather as a general statement about human nature itself. Here James goes beyond both the problem of religion in an age of science, and the multiplicity of institutional religious creeds to carry out a brilliant and detailed analysis of religious experience itself in all its manifestations. We will be working with Varieties for the next few weeks.

Readings
Lecture I  Religion & Neurology
Lecture II  Circumscription of the Topic  (in Varieties)
Lecture III The Reality of the Unseen

Oct. 14 James’ Varieties continued.

Readings
Lecture IV The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness, Part 1
Lecture V The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness, Part 2
Lecture VI The Sick Soul, Part 1
Lecture VII The Sick Soul, Part 2

Oct. 21 James’ Varieties continued.

Readings
Lecture VIII The Divided Self and the Process of its Unification

Oct. 28 James’ Varieties continued.

Readings
Lecture IX Conversion
Lecture X Conversion, concluded
Lecture XI Saintliness, Part 1
Lecture XII Saintliness, Part 2
Lecture XIII Saintliness, Part 3

Nov. 4 James’ Varieties continued.

Readings
Lecture XIV The Value of Saintliness, Part 1
Lecture XV The Value of Saintliness, Part 2
Lecture XVI Mysticism, Part 1
Nov. 11  James' *Varieties* continued.

Readings  Lecture XVIII  Philosophy  
          Lecture XIX  Other Characteristics  
          Lecture XX  Conclusions  

Nov. 18/Nov. 25 The philosophical work for which James is most remembered appeared in 1907 under the title of *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Pragmatism is America's only indigenous philosophy, and while James did much to make it known in philosophical circles, he credits his friend Charles Sanders Peirce as being its originator. Peirce was both flattered and disturbed by James' work. Over the next several classes, we shall explore this distinctively American philosophy, both in its original Peircean form as well as in the quite different development it receives in the hands of James. We shall also explore the differences between these two pragmatisms. Today, we will spend most of our time talking about Charles Peirce. James presents Pragmatism as the solution to the great philosophical riddle of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Our psychology demands viable solutions to the ultimate metaphysical questions such as whether the will is free or whether a God exists. Traditional philosophy offers two equally inadequate approaches: rationalism and empiricism. In a brilliant reconfiguring of philosophy, James discusses the psychological needs to which philosophy responds, and he offers Pragmatism as the only meaningful alternative to the more traditional philosophical forms. These selections are in McDermott.

Readings  Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results  
          The Present Dilemma in Philosophy  
          Pragmatism's Conception of Truth  
          Essays on the Spanish American War & The Philippines (Blackboard)  

Dec. 2/Dec. 9 In May of 1908, James delivered the Hibbert Lectures at Oxford which treat some of the metaphysical implications of his pragmatism. These lectures were later published as *A Pluralistic Universe*.

Readings  The Types of Philosophic Thinking  
          Philosophy & Its Critics  
          The Energies of Men  
          Concerning Fechner