

THE UNHABITUAL IDEAL
WILLIAM JAMES' QUEST FOR MORAL STRENUOUSNESS, 1891-1910

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Any errors are my own.

INTRODUCTION

In the early months of 1870, William James was in a period of deep depression. He had experienced feelings of doubt and despondency for the previous several years, but they reached their most intense point at this time, around his twenty-eighth birthday. He described his mind as in a state of “moral collapse,” and sensed in these months that he “about touched bottom.”¹ Years later, he described his feelings in this period as constituting “a horrible fear of [his] own existence,” one that made him awake “morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of [his] stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that [he] never knew before, and that [he] never felt since.”² James contemplated suicide; he struggled to imagine a way out of his deep, enduring melancholy.

Two moments helped James escape this period of depression. One was a concrete change in his career. In August 1872, James was appointed an instructor in physiology at Harvard College, inaugurating a teaching career that would continue almost until his death in 1910. This development gave James a material sense of purpose, the lack of which he admitted had contributed to his depression. The other, earlier moment that helped lift him from this period of doubt—and the one that James’ own account emphasizes—had a much more internal, spiritual flavor. According to James, the turning point came from his reading of the French philosopher Charles Renouvier, who asserted that the act of believing in free will “is itself a free act, and critical philosophy demands that each of us perform this act.”³ James seized on this claim. In his diary entry from April 30, 1870, James wrote of a sea-change in his mental process: “Hitherto, when I have felt like taking a free initiative... suicide seemed the most manly form to put my

¹ William James, *Diary 1*, February 1, 1870; quoted in Robert Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 117.

² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; New York: Modern Library, 2002), 179.

³ Charles Renouvier, *L'Année Philosophique*, 1867, 13; quoted in Richardson, *William James*, 121.

daring into...Now I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power.”⁴ He resolved to abide by Renouvier’s maxim from then on, writing, “My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.”⁵ Though James struggled with depression periodically throughout the remainder of his life, it never again reached such an acute level. To the end, James asserted that his emotional and mental turnaround depended on his embrace of the power of his own mind.

Best known for his works *The Principles of Psychology*, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and *Pragmatism*, William James (1842-1910) was an American psychologist and philosopher. His father, Henry James Sr., was an eccentric writer and theologian, whose ideas never took hold but whose intellectual circle included the transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau. William was the oldest in a family of five children, and his younger siblings included the novelist Henry James and the diarist Alice James. Beyond the intellectual atmosphere of his family and his formative period of depression, James’ failure to serve in the Civil War stands out as a defining event in his early life. Henry James Sr. paid for substitutes for both William and Henry Jr., hoping not to endanger his two children who had demonstrated capacities of genius, but he had no such worries about sending his two younger sons. Robert (Bob) and Garth Wilkinson (Wilky) James both fought in the Civil War, with Wilky ending up as an officer in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Led by Robert Gould Shaw, Wilky served alongside some of the first black soldiers employed by the Union in the war, and suffered serious injuries in the assault on Fort Wagner.⁶

⁴ William James, Diary 1, April 30, 1870; quoted in Richardson, *William James*, 122.

⁵ *Letters of William James*, vol. 1, 147; quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935), 323.

⁶ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2001), 73-74.

Witnessing the collective experience of the Civil War and facing an individual struggle with depression made William James deeply concerned with questions of action and energy. The idea of mental energy pervaded James' work on psychology, the main focus of his career from his breakdown in 1870 through the publication of *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890. This focus on action and energy also informed his ethical thought and his political and social criticism, areas of his work that gained in importance in the final two decades of his life. In these contexts, James' fascination with mental energy took the form of an emphasis on what I call "moral strenuousness." In the individual, ethical realm, moral strenuousness consisted of the attempt to act in ways that would draw forth a person's reserves of mental strength, and it rejected an understanding of morality as determined solely through pleasure and pain. In the social realm, moral strenuousness stood opposed to the optimistic faith in progress that dominated American public life around the turn of the twentieth century; it represented an attempt to reassert older values of action and heroism in a modern culture defined more and more by commercialization and materialism.

In this essay, I track the development of James' ideas of moral strenuousness from his 1891 essay on ethics, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," through the publication of "The Moral Equivalent of War" a few months before his death in 1910. Chapter 1 examines the vision of ethical philosophy he offered in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," where he declared moral strenuousness and pluralism as his two fundamental ethical commitments. Chapters 2 through 4 trace the relationship between these two commitments in James' philosophy and his involvement in public affairs. Chapter 2 elucidates the cultural context of James' conception of moral strenuousness and examines his response to militaristic visions of the "strenuous life." Chapter 3 discusses James' social and cultural pluralism and his

involvement in the anti-imperialist movement against the American war in the Philippines, and examines how these factors affected his promotion of moral strenuousness. Chapter 4 focuses on James' search for a "moral equivalent of war" in the last decade of his life, a search that represented the culmination of his discourse on moral strenuousness and that brought out tensions between this concept and his pluralism. James' quest to define a form of moral strenuousness within a pluralistic society represented the central ethical concern that animated both his writings and his political activities in the final two decades of his life.

Historiography

Given William James' variety of interests and the scope of his influence in the century since his death, the literature addressing him is far too voluminous to approach in a project of this size. Focusing on James' engagement with questions of moral strenuousness, and placing his ethical thought in the context of cultural debates at the turn of the twentieth century, however, requires grappling with the historical literature that specifically treats James as a moral, social, and political thinker. James never offered a systematic explanation of his politics, and his musings on specific political questions do not place him neatly in any ideological category. The major problems in the historical literature on James as a social or political thinker reflect this fact: authors have a tendency either to overestimate or underestimate James' social consciousness, or they have sought to enlist his writings as endorsing a specific political ideology.

While Ralph Barton Perry, James' former student and his first biographer, may have overestimated his political activities, the perception of James as an unconcerned and

unsophisticated social and political thinker has dominated the discourse on him.⁷ As early as the 1920s, the cultural critic Lewis Mumford condemned pragmatism as a philosophy that supported crass materialism and mechanization, and, despite the revival of interest in pragmatism since the 1980s, several recent authors have essentially restated Mumford's case against James.⁸ I have found these characterizations of James less convincing than those that take his social and political ideas seriously.

Louis Menand's work has shaped current popular understandings of the political implications of James and his pragmatism as well. Menand does not stake out a position in the debate over the political relevance of James' philosophy. Emphasizing the importance of the Civil War in James' biography, however, Menand argues that James and his intellectual circle developed pragmatism in part as an attempt to ensure that such a conflict never happen again: "Pragmatism explains everything about ideas," Menand claims, "except why a person would be willing to die for one."⁹ As I hope this essay will show, such a perspective ignores James' significant interest in questions of courage, heroism, and strenuousness, all of which made his philosophy less averse to the prospect of death than Menand suggests.

Several other authors, reasserting the social and political relevance of James' thought, have influenced me in this study. James Kloppenberg's close analysis of William James' ethical thought and his portrayal of James as part of a modern search for a "*via media*" (middle way) between Marxist socialism and classical, laissez-faire liberalism gave me an understanding of the

⁷ Perry, *Thought and Character*, vol. 2, chap. 67.

⁸ Lewis Mumford, *The Golden Day: A Study in American Literature and Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1926). For some modern examples of similar claims, see Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 67, and George R. Garrison and Edward H. Madden, "William James—Warts and All," *American Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 2 (Summer 1977).

⁹ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*, (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2001), 375.

sources and political implications of William James' ethics.¹⁰ Frank Lentricchia's account of James' pragmatism as part of a "hidden history" of American anti-imperialism has helped draw out the connections between James' political commitments and central elements of his philosophy.¹¹ Biographies of James by Gerald Myers and Robert Richardson have helped me see the question of James' politics in the context of a holistic understanding of his thought and life.¹²

Two other recent studies of James have sought to prove his identification with a specific political ideology. Deborah Coon labels James a "communitarian anarchist," whose dislike of "bigness" influenced each of the political positions he would take and whose political commitments prefigured some of his philosophical ideas.¹³ Joshua Miller also tries to place James in a specific political category, in his case that of a "radical democrat."¹⁴ Both of these authors have influenced my understanding of James. Coon, like Lentricchia, has pointed me to crucial intersections between James' philosophy and his anti-imperialism. Miller's focus on James' search for a heroism disconnected from war plays into my understanding of James' concern with moral strenuousness. Both authors, however, struggle to make their specific ideological labels stick.

George Cotkin illustrates James' political and moral commitment in a more nuanced way. Cotkin, like Miller, emphasizes James' "discourse of heroism," incorporating many of James' political activities and writings under that appellation.¹⁵ He paints a more convincing picture of

¹⁰ James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.

¹¹ Frank Lentricchia, "The Return of William James," *Cultural Critique*, No. 4 (Autumn 1986): 12.

¹² Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Richardson, *William James*.

¹³ Deborah Coon, "'One Moment in the World's Salvation': Anarchism and the Radicalization of William James," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 83, no. 1 (June 1996): 73.

¹⁴ Joshua Miller, *Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 2.

¹⁵ George Cotkin, *William James: Public Philosopher* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

James' understanding of heroism than Miller does, however, and his work provides a corrective to the narrowly ideological stances of both Miller and Coon. His more thorough account of James' ethics and their relationship to his political activities and writings, as well as his image of James as a "public philosopher," has shaped my understanding of James to a great extent.

I aim to build on Cotkin's work by focusing more specifically on the intersections and tensions between James' ideals of moral strenuousness and pluralism. My essay integrates close readings of James' writings on moral strenuousness with an analysis of his involvement in the anti-imperialist movement during the Philippine-American War. It further evaluates James' thought in light of the intellectual climate at the turn of the twentieth century, emphasizing especially the perspectives of public figures such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Theodore Roosevelt, and the newspaper editor E. L. Godkin. Through these layers of analysis, I hope not only to place James within his cultural and intellectual context. I also hope to illustrate how James responded to and rebelled against several strands in the dominant American culture by promoting his two central ethical priorities—moral strenuousness and pluralism—in the final two decades of his life.

* * *

In order to give a useful account of the place of James' discourse on moral strenuousness within his philosophy, it is necessary to sketch at least the outlines of James' larger philosophies of pragmatism and pluralism. Pragmatism consists of several distinct concepts in James' thought. It is a method of resolving philosophical disputes, a theory of truth, and a temperament. A comprehensive definition of the idea is unnecessary here.¹⁶ For my purposes, an understanding

¹⁶ The essays in John J. Stuhr, ed., *100 Years of Pragmatism: William James's Revolutionary Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010) provide more thorough definitions of the idea, and usefully illustrate a variety of ways the concept has been interpreted since James' time.

of the unifying feature of the different strands of James' pragmatism is sufficient. James' assertion that "there can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn't *make* a difference elsewhere" serves as the basis for my broad understanding of pragmatism.¹⁷ In all its manifestations, James' pragmatism means a fundamental orientation toward the consequences of a thought or action.

Pluralism similarly meant several things to William James. Metaphysically, it meant that no single principle dominated the universe. Epistemologically, it meant that no one perspective contained a complete vision of reality. Socially and culturally, it meant that people had an obligation to tolerate and respect the backgrounds and points of views of others.¹⁸ These overlapping understandings of pluralism stemmed from several sources. James' metaphysical pluralism stood as a rebuke to both the progressive optimism that dominated the American popular imagination at the turn of the twentieth century and the philosophical idealism of thinkers like his colleague and friend Josiah Royce. James opposed the vision of Royce and other Hegelian idealists of an "Absolute:" a single, ultimately beneficent principle that governed the universe. His pluralism represented a rejection of determinism by declaring the open-endedness of the universe and upholding the potential for human action to shape it.

The most fundamental aspect of James' pluralism is its relational character. James claimed that relations between substances accounted for as much of reality as the substances themselves, and therefore that the Cartesian dualism between mind and matter did not account for the complexity of the universe. This emphasis on relations inflected James' social pluralism as well. Eschewing the atomistic individualism of some of his Social Darwinist contemporaries,

¹⁷ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), in *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, ed. Giles Gunn (New York: Penguin, 2000), 27.

¹⁸ I mean to separate James' ideas of social or cultural pluralism from their definitions as understood today. James did not speak of a "cultural pluralism" defined by different cultural groups asserting their identities in a diverse society, nor did he discuss a "social pluralism" of competing interest groups. His understanding of pluralism in society, culture, and politics had a less rigid set of meanings, while retaining an emphasis on tolerance and a belief in the value of acknowledging multiple points of view.

James portrayed the social world as constituted both by sovereign individuals and by the relationships that exist between them.

James' overlapping pluralisms had intimate and complex connections with his quest for moral strenuousness. James embarked upon this quest because of his metaphysical pluralism. He believed in the reality of evil as an independent principle in the world, and he pictured the universe as open-ended and unfinished. These two factors stimulated his desire to revive a sense of moral strenuousness among his fellow Americans. His promotion of moral strenuousness intersected with his social and cultural pluralism as well, as he sought to present a vision that respected individual differences and left open multiple paths to the achievement of moral strenuousness. Sustaining this balance between a meaningful understanding of the moral life and an open-ended conception of ethics and society proved a central challenge to James. The interactions between his search for moral strenuousness and his ideas of pluralism shaped the trajectory of his work from his 1891 essay "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" to his 1910 article "The Moral Equivalent of War."

Chapter 1: ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS

“The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” marked a turn in James’ career. Though James composed and delivered the essay in 1891, it was first published in the collection *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* in early 1897. *The Will to Believe* was the first full book James published after completing *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890, a scientific textbook of over 1,000 pages, and its abridged version in 1892. The description of his work as “popular philosophy” in the 1897 collection’s title—a title James, rather than his publisher, chose—reflected James’ desire to reach a wider audience.¹⁹ As he wrote in a notebook for a series of lectures he was to give at Wellesley College in 1905, “The classroom and the street have no connexion [sic].”²⁰ Despite spending much of his time in the classroom, James hoped his words would break out of it, to find their true audience in the street.

This belief in the primacy of the “street” defined not only the style of James’ writing but also the content of his ethical vision. James put forth the ethical ideas of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” as a response to the overly schematic and scholastic systems of ethics that dominated the philosophical landscape, as the first sentence of the lecture proclaims: “The main purpose of this paper is to show that there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance.”²¹ James rests this claim on the idea that each individual, and each individual’s relations, has ethical significance. This notion recapitulates a point he made in his lecture notes for an ethics course he taught between 1888 and 1889, where he observed, “the

¹⁹ The detail of James choosing the book’s title comes from Richardson, *William James*, 363.

²⁰ “Notebook 18” (1905), in BMS Am 1092.9: Compositions, Boxed Manuscripts, Notebooks, William James Papers (MS Am 1092.9-1092.12), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

²¹ William James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (1891), in *Essays on Faith and Morals*, ed. Ralph Barton Perry (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949), 184.

moral character of the universe is...*created* by certain relations amongst persons.”²² James’ conception of ethics as rooted in interpersonal associations and daily life forced him to insist on a pluralistic understanding of ethics, one based on the actual demands of individuals upon each other in a relational social world.

Beyond laying the groundwork for his pluralism, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” represented the starting point for James’ engagement with questions of moral strenuousness. The notes for James’ course on ethics illustrate clearly his rejection of a strictly utilitarian account of morality, in which moral preferences and choices derive only from questions of pleasure and pain: “I firmly believe that we have preferences inexplicable by utility... Those who contend for an innate moral faculty are therefore right from a *psychological* point of view.”²³ This assertion marks James’ separation not only from the classical utilitarianism of the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, but from a strand of Social Darwinism that embraced calculations of pleasure and pain as the basis for morality as well.²⁴ Through his refusal to subordinate morality to material impulses, James here foreshadows his preoccupation with moral strenuousness.

Near the end of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James identifies the utilitarian system he rejects with the “easy-going mood,” while endowing the “strenuous mood” with the power to “make us quite indifferent to the present ill, if only the greater ideal be attained.”²⁵ Louis Menand’s understanding of James’ philosophy as explaining “everything about ideas except why a person would die for one” cannot explain James’ preference for a morality that makes one “quite indifferent to present ill.” Rather, it appears that a willingness to

²² *Ethics course: 1888-9*, in bMS Am 1092.9: Compositions, Boxed Manuscripts, Papers on philosophy, William James Papers (MS Am 1092.9-1092.12), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944; Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

²⁵ James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” in *Faith and Morals*, 211.

die for an idea represents a central component of the ideal of moral strenuousness that James promotes.

If moral values stem from human relationships, as James argues here, then “there is nothing final in any actually given equilibrium of human ideals.”²⁶ This assertion suggests a conjunction of James’ belief in pluralism and his desire for moral strenuousness—the open-endedness of the universe induces him to promote a moral philosophy of action. James thus also condemns those philosophers who seek to impose their closed systems on other minds, considering themselves “no longer as one-sided champions of special ideals, but as schoolmasters deciding what all must think.”²⁷ The image of a closed, all-encompassing system of ethics determined by a single philosopher shocks James, not only for its denial of the universe’s open-ended quality but for its political implications: “Think, further, of such individual moralists, no longer as mere schoolmasters, but as pontiffs armed with the temporal power...and the notion really turns one pale.”²⁸ James offers this image as a warning, and it both reflects his democratic outlook and foreshadows his anti-imperialism. His claim that “all one’s slumbering revolutionary instincts waken at the thought of any single moralist wielding such powers of life and death,” furthermore, suggests that ethical systems change through a process of overturning.²⁹

James describes this process in the language of violence, conquest, and revolution: “As our present laws and customs have fought and conquered other past ones, so they will in their turn be overthrown by [a] newly discovered order.”³⁰ James’ support for an ethics based on a continual process of overthrowing old systems connects with a central component of his

²⁶ Ibid., 206.

²⁷ Ibid., 204.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 206.

psychological thought as well, namely, his aversion to a fixed notion of consciousness.

Portraying instead a “stream of consciousness,” James emphasizes that “*no state once gone can recur and be identical with what it was before.*”³¹ As in psychology, so in ethics: one system can remain in place for a time, but its overthrow means it will never recur in exactly the same form. This understanding of ethical systems as temporally bound indicates an anti-authoritarian strain, and a lack of reverence for current social arrangements, in James’ moral vision as well.

James’ belief that ethical priorities come not from a single source but from relations among people led him to a conception of ethics based on demands. Yet his attempt to take every demand into account meant that some demands must come into conflict with others: “There is hardly a good which we can imagine except as competing for the possession of the same bit of space and time with some other imagined good.”³² This notion of a competition among moral goods gets at the heart of James’ ethical perspective. No one person has an exclusive claim to truth or goodness. Everyone must have his or her say, and each new ideal must overturn old ones. Determining how to pursue one’s own ideals in the presence of the equally valid ideals of others, therefore, stands as the individual’s fundamental ethical task. Because, as James asserted, “there is always a *pinch* between the ideal and the actual,” this project demanded sacrifice; “some part of the ideal must be butchered,” and the challenge James posed was “to know which part.”³³ James’ commitment to metaphysical pluralism helped instigate his drive for moral strenuousness, but the open-ended ethical universe placed constraints on the strenuous pursuit of a single ideal. The interactions between these two ethical priorities would shape James’ engagement with questions of militarism, pacifism, and imperialism.

³¹ James, “The Stream of Consciousness,” from *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892), in *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, 173.

³² James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” in *Faith and Morals*, 202.

³³ *Ibid.*, 203.

Chapter 2: WILLIAM JAMES AND THE “STRENUOUS LIFE”

William James’ attempt to formulate a vision of moral strenuousness placed him in the midst of a complex conversation surrounding action and energy in turn-of-the-century America. This conversation grew out of the fears of an urban, educated, Northeastern elite that their lives lacked action and had lost moral purpose.³⁴ Made up primarily of writers, journalists, academics, and ministers, this Northeastern elite had its geographical center in Boston. The effects of modernization—economic, social, and cultural—had unmoored the structures of authority on which they depended. Increasing materialism and atomization in America’s market-based society, alongside the simultaneous emergence of what one historian at the time called “an ignorant proletariat and a half-taught plutocracy,” left this narrow Northeastern elite confused about its place in society.³⁵ At the same time, the spread of Darwinian and positivistic science threatened the religious foundations of this group’s belief systems, leaving behind philosophical as well as social instability.

This sense of instability produced a number of intersecting responses. One heaped scorn on businessmen and machine politicians while expressing fear of immigrants and the newly assertive working class. Another sought to reclaim a sense of authenticity by emphasizing the values of heroism, action, and masculinity, seen as under threat by modern culture. Belief in the widespread presence of a mental condition called “neurasthenia” contributed to the conviction that Americans had become “overcivilized,” and added a sense of urgency to this cultural search

³⁴ This account of elite fears in late nineteenth century America relies primarily on T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), but also on Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), Leslie Butler, *Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), and Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1982).

³⁵ Francis Parkman, “The Failure of Universal Suffrage,” *North American Review*, 127 (July-August, 1878): 4.

for authenticity through action.³⁶ William James, having faced his own “neurasthenic” crisis of doubt in the late 1860s and early 1870s, developed his moral and social philosophy within this cultural matrix. While he promoted strenuous action as a reinvigorating and moral practice, his opposition to those such as Oliver Wendell Holmes and Theodore Roosevelt, whom he saw as embracing action for its own sake, caused him to qualify and reconsider his promotion of action and energy. James’ involvement in the debate over the “strenuous life”—a phrase coined by Theodore Roosevelt in an 1899 speech—represented a crucial stage in the development of his own ideal of moral strenuousness.

Deeply ingrained class assumptions permeated the entire discourse on the “strenuous life,” and James’ own work is no exception. James’ audience—his readership, his students, and the listeners that packed the public lecture halls in which he spoke—consisted of educated people, largely but not exclusively both white and male, of the middle and upper classes of turn-of-the-century America. His exposure to the world outside this circle was limited, and this narrow range of experience placed limits on James’ material understanding of some of the topics he addressed, like physical labor and poverty. James sought to evoke awareness and solidarity in his audience toward the experiences of the working class, but his perspectives on these experiences should not be understood as authoritative. Rather, his discussions of such topics represented subjective attempts to show their potential relevance to an audience that sat at an equal or greater remove from them than he did.

Two of James’ public lectures during the 1890s demonstrated his fear of the “overcivilization” of the educated American man. James delivered the first of these two addresses, entitled “Is Life Worth Living?,” in October 1895 to a gathering of the Harvard

³⁶ I take the words “overcivilized” and “overcivilization” from Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 7; he attributes them to George Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York, 1881).

Young Men's Christian Association. The setting as well as the speech serve to illustrate its cultural context: at a time when middle-class Protestantism experienced a decline in male religiosity, the YMCA's promotion of an evangelical Christianity alongside physical fitness caused the organization to grow rapidly.³⁷ James alludes early in his lecture to "that metaphysical *tedium vitae* which is peculiar to reflecting men," arguing that "too much questioning and too little active responsibility" can lead one "to the edge of the slope, at the bottom of which lie pessimism and the nightmare or suicidal view of life."³⁸ James peppers the speech with nostalgic ideas of pre-modern suffering and heroism, alluding to seventeenth century plagues and sixteenth century military campaigns in order to contrast these hardships with the "petty powers of darkness" of his own time.³⁹ James thus suggests that the "*tedium vitae*" he has experienced—along with much of his audience, he suspects—represents a condition peculiar not only to "reflecting men" but to modern man in general.

James' discontent with the tedium enabled by modernity's comforts emerges again in his 1898 lecture, "What Makes a Life Significant?" Reflecting on a "happy week" he spent at the grounds of Chautauqua Lake in upstate New York two years earlier, James disparages the sense of ease and enlightenment that pervaded the place.⁴⁰ The Chautauqua assembly, founded in 1874 as a summer retreat for employees of the Methodist Church, had by the 1890s become a symbol of middle-class cultural achievement, a place for organized leisure activities and self-cultivation away from the messy realities of urban life.⁴¹ James found in Chautauqua material luxury, education, and culture, but the absence of any sign of effort or any opportunity for heroism

³⁷ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), chap. 5.

³⁸ James, "Is Life Worth Living?" (1895), in *Faith and Morals*, 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁰ James, "What Makes a Life Significant?" (1898), in *Faith and Morals*, 287.

⁴¹ Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 140.

stripped the place of its appeal. Chautauqua's reputation as a utopian ideal for middle-class America further struck James as a failure of the imagination. Near the end of his discussion of Chautauqua, James warns that "an irremediable flatness is coming over the world," and that "bourgeoisie and mediocrity, church sociables and teachers' conventions, are taking the place of the old heights and depths and romantic chiaroscuro."⁴² As in "Is Life Worth Living?," James combines a substantive critique of modern culture with a nostalgic look at the past, but here his pessimism comes through more clearly. Whereas in the earlier speech James portrayed "*tedium vitae*" as a particular problem—"peculiar to reflecting men"—here he sees it as widespread, almost universal: "The higher heroisms and the old rare flavors are passing out of life."⁴³ The absence of moral strenuousness in the culture surrounding James thus motivated his search for it.

James' criticisms of two proponents of different visions of moral strenuousness—Oliver Wendell Holmes and Theodore Roosevelt—illustrate the other side of his concern about "overcivilization" and "*tedium vitae*." James' disagreements with Holmes centered on their different attitudes toward war, while his conflict with Roosevelt hinged on their opposite positions on American imperialism. His critiques of each figure highlight the connections between James' views on public affairs and his philosophical commitments. Pragmatic objections undergirded James' hostility to the overly dogmatic faith in energy and action that his two contemporaries promoted. If an unconditional embrace of war and a blind promotion of American imperialism represented the practical results of the "strenuous life," James argued, then the attempt to revitalize "overcivilized," overly reflective Americans must be reconsidered.

Oliver Wendell Holmes put forth a militaristic vision of the "strenuous life" in an address entitled "The Soldier's Faith," delivered on Memorial Day, 1895. A friend of James' since

⁴² James, "What Makes a Life Significant?" in *Faith and Morals*, 290.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 291.

childhood and at the time Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, Holmes had suffered several wounds and lost his best friend in the Civil War. In this address, Holmes emphasizes the contrast between the soldier's choice of "honor rather than life" and the "belief that money is the main thing," denouncing the perceived dominance of commercial values in American culture.⁴⁴ Offering a faith in military heroism as a substitute for religion, Holmes explicitly places his militaristic ethic in the context of the crisis of doubt afflicting the educated classes in late nineteenth-century America. Declaring, "I do not know the meaning of the universe," Holmes goes on to identify the "soldier's faith" as the one solid belief left: "In the midst of doubt, in the collapse of creeds, there is one thing I do not doubt...and that is that the faith is true and adorable which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty."⁴⁵ That this duty is "blindly accepted" strikes Holmes as important; indeed, the faith he celebrates becomes all the more "true and adorable" if the soldier fights "in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has no notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use."⁴⁶ By ignoring the causes and consequences of war, Holmes posits heroic action as an end in itself. Seeing military values as self-propagating—"out of heroism grows faith in the worth of heroism"—Holmes proposes a renewal of the martial ethic as a solution to the "*tedium vitae*" James identified.⁴⁷

When confronted with this embrace of militarism as an alternative to "*tedium vitae*," James recoiled. Despite their earlier friendship, James and Holmes had drifted apart by the 1890s.⁴⁸ James' reaction against Holmes' celebration of unthinking militarism comes through

⁴⁴ Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., "The Soldier's Faith," May 30, 1895, in *An Address by Oliver Wendell Holmes* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1895), 6, 4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁸ Richardson, *William James*, 423.

most clearly in a letter from 1900, after a speech Holmes gave at the Bar Association of Boston that had a strong resemblance to “The Soldier’s Faith.” James indicates his familiarity with the earlier speech, calling Holmes’ 1900 address “that one set speech which comes out on every occasion.”⁴⁹ He criticizes Holmes for his celebration of “mere vital excitement,” and especially for his desire to “make it systematic, and oppose it, as an ideal and a duty, to the ordinarily recognized duties.”⁵⁰ What James objects to is not Holmes’ celebration of strenuous action, but rather his promotion of it as disconnected from any other purpose. While Holmes sees the soldier’s faith as requiring an adherence to “a cause which he little understands,” James believes that both causes and consequences matter. “Mere excitement is an immature ideal,” James writes; action cannot be its own justification.⁵¹

James’ critique of Holmes in 1900 came in the midst of his opposition to the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars, but it had deeper roots in James’ thinking. Indeed, this criticism reprised several ideas regarding war, morality, and the “strenuous life” he had expressed several years earlier, in an oration at the dedication of the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial in Boston on May 31, 1897. James’ personal connection to the memorial, through his brother Wilky’s service in Shaw’s regiment, did not induce a paeon to the war spirit. While James celebrated the heroism of his brother and the other soldiers of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts, he did not endorse war as a stimulant to action as Holmes did. Rather, James’ speech reflects his tragic sense of war’s ultimate consequences, and illustrates his preference for a morality based on small actions rather than large ones.

⁴⁹ William James to Frances R. Morse, April 12, 1900; quoted in Perry, *Thought and Character*, vol. 2, 250-1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

The pugnacious instinct, which James at times celebrated and which represented the best of mankind for Holmes, here does not strike James as the element of Shaw's character worthy of veneration. James' perception of war's roots in the human psyche, a theme that emerged throughout his work from *The Principles of Psychology* to "The Moral Equivalent of War," emerges here as well: "Man is once for all a fighting animal."⁵² Even on this occasion, intended to celebrate a war hero, James makes clear his ambivalence about the warlike instinct, noting the emerging cultural trend to praise war as a "school of manly virtue" but also observing that "it is easy to exaggerate upon this point."⁵³ James instead celebrates Shaw's "more lonely courage," which James believes he exhibited "when he dropped his warm commission in the glorious Second" in favor of the more "dubious fortunes" of the Fifty-Fourth.⁵⁴ James praises Shaw for eschewing comfort and taking up the position of the underdog. The "civic courage" that Shaw exemplified requires not only a daily sense of moral duty—"the nation blest above all nations is she in whom the civic genius of the people does the saving day by day"—but also a willingness to go against the grain.⁵⁵

In its preference for the concrete over the abstract, the small over the large, James' definition of "civic courage" reflects both his pragmatism and his desire to align his conception of moral strenuousness to fit the demands of his pluralism. Reflecting on the state of his country in the aftermath of the Civil War, James ominously states that "democracy is still upon its trial," and that "neither laws nor monuments, neither battleships nor public libraries, nor great newspapers nor booming stocks; neither mechanical invention nor political adroitness, nor churches nor universities nor civil-service examinations can save us from degeneration if the

⁵² William James, "Robert Gould Shaw: Oration by Professor William James" (1897), in *Essays in Religion and Morality*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, et. al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 72.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 73.

inner mystery be lost.”⁵⁶ These lines demonstrate James’ distrust of institutional solutions to the country’s cultural problem: neither politics (“laws”), nor war, (“battle-ships”), nor commerce (“booming stocks”) could save them. Rather, respect for the individual’s “inner mystery” stands as the one principle on which the success of democracy depends. Just as James’ dismay at the problems of “reflecting men” influenced his pragmatic conception of the purpose of thought, his suspicion of the glorification of military values contributed to his belief in a morality based on small, daily actions.

James’ conflict with Theodore Roosevelt further illustrates the limits and qualifications of his embrace of the strenuous ideal. The intellectual antagonism between James and Roosevelt began during the Venezuela crisis of 1895-1896. In May 1895, the government of Great Britain threatened naval action in a border dispute between Venezuela and British Guiana. President Grover Cleveland, influenced by Secretary of State Richard Olney, saw this threat of intervention as an affront to the Monroe Doctrine, which claimed for the United States an exclusive right to intervene in its purported sphere of influence. Olney’s note to the British Foreign Office invoked the Monroe Doctrine and advised Britain to back down, proclaiming, “today the United States is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interpositions.”⁵⁷ Its bellicose tone stirred up war fever among Congress and sections of the American public.

At the time of the Venezuela crisis, Theodore Roosevelt was serving as President of the Board of Police Commissioners of New York City. Roosevelt wrote an article in the *Harvard Crimson* in the midst of the crisis attacking those who opposed the administration’s bellicose

⁵⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, with the Annual Message of the President, Transmitted to Congress December 2, 1895*, pt. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1895), 588, University of Wisconsin Digital Collections, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS> (accessed November 1, 2011).

policy, arguing that the “stock-jobbing timidity” of those who “put a monetary gain before national honor” would not only weaken the country but would “in the end most assuredly invite war.”⁵⁸ Roosevelt here sets up an opposition between materialism and the older value of “honor”—a common trope of the militaristic perspective on strenuousness to which he and Holmes subscribed.⁵⁹ James, responding with his own letter in the *Crimson*, contests Roosevelt’s position, especially his definition of patriotism. James defines patriotism not as Roosevelt’s uncritical support of administration policy but as an active, critical, at times oppositional stance: “May I express a hope that...we shall be patriotic enough *not* to remain passive whilst the destinies of our country are being settled by surprise.”⁶⁰ He goes on to argue that the opponents of the Cleveland administration’s policy should “exert ourselves as citizens with all our might.”⁶¹ Framing his position in terms of action, exertion, and might, James hoped to claim the strenuous mantle for the anti-war side of the debate.

James and Roosevelt clashed again on the question of strenuousness in the spring of 1899. This time, the Philippine-American War set the backdrop for their dispute. The brief naval and land campaigns against Spanish forces in the Caribbean and the Pacific that began in May 1898 quickly yielded American military victories in both theaters, resulting in the Treaty of Paris, which annexed the Philippines to the United States. Despite having enlisted the cooperation of Filipino revolutionary forces under General Emilio Aguinaldo in their campaign against the Spanish, the U.S. opposed Filipino independence. In February 1899, less than a

⁵⁸ Theodore Roosevelt, letter to the editor, *Harvard Crimson*, January 7, 1896; quoted in Perry, *Thought and Character*, vol. 2, 304.

⁵⁹ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, chap. 1 and chap. 5.

⁶⁰ James, letter to the editor, *Harvard Crimson*, January 9, 1896; quoted in Perry, *Thought and Character*, vol. 2, 304.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

month after the formal establishment of the First Philippine Republic, U.S. forces fired on Filipino soldiers, beginning the three-year conflict known as the Philippine-American War.⁶²

On April 10, 1899, Theodore Roosevelt, then the governor of New York and a prominent supporter of the war in the Philippines, delivered an address at the Hamilton Club in Chicago entitled “The Strenuous Life.” Roosevelt—who had fought in Cuba in 1898—here exploits the same fears of weakness and inactivity that James addressed in “Is Life Worth Living?” and “What Makes a Life Significant?” He characterizes opponents of the conflict in the Philippines as embodying the “overcivilization” of the middle-class American man, as he contrasts “the timid man, the lazy man, the man who distrusts his country, the over-civilized man” with “stern men with empires in their brains.”⁶³ Throughout the speech, Roosevelt elides the distinction between nation and individual. Just as the “highest form of success” comes “to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil,” so too must the nation not “shrink from...undertak[ing] its new duties” or “do[ing] our share of the world’s work.”⁶⁴ This identification of individual with nation allows Roosevelt to connect national expansion with individual adventure, and national militarism with individual strength. It helps him portray opponents of the new national project not only as unpatriotic but as unmanly: “I have even scantier patience with those...who cant about ‘liberty’ and the ‘consent of the governed,’ in order to excuse themselves for their unwillingness to play the part of men.”⁶⁵ Drawing on the fear of the “overcivilized,” feminized man, Roosevelt ignores the arguments of the anti-imperialists

⁶² Daniel B. Schirmer, *Republic or Empire: American Resistance to the Philippine War* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1972), chap. 8 and chap. 9.

⁶³ Theodore Roosevelt, “The Strenuous Life,” in *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses* (1899; St. Clair Shores, MI: Scholarly Press 1970), 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1, 7.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

(that “cant about ‘liberty’ and the ‘consent of the governed’”), preferring to challenge their masculinity instead.

James responded immediately. The course of events in the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars had left James deeply disillusioned. His letter to his brother Henry on May 3, 1898 reveals an ambiguous opinion on U.S. policy in the Caribbean and the Philippines, but one shaped by an optimistic reading of America’s motivations for entering into the conflict: “We are making an absolutely *disinterested* war. Not a soul thinks of conquest or wishes it.”⁶⁶ Just over a month later, however, he attended the first meeting of what would later become the New England Anti-Imperialist League at Faneuil Hall in Boston, suggesting a more critical view of the conflict. He finalized his turn against the war by the first months of 1899, with President McKinley’s decision to oppose the indigenous forces of Aguinaldo and to seek colonial rule over the islands. After a major battle in February 1899, James expressed his contempt for the path his country had taken in a letter to his brother Henry: “Our national infamy is I fear irremediable, after our massacring of these poor Filipino ‘rebels’ with whom we have refused to hold any communication.”⁶⁷

Two months later, in a letter to the editor of the *Boston Evening Transcript*, he published his response to Roosevelt’s call for empire as a manifestation of the “strenuous life.” James, himself concerned at the absence of opportunities for strenuous action among the American middle and upper classes, here emphasizes the limits of his belief in a gospel of action. Roosevelt’s conflation of war with strength and peace with weakness provides “not a word of the

⁶⁶ William James to Henry James Jr., May 3, 1898, in *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 3: *William and Henry, 1897-1910*, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994), 33.

⁶⁷ William James to Henry James Jr., February 20, 1899, in *Correspondence*, vol. 3: *William and Henry*, 50.

cause—one foe is as good as another, for aught he tells us.”⁶⁸ Roosevelt’s failure to consider the conditions and effects of the strenuous action he promotes renders the speech, in James’ mind, “one flood of abstract bellicose emotion.”⁶⁹ The spirit of action never exists in isolation, James recognizes, and its consequences can undo the good its inspiration may have caused. A whisper of the pragmatic idea can be heard in this letter as well: action, like thought, is only as good as its results.

* * *

Theodore Roosevelt hunted game in Africa. He stormed a hill in Cuba. Running for president for a second time in 1912, he was shot while on his way to give a campaign speech—and gave the speech anyway. He led the “strenuous life,” or at least a recognizable version of it. William James yearned for adventure and loved the outdoors, but spent his entire adult life as a New England professor, confined largely to the classrooms and social circles of Harvard. While two of his younger brothers served in the Civil War, he did not. His conception of strenuousness grew mostly from his moral imagination, not his physical experience. The flavor of some of his philosophical language, such as the image of “human nature strained to its uttermost and on the rack,” at times indicates a wish for a life other than the one he had.⁷⁰ In 1909, in the middle of the seventh lecture of *A Pluralistic Universe*, James proclaimed, “I say no more: I must leave life to teach the lesson”—and continued his lecture.⁷¹ These contradictions make James the

⁶⁸ William James, “Governor Roosevelt’s Oration” (1899), in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, et. al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 163.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷⁰ James, “What Makes a Life Significant?” in *Faith and Morals*, 290.

⁷¹ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), in *Writings 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Library of America, 1987), 763.

embodiment of the “self-contempt” that historian Christopher Lasch claims has defined American intellectuals since the turn of the twentieth century.⁷²

Yet James’ biography should not make us take his belief in the value of moral strenuousness as insincere. James’ metaphysical pluralism meant that he believed in the reality of evil as an active force in this world. His understanding of the world as “half-wild, half-saved,” and ultimately open-ended made him search for a way that people could play a part in its salvation.⁷³ James sought to define a vision of moral strenuousness that would serve that purpose—not the dubious project of American militarism.

⁷² Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America: The Intellectual as Social Type, 1889-1963* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 349.

⁷³ James, “Is Life Worth Living?” in *Faith and Morals*, 30.

Chapter 3: ANTI-IMPERIALISM, PLURALISM, AND INTERNAL STRENUOUSNESS

If James' metaphysical pluralism instigated his concern with moral strenuousness, his social pluralism had a more complex relationship with it. Holmes and Roosevelt—figures with far greater cultural standing than James—advocated militarism and imperialism as the only paths to the “strenuous life.” James opposed not only the militaristic content of their vision but also their dogmatism in asserting its unique significance. His response to American imperialism in the Philippines reflected his attempt to preserve the open-ended pluralism of his ethical and social vision while still promoting an ideal of moral strenuousness. These two goals led James to develop a vision of moral strenuousness based on people's internal lives. Acknowledging the internal character of moral strenuousness left open multiple paths to its achievement, which in turn advanced the cause of James' open-ended pluralism.

James opposed American intervention in the Philippines on different grounds than most other anti-imperialists. Many southern white anti-imperialists opposed the annexation of the Philippines on racial grounds, arguing that the “inferior” Filipino race could never be assimilated into the democratic system of the United States. Black anti-imperialist groups and black newspapers at times emphasized the parallels between the Filipino struggle for independence and their own struggle for equality, denouncing imperialism as another manifestation of white domination of “colored peoples.” William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic Party's unsuccessful nominee for President in the 1900 election, ran with the campaign slogan, “Republic or Empire,” reflecting the prominence of imperialism as a national political issue.⁷⁴ But the strain of anti-imperialist thought that had the greatest impact on James emerged from a small circle of

⁷⁴ This brief characterization of a few of the different strands of anti-imperialism draws on Richard E. Welch, Jr., *Response to Imperialism: The United States and the Philippine-American War, 1899-1902* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

politicians, writers, and professionals living in Boston—and one newspaper editor from New York—in 1898.

On June 15, 1898, just over a month after the outbreak of war in the Caribbean and the Pacific, a group of aging men met in Faneuil Hall in an act of opposition to the United States' imperial policy. This meeting laid the groundwork for the formal organization of the group into the New England Anti-Imperialist League, which would eventually become the American Anti-Imperialist League. By October 1899, the League had moved its headquarters from Boston to Chicago in order to reflect its more national appeal, and it claimed a membership of over 30,000.⁷⁵ The core of the group, however, remained New Englanders, and consisted largely of former members of the Mugwump campaign against James G. Blaine, the Republican candidate for president in 1884. Mugwump anti-imperialists like Erving Winslow, a Boston merchant who became the secretary of the League and one of anti-imperialism's most outspoken advocates, dreamt of breaking up the existing two-party system in the United States in order to establish a third party founded on reformist principles. William James expressed a similar desire in a letter he wrote describing his decision to vote for Grover Cleveland, the Democratic candidate for president, in 1884. In this letter, James claimed that he wished to “get the present fossil Republican party permanently killed, and to be able four years later to drive out the Democrats.”⁷⁶ The Mugwumps' dream of forming a third party, their feelings of exclusion from a corrupt political system, and their idealization of the early Republican Party reflected not only their desire to demonstrate their political independence but also their belief in a political genealogy that reached back to the abolitionist movement. The claim of abolitionist roots was a stretch for most Mugwump anti-imperialists. With the exception of Thomas Wentworth

⁷⁵ Welch, *Response to Imperialism*, 44.

⁷⁶ William James to F. G. Bromberg, June 30, 1884; quoted in Perry, *Thought and Character*, vol. 2, 297.

Higginson, who as a young minister had been an active abolitionist throughout the 1840s and 1850s, most of them could only point to parents or relatives who had participated in that struggle. The desire to associate the cause of anti-imperialism with that of abolition, however, indicated Mugwump anti-imperialists' deep-seated political moralism.⁷⁷

The shared class background of the Mugwump anti-imperialists also played a role in shaping their arguments. The majority of those active in the anti-imperialist movement in Boston and New York were highly educated professionals. Many belonged to the same cultural elite most threatened by the rapid changes in American society at the time and most fearful of the "overcivilization" of the educated American. The social class of these anti-imperialists, their advanced age (in 1898, the average age of the officers of the Anti-Imperialist League was over sixty), and their self-image as a continuation of the abolitionist movement gave them a pejorative perspective on Gilded Age politicians, whom they saw as corrupt.⁷⁸ By focusing on the moral quality of individual officeholders, however, Mugwump anti-imperialists demonstrated their limited understanding of imperialism: to most of them, the solution to political problems lay always in electing "better men."⁷⁹ These limitations meant that, while this group of anti-imperialists denied the necessity or desirability of empire, they often reproduced the hierarchical assumptions that undergirded imperialist arguments.

In addition to his belief in national duty and national destiny, Theodore Roosevelt employed the racist dichotomy between "civilized" and "savage" peoples in the service of his imperialism. While Roosevelt's rhetoric of the "strenuous life" sought to counteract the

⁷⁷ Robert Beisner, *Twelve Against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists, 1898-1900* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), chap. 1.

⁷⁸ The point about the anti-imperialists' age comes from Berkeley Tompkins, "The Old Guard: A Study of the Anti-Imperialist Leadership," *Historian*, vol. 30, no. 3 (Summer 1968): 386.

⁷⁹ Carl Schurz, "Why Anti-Grant and Pro-Greeley," July 22, 1872, in *Speeches, Correspondence, and Political Papers of Carl Schurz*, vol. 6, ed. Frederic Bancroft (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1913), 401.

perceived damage done by “overcivilization,” he nonetheless maintained a rigid, racialized distinction between “civilized” and “savage” races. Evolutionary thinking heavily influenced Roosevelt’s intertwined understandings of racial hierarchy and imperialism; the United States’ wars against American Indians and Filipinos both served his purpose of “promoting the civilization of mankind” by “put[ting] down savagery and barbarism.”⁸⁰ The violence of these wars, to Roosevelt, had the potential to make Americans more “savage” without destroying the essential “civilization” at the heart of their race. Imperialism could beat out the nation’s “overcivilization” while spreading the virtues of civilization itself.⁸¹

A number of prominent Mugwump anti-imperialists duplicated Roosevelt’s racist distinction between “civilization” and “savagery,” while attempting to use this assumption to argue against expansion. They opposed colonial expansion not because they saw the people of the Philippines as worthy of the same privileges of self-government that Americans enjoyed, but precisely because they saw Filipinos as unequal to them. Incorporating Filipinos into the American polity and allowing them rights of voting, migration, and free labor struck Mugwump anti-imperialists like Carl Schurz, a former U.S. senator and Secretary of the Interior, as a recipe for racial disaster: “The prospect of the consequences which would follow the admission of the...Malays and Tagals of the Philippines to participation in the conduct of our government is so alarming that you instinctively pause before taking the step.”⁸²

Arguments such as this one replicated most of the features of Roosevelt’s racial fears, but had different prescriptions. From the principle that racial differences made it impossible for Filipinos to take part in the democratic American political community, these anti-imperialists

⁸⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, “National Duties” (1901) in *The Strenuous Life*, 293-4.

⁸¹ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), chap. 5.

⁸² Carl Schurz, “The Issue of Imperialism,” quoted in Christopher Lasch, “The Anti-Imperialists, the Philippines, and the Inequality of Man,” *Journal of Southern History*, no. 21 (Summer 1958): 327.

deduced that, if the United States were to conquer the Philippines, they could only govern the residents of the islands as subjects. At the same time, these anti-imperialists defended the American principle of government by consent, waving the Declaration of Independence as their battle flag. This commitment made occupation an untenable option. Despite opposing actual conquest, therefore, this form of anti-imperialist opposition failed to challenge the premises on which imperialists based their arguments and actions.⁸³

William James challenged these premises. Particularly, he despised the morally charged dichotomy between “civilization” and “savagery.” James’ anti-imperialism thus set him apart not only from imperialists but from some of his anti-imperialist allies as well. In a letter to the editor of the *Boston Evening Transcript* entitled “The Philippine Tangle,” James argued that the war in the Philippines called into question the perception of “civilization” as an unqualified good: “Could there be a more damning indictment of that whole bloated idol termed ‘modern civilization’ than this amounts to? Civilization is, then, the big, hollow, resounding, corrupting, sophisticating, confusing torrent of mere brutal momentum and irrationality that brings forth fruits like this!”⁸⁴ James’ pragmatism shaped this critique of civilization: despite the abstract arguments in its favor, its “fruits” betray it. This commentary on civilization further inflected James’ assertion of Filipinos’ right to self-government. He proposed for residents of the islands, simply, “freedom,” whether other Americans found them “‘fit’ or ‘unfit’” for it, and he stated a willingness to accept “whatever anarchy may go with it until the Filipinos learn from each other, not from us, how to govern themselves.”⁸⁵

⁸³ This criticism of the anti-imperialists’ argument draws on Lasch, “The Anti-Imperialists, the Philippines, and the Inequality of Man.”

⁸⁴ James, “The Philippine Tangle” (1899), in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 157.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

James' critique of the idea of "civilization," so central to the promotion of imperialism, reinforced his pluralism and led him explicitly to a hatred of large structures and abstract ideas in politics. In James' letter to his brother Henry on February 20, 1899—the same one in which he marked his irreversible turn against the war—James wrote, "the day of 'big'ness—big national destinies, political parties, trade-combines, newspapers, is sweeping every good principle and quality out of the world."⁸⁶ Several months later, in a letter to his close friend Sarah Wyman Whitman, James offered his most direct criticism of the ideology of "bigness" epitomized by the Gilded Age trends of centralization, incorporation, and imperialism: "I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms, and with the invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual... The bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed."⁸⁷ James here reflects the anxiety of his class in the face of major changes to American society; big business and big labor threatened both the material privilege and the cultural power of the older, Northeastern elite. As the earlier letter to his brother shows, however, James' critique of "bigness" derived most directly from the historical circumstance of American imperialism.

James' opposition to the "bigness" of imperialism affected his sustained engagement with the question of moral strenuousness. The American war in the Philippines and the reaction against it helped shape James' commitment to small-scale action. His screed against "bigness and greatness" did not produce an embrace of pure individualism, though. Rather, it provoked a restatement of his pre-existing commitment to the importance of the relations among individuals. James explained his position as not only "*against* bigness and greatness" but also "*with* the

⁸⁶ William James to Henry James Jr., February 20, 1899, *Correspondence*, vol. 3: *William and Henry*, 50.

⁸⁷ William James to Sarah Wyman Whitman, June 7, 1899, in *The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 8, ed. Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 546.

invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual.” James’ critique of imperialism, therefore, comprised an element of his relational pluralism.

William James also abjured imperialism because he saw it as an abstraction disconnected from facts—most of all the fact of other people’s minds and experiences. In an essay called “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” delivered as a lecture in October 1898, James argued that at the heart of each person there exists a “vital secret,” a new phrase to describe the “inner mystery” he praised in his speech at the dedication of the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial.⁸⁸ Our blindness to the “vital secrets” of others generates the “stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of alien lives,” and provokes the “falsity of our judgments, so far as they presume to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons’ conditions or ideals.”⁸⁹ In his letter “The Philippine Tangle” a few months later, James condemned the McKinley administration’s war against Emilio Aguinaldo’s independence movement on the grounds that it “can only destroy the inner realities” of the people of the Philippines.⁹⁰ In the same few months as he wrestled with Theodore Roosevelt’s conception of the “strenuous life” and its conflation of the individual with the nation, James sought to emphasize not the individual’s imagined identification with an abstract conception of patriotism, but rather his or her internal experience.

James’ emphasis on the internal and his commitment to an open-ended idea of moral strenuousness represent the central links between “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” and its companion piece, “What Makes a Life Significant?” In the latter essay, James reveals his concern with the “overcivilization” of the American upper and middle classes as he found them

⁸⁸ James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (1898), in *Faith and Morals*, 259.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ James, “The Philippine Tangle,” in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 157.

in his retreat at Chautauqua. In the former, he criticizes the narrow-mindedness and “blindness” of the same cultural set. He opens the essay with a personal account of his travels through North Carolina. Passing through the mountains, he came across a number of coves, in which residents had carved dilapidated log cabins out of the pristine forests; James’ first impression of these cabins, he admits, “was one of unmitigated squalor.”⁹¹ After inquiring about the coves to a local mountaineer, however, James realizes that his Romantic critique of the constructions—seeing them as “a sort of ulcer, without a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of Nature’s beauty,”—overlooked “the whole inward significance of the situation.”⁹² Where James saw “naught but denudation,” the mountaineers saw “personal victory” and “a symbol redolent with moral memories [that] sang a very paean of duty, struggle, and success.”⁹³ The internal moral attachment the mountaineer felt toward his construction forces James to reconsider his perspective.

James’ self-critical viewpoint stands in for a critique of the “blindness” of the middle and upper classes to the experiences of those, like the mountaineers in North Carolina, with no Chautauqua in their lives. The physical strenuousness of the mountaineer’s activity, however, is less important for James than the internal feeling of moral accomplishment the activity engenders. This internal standard of moral strenuousness, the notion that the moral worth of an action cannot be judged from an external, *a priori* standard, lies at the center of James’ argument throughout the essay. His assertion that “wherever a process of life communicates an eagerness

⁹¹ James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” in *Faith and Morals*, 261.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 261, 262.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 262.

to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant” illustrates James’ attempt to align his commitment to strenuousness with his open-ended pluralism.⁹⁴

James’ description of the internal nature of moral strenuousness leads him to emphasize the presence of multiple paths one might take to achieve it. To demonstrate the existence of these multiple paths, James fills the remainder of “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” with examples of his idea of the “strenuous life” that seem opposed to the example of the mountaineer. He shifts from a celebration of the “honest sweat” and “persistent toil” of people who make their living through disruptions of Nature to an equally sincere celebration of those who draw their moral significance from Nature’s untouched beauty.⁹⁵ Quoting William Wordsworth and Walt Whitman, among others, James defends the Romantic attitude immediately after pointing out its limitations. By extending the same tolerance to “your mystic, your dreamer, or your insolvent tramp or loafer” as he does to the mountaineer, James dramatizes his belief in the existence of plural paths to the morally significant life.⁹⁶

The importance of the “loafer” to James’ argument comes not only through his or her deviation from the standard set by the mountaineer, but also through his or her separation from the dominant commercial culture. An hour spent in the Romantic pastime of communing with Nature, James recognizes, must be considered “a worthless hour of life, when measured by the usual standards of commercial value.”⁹⁷ Yet James argues that only such hours as these can “change the usual standards of human value in the twinkling of an eye,” and they gain in moral significance as a consequence.⁹⁸ Foreshadowing an argument he would make in his chapters on “The Value of Saintliness” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James here takes a central

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 272.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 271.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 272.

element of the militaristic critique of American culture—its denigration of the commercial standard of value—and modifies it. The moral power of the “loafer,” like that of Holmes’ and Roosevelt’s soldier, comes through his or her denial of the popular standards of success, yet the form this denial takes is radically different: instead of embracing the existing, military option, the “loafer” illustrates the possibility of developing new alternatives.

James’ promotion of an open-ended conception of moral strenuousness in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” assumes an explicitly anti-imperial tone in the final paragraph of the essay. The potential for moral significance in individuals as disparate as the mountaineer and the “loafer” ought to prohibit us, James argues, from “pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own.”⁹⁹ The internal character of moral strenuousness further “commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us.”¹⁰⁰ These prescriptions exemplify James’ line of attack on Roosevelt’s attempt to justify the American occupation of the Philippines through the idea of a civilizing mission. The failure of Americans to recognize the moral significance of Filipino lives did not mean that such significance did not exist. “Hands off,” James advised, as “neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer”—or, for that matter, any single nation.¹⁰¹ The relational emphasis in James’ pluralism emerges clearly from this line. Multiple perspectives on truth and goodness, and the relations among these perspectives, will bring humanity closer to the “whole of truth” or the “whole of good” than any one of these perspectives would do alone. Imperialism failed James’

⁹⁹ Ibid., 283-4.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 284.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

ethical test not only because it trampled on each Filipino's opportunity to discover his or her significant life, but because, in the process, it hindered the broader search for truth as well.

The structure of "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" further demonstrates James' relational pluralism. The extensive use of quotations in the essay, from a variety of different sources, illustrates this concept. Each quotation, alone, holds little significance for James' argument, but together they transform the essay itself into an expression of the attitude toward truth that James advocates: an openness to the potential for meaning from multiple perspectives, and from the intersections that arise as these perspectives relate to each other. This structure further reflects James' desire to leave his definition of moral strenuousness capacious enough to allow for multiple paths to its achievement. By asserting the equal potential for moral strenuousness in both the mountaineer's and the "loafer's" chosen life, James advances the cause of his social and cultural pluralism. Relations among people, James implies, can only improve once we recognize each other's "vital secrets."

James' embrace of the "loafer" in "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" reflects the same impulse as his condemnation of the retreat on Chautauqua Lake in "What Makes a Life Significant?" Both inclinations demonstrate his preference for independent, small-scale action and his orientation away from dominant cultural forms. While the actions of the "loafer" appear to embody the "easy-going mood," James argues that they represent a form of moral strenuousness by connecting the "loafer" with an extremity of experience—an intense connection to nature—that upends the dominant system of value. The organized leisure of Chautauqua does the opposite; it confines experience within safe and easy limits, making James

yearn for “the heights and depths, the precipices and the steep ideals, the gleams of the awful and the infinite.”¹⁰²

The internal significance that the “loafer” draws from his supposedly wasted time James finds in a different form in the life of laborers in “What Makes a Life Significant?” James argues that the “unidealized heroic life” lies all around, but the upper and middle classes fail to notice it: “On freight-trains, on the decks of vessels, in cattle-yards and mines, on lumber-rafts, among the firemen and the policemen, the demand for courage is incessant; and the supply never fails.”¹⁰³ James’ celebration of the dailiness of this form of moral strenuousness brings to mind his notion of “civic courage” as he expressed it in the Shaw oration. There, he emphasized that nations depend on “acts without external picturesqueness” for their salvation.¹⁰⁴ Here, his understanding of internal moral significance means that “men’s lives [are] levelled [sic] up as well as levelled down,—levelled up in their common inner meaning, levelled down in their outer gloriousness and show.”¹⁰⁵ This process of “levelling” that comes when evaluating an action for its internal moral significance, rather than its external characteristics, makes “picturesqueness,” or its absence, irrelevant: the inner struggle of each person constitutes the “significant portion of life,” or nothing does.¹⁰⁶ Thus James’ advocacy of an internal standard of strenuousness again serves the purposes of his social and cultural pluralism, by challenging the notion that the predominant culture represents the only worthwhile culture. Picturesqueness, like productivity, epitomizes a dominant cultural ideal. Daily action, therefore, like “loafing,” helps to upend this dominant standard by laying claim to moral strenuousness outside its usual confines.

¹⁰² James, “What Makes a Life Significant?” in *Faith and Morals*, 289.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 291, 292.

¹⁰⁴ James, “Robert Gould Shaw,” in *Essays in Religion and Morality*, 73.

¹⁰⁵ James, “What Makes a Life Significant?” in *Faith and Morals*, 294.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 293.

What can moral strenuousness mean if it exists principally at the internal level, and if it must remain ultimately open-ended? James' ethics of demands and obligations, which he elucidated in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," place some limits on the subjectivity of his standard of moral strenuousness. Further, his critique of the Chautauqua lifestyle indicates that one may not simply adopt a ready-made life of middle-class leisure and call it strenuous. Moral strenuousness comes through "the marriage...of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance."¹⁰⁷ Understanding James' conception of moral strenuousness here demands a reading of the phrase "unhabitual ideal." "Unhabitual" at first suggests something out of the ordinary at the individual level, something out of people's daily habits and routines. Yet James spends much of the essay up to this point defending dailiness. What makes an ideal "unhabitual," therefore, must not be its removal from dailiness, but rather its failure to align with the habits of the culture at large—"unhabitual" as unique, extreme, unorthodox. James' orientation away from the commercial culture he perceived as dominating American life thus lies not at the periphery but at the center of his ideal of moral strenuousness.

* * *

James' emphasis on the internal character of moral strenuousness had several implications. It both reflected and reinforced his pluralism by insisting on the value of multiple iterations of the "strenuous mood." It demanded respect for the interiority of other individuals, their "vital secrets," and thus it rejected the abstract, pejorative assumptions of American imperialism. Lastly, it challenged the increasing dominance of a strictly commercial value system. James' illustration of these characteristics of moral strenuousness set the stage for his imagining of discrete forms of strenuous action. These actions would stand as alternatives to the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 308.

“easy-going mood” of the dominant commercial culture, while at the same time rejecting the militarism and imperialism of Roosevelt’s “strenuous life.” James envisioned these alternatives as “moral equivalents of war.”

Chapter 4: THE EVOLUTION OF MORAL EQUIVALENCE

William James believed that the physical and mental struggle of war could evoke the “strenuous mood” he felt was missing from much of American life at the turn of the twentieth century. James opposed war, however, despite his brothers’ military service and the romanticized view of the Civil War that pervaded his Mugwump political circle. In the last two decades of James’ life, intellectuals and politicians on both sides of the Atlantic sought to develop permanent alternatives to war, seeking to end violent conflict forever. These efforts often focused on the possibility of creating non-violent methods of resolving international disputes.¹⁰⁸ James, too, spent much of his later life seeking an alternative to war, but he approached the question from a different angle. James’ work in psychology and his observations of the war fever that spread throughout the United States during the Venezuela controversy and the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars had convinced him that war was not simply a question of politics. Its source, rather, lay in the human psyche. The alternatives to war that James proposed aimed to divert that source to other ends. Both his belief in the psychological roots of war and his endorsement of the ethical value of the “strenuous mood” directed James’ anti-war efforts away from traditional pacifism and led him on an ongoing search for a “moral equivalent of war.”

The idea of a “moral equivalent of war” first appears in James’ writings in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a publication of the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion that James delivered at the University of Edinburgh from 1901 to 1902. In a set of chapters on “Saintliness” and “The Value of Saintliness,” James sets out to explore the extreme religious devotion of so-called saints (drawing on examples from a number of faiths) by examining the empirical and

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan M. Hansen, *The Lost Promise of Patriotism: Debating American Identity, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), chap. 5.

psychological results of their devotion. Defining saintliness as “the character for which spiritual emotions are the habitual centre of the personal energy,” James incorporates extreme religious experience within his discourse of moral strenuousness: “Here if anywhere is the genuinely strenuous life.”¹⁰⁹ Identifying devoutness and asceticism as the principal defining characteristics of “saints,” James places these characteristics in opposition to both “naturalistic optimism” and “the worship of material luxury and wealth,” which, in his mind, “constitutes so large a portion of the ‘spirit’ of our age.”¹¹⁰ As he did with other expressions of moral strenuousness in “Is Life Worth Living?” and “What Makes a Life Significant?,” James here poses the example of extreme religious devotion as a challenge to the encroaching materialism he saw in the American culture of his time.

Throughout his chapters on “Saintliness” and “The Value of Saintliness,” James compares the “strenuous life” of the saint with that of the soldier. Both consist of embracing an emotional “pitch of intensity” and a “willingness to live with energy, though energy bring pain.”¹¹¹ Rejecting a morality that aligns good with pleasure and evil with pain, the saint and the soldier both exemplify the anti-utilitarian character of James’ ethics from “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” James’ description of the affiliation between the religious ascetic and the soldier ends, however, when he looks at the two figures from a pragmatist point of view. Considering the consequences of their two interpretations of the “strenuous life,” James argues, “we find a world-wide difference in all their spiritual concomitants.”¹¹² His pragmatist examination of these two approaches to moral strenuousness motivates James’ search for alternatives to war that retain its flavor of heroism: “What we now need to discover in the social

¹⁰⁹ James, *Varieties*, 298, 285.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 398.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 289, 290.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 400.

realm is the moral equivalent of war.”¹¹³ Despite portraying the soldier as a counterpart to the devoted religious figure, James recoils at the thought of promoting war, and contends that war “has proved itself to be incompatible” with humans’ “spiritual selves.”¹¹⁴ His introduction of the idea of a moral equivalent follows closely on the heels of his recollection of Prussian general Helmuth von Moltke’s axiom that “the immediate aim of the soldier’s life is...destruction, and nothing but destruction.”¹¹⁵ As in his speech at the dedication of the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial, James’ thoughts of war’s destructive power motivate his rhetorical shift away from a celebration of the martial.

If war’s effects consist of “nothing but destruction,” why should people seek its “moral equivalent?” Others in James’ anti-imperialist circle, outraged at the bellicosity of political rhetoric in the late 1890s, called into question the entire cultural tradition of celebrating war. In 1897, after the Venezuela crisis, E. L. Godkin—founder of *The Nation* magazine, editor-in-chief of the *New York Evening Post*, and a leading anti-imperialist—wrote an essay in the magazine *Century* called “The Absurdity of War.” Godkin denied the idea that war or the military temper carries any moral value. In this essay, Godkin turns the image of the suffering soldier, used by Holmes in “The Soldier’s Faith,” on its head, observing that it is only in the popular imagination that the soldier “does not kill for his country: he is killed for his country.”¹¹⁶ Holmes’ image of the self-sacrificial soldier willfully ignores that same soldier’s violent, destructive side—“the active part of his business”—and so does the society that embraces the martial spirit.¹¹⁷ In order

¹¹³ Ibid., 401.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 400.

¹¹⁶ E. L. Godkin, “The Absurdity of War,” *The Century Magazine* (January 1897): 469.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

to consider war “an improver of character, or moral elevator of the whole community,” a society must turn a blind eye to those on the other end of the bayonet.¹¹⁸

Godkin thus upends the perspectives of both Holmes and James on the relationship between activity, morality, and war. Asserting that what makes a soldier “active” is not his self-sacrifice but his willingness to kill others, Godkin calls into question the crucial assumption underlying James’ search for a “moral equivalent of war.” If the wars that have raged persistently throughout history have left “no record of their having improved any nation’s character, of having made men more sober, or religious, or humane, or law-abiding,” as Godkin claims, then the effort to find or create war’s moral equivalent is worse than futile.¹¹⁹

James, of course, disagreed. Despite war’s destructive effects, James saw in it the “strenuous mood” in its most obvious form, and creating an alternative that could replicate that strenuousness without violence represented the true task for those who sought to end war. James’ attempt to discover what might constitute such a “moral equivalent of war” provided the framework for much of his social thinking in the last decade of his life. In *Varieties*, James first suggests voluntary poverty. He takes the idea—“the old monkish poverty-worship”—directly from the ascetic religious figures he describes as exemplars of strenuousness in his chapters on “Saintliness” and “The Value of Saintliness.”¹²⁰ James explicitly links this proposed alternative to war to his anti-imperialism and his criticism of Theodore Roosevelt: “May not voluntarily accepted poverty be ‘the strenuous life,’ without the need of crushing weaker peoples?”¹²¹ James’ advocacy of an ethos of voluntary poverty can shock readers, especially those who, following Lewis Mumford, understand James’ pragmatism as the philosophical outgrowth of

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 470.

¹²⁰ James, *Varieties*, 401.

¹²¹ Ibid.

Gilded Age business strategy. Even the biographer Robert D. Richardson, a less polemical observer, notes that “nothing in William James’ life that we know about can prepare us for this emphasis on voluntary poverty.”¹²²

Yet James’ promotion of voluntary poverty fits more neatly in his discourse of moral strenuousness than Richardson recognizes. As a voluntary action, it aligns well with the open-ended pluralism James espouses in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” and the internal character of its “fruits”—which derive principally from the ascetic’s deeper religious devotion—corresponds with this stage in James’ understanding of strenuousness. Further, James’ embrace of voluntary poverty supports his critique of property as an enemy of this internal form of strenuousness. James’ qualified support for the military ideal, “hideously corrupted as it has always been,” stems from his belief that a love for property has always come at the expense of personal character: “the opposition between the men who *have* and the men who *are* is immemorial.”¹²³ Property represents a confining force, one that hems in the pursuit of the significant life, as “the claims which *things* make are corrupters of manhood, mortgages on the soul, and a drag anchor on our progress towards the empyrean.”¹²⁴ Voluntary poverty, therefore, represents not only a “moral equivalent of war” but a moral alternative to the worship of property.

James’ critiques of both militarism and materialism transform his chapters on “Saintliness” and “The Value of Saintliness” from an exploration of a religious phenomenon into some of his most socially critical writing. Asceticism, the marker of “saintliness” that led James to his promotion of voluntary poverty, rests on James’ metaphysical pluralism. Voluntary

¹²² Richardson, *William James*, 411.

¹²³ James, *Varieties*, 349, 348.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 349.

poverty stands as an enactment of the belief that “there is an element of real wrongness in this world...which must be squarely met and overcome by an appeal to the soul’s heroic resources.”¹²⁵ The progressive optimism reflected in materialism and property-worship represented another form of “blindness,” according to James, one which failed to account for this “real wrongness” in the world. James’ promotion of voluntary poverty as a “moral equivalent of war” thus exemplifies an intersection between his dissent from the predominant attitude of turn-of-the-century American culture and his specific understanding of the pluralistic nature of the universe. By framing voluntary poverty in both metaphysical and cultural terms, James again demonstrates the intimate connection between his pluralism and his quest for moral strenuousness.

* * *

James’ conception of moral equivalence underwent significant changes between his first expression of the idea in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and his final engagement with the question in his 1906 essay, “The Moral Equivalent of War.” This evolution—which led him eventually to jettison his promotion of voluntary poverty in favor of something resembling compulsory labor or national service for America’s youth—echoed the embrace of centralized reform efforts characteristic of the Progressive Era. The shift also reflected important developments in James’ anti-imperial thinking, especially his understanding of America’s place among the nations of the world. The developments in James’ proposal for a “moral equivalent of war” paralleled his abandonment of an exceptionalist reading of American history.

James’ early criticisms of the imperial policies of Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt contained a strong current of American exceptionalism. Like many Mugwumps, James saw the

¹²⁵ Ibid., 396.

Declaration of Independence as a sacred political document, liberating the United States from the Great Power politics that ruled Old Europe. The Monroe Doctrine, interpreted by Mugwumps as an anti-colonial commitment to self-determination in the Americas rather than as an attempt to claim for the United States its own sphere of influence, served as the Declaration's parallel in foreign affairs. The United States did not seek colonies, the Monroe Doctrine maintained; with an air of moral authority, Monroe declared his nation above the territorial conflicts of the European empires. James, Godkin, and other Mugwump anti-imperialists saw the war in the Philippines as America's abandonment of this commitment, its tragic fall from a lofty moral position into the scrum of world politics.

Charles Eliot Norton, a liberal reformer and colleague of James' at Harvard, accused America of assuming "all the evil spirits of the Old World," and emphasized that "under their influence she has gone mad."¹²⁶ Charles Francis Adams Jr., a former Union Army colonel and a railroad regulator and executive, also decried the imperial policy of the United States in the Philippines on explicitly exceptionalist grounds. Since America's "fundamental principles," which Adams defined as those found in the Declaration, the Constitution, and the Monroe Doctrine, "have not been shown to be unsound," Adams asked, "why need we, all of a sudden, be so very English and so altogether French?"¹²⁷ William James offered a similar critique, in characteristically more graphic terms than those used by his more genteel colleagues: by invading the Philippines and entering the game of empire, America had "puked up our national soul."¹²⁸ The Mugwump strand of anti-imperialism enlisted an imagined American past, in which

¹²⁶ Charles Eliot Norton to Leslie Stephen, June 24, 1898, July 8, 1899, both in Charles Eliot Norton, *Letters*, 2:270, 284; quoted in Butler, *Critical Americans*, 252.

¹²⁷ Charles Francis Adams Jr. to Carl Schurz, December 21, 1898, in Charles Francis Adams Jr., *"Imperialism" and "The Tracks of Our Forefathers"* (Boston: Dana Estes & Company, 1899), 36.

¹²⁸ James to George Hoar, May 11, 1900, in *Correspondence*, vol. 9, 203.

the United States stood as an anti-imperial alternative to Europe, in order to criticize the policies of the McKinley administration in the Philippines.¹²⁹

George Santayana, a Spanish-born colleague of James' at Harvard, challenged this imagined past and criticized its use as a basis for anti-imperial arguments. Santayana's recollection of James' anti-imperialism, in his autobiography *Persons and Places*, casts Santayana as a realist and James as an idealist in the realm of global politics. American aggression did not strike Santayana as the abandonment of a sacred political principle, but rather as the natural course of action for a rising power. James based his anti-imperialism on a "false moralistic view of history" and the wistful idea that he had "lost his country."¹³⁰ According to Santayana, the Declaration of Independence had never determined the conduct of American political leaders, who could be no more than "creatures of circumstance and slaves of vested interests."¹³¹ Indeed, Santayana declared, the Declaration itself wielded no more power than "a piece of literature, a salad of illusions."¹³² Because James falsely "attribut[ed] events to the conscious ideals and free will of individuals," he failed to understand that nations had a logic of their own.¹³³ James had not "lost his country," according to Santayana, but rather had just "lost his way in its physiological history."¹³⁴ America at the turn of the twentieth century "was in good health and just reaching the age of puberty"—anti-imperialists had made a cancer out of what were simply growing pains.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ The argument in this paragraph draws on Butler, *Critical Americans*, 252-4.

¹³⁰ George Santayana, *The Middle Span: Volume II of Persons and Places* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945), 167.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

As this account comes only through Santayana's recollections, set down decades after the fact, the direct effects of his criticisms at the time are hard to gauge. James' outlook on the anti-imperialist struggle, however, shifted in the years after his first engagement with the question. His disgust, in 1899, at America "puk[ing] up [its] ancient national soul" developed by 1903 into an equally strong but less nostalgic disapproval of his country's actions. Delivering an address to the Anti-Imperialist League in the autumn of 1903, James criticized his fellow anti-imperialists for falling into the trap of abstractions just as the imperialists had. Faith in American exceptionalism, in the ideals set forth by the Declaration of Independence, struck James as an abstract belief as false as the dichotomy between "civilization" and "savagery." The Philippine-American War made James reconsider his conception of his homeland as unique: "In every national soul there lie potentialities of the most barefaced piracy," and James had come to see America's "soul" as "no exception to the rule."¹³⁶ The principles of the Declaration—the foundation on which Mugwump political ideals purportedly rested—represented no more than an "idle dream," a "pure Fourth of July fantasy, scattered in five minutes by the first temptation."¹³⁷ Whether through an appreciation of Santayana's criticisms or simply through a reconsideration brought on by the course of the conflict, James abandoned his understanding of the United States as a uniquely moral nation, a country that had chosen to exempt itself from the power struggles of international affairs.

The evolution of James' idea of moral equivalence paralleled this denunciation of exceptionalism. Voluntary poverty, James' first proposal for a "moral equivalent of war," depended on an individual's choice to exempt himself or herself from the dominant material culture. It demanded of individuals much the same thing that James' early anti-imperialism

¹³⁶ James, "Address on the Philippine Question" (1903), in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 85.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

demanding of his country: that they separate themselves from the assumptions and mores of their environment. James' later attempt to promote an alternative to war repudiated this voluntarism, instead advancing a program that resembled compulsory national service for young men of the middle and upper classes. "The Moral Equivalent of War," originally delivered as a lecture at Stanford University in 1906 but only published in 1910—a few months before James' death—marked a shift in James' thinking from an open-ended, voluntary model of strenuousness to a closed, prescribed version. It represented the moment of greatest tension between James' ideals of moral strenuousness and pluralism.

In the opening line of "The Moral Equivalent of War," James again portrays the anti-war tendency as aligned with ideals of action and exertion: "The war against war is going to be no holiday excursion or camping party."¹³⁸ James sets up the problem of developing a strenuous alternative to militarism by restating some of the principles he set out in his memorial address for Robert Gould Shaw. Accounting for the prominent place of war in both history and culture, James arrives at the same understanding of the war instinct as a successful evolutionary trait that he announced in his Shaw oration, asserting confidently, "we inherit the warlike type."¹³⁹ James again does not contest the power of military conflict to evoke moral strenuousness. He criticizes traditional pacifism as an abstraction, in the same way he criticized Holmes' militarism and Roosevelt's imperialism: "In the whole discussion both sides are on imaginative and sentimental ground. It is but one utopia against another, and everything one says must be abstract and hypothetical."¹⁴⁰ Finding a "moral equivalent of war" thus required bringing together the "peace-party" and the "war-party," a task that struck James as similar to the problem of reconciling

¹³⁸ James, "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1910), in *Faith and Morals*, 311.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 314.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 315.

opposed philosophical tendencies—the exact problem James conceived pragmatism to address.¹⁴¹

The pragmatic resolution to the conflict between the “peace-party” and the “war-party” that James pursues, though, differs radically from the “moral equivalent of war” he proposed in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Of the possible avenues to moral strenuousness that James advocated, voluntary poverty in some ways most resembled the path of the “loafer” from “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.” The voluntarism at its heart replicated James’ concern for the internality of moral strenuousness expressed in his 1898 essay; what makes voluntary poverty strenuous is its effect on the ascetic’s own spiritual devotion. Both the ascetic and the “loafer,” furthermore, pursue paths far removed from the dominant norms of commercial culture. Neither option, however, stands as a feasible basis for the reorganization of society, as James recognizes. The scale of James’ project in “The Moral Equivalent of War,” therefore, produces a new conception of moral strenuousness: one not defined by openness, internality, and separation from the dominant culture, but by external hardship, measurable productivity, and collective discipline.

James expresses faith in humanity’s potential to develop a “moral equivalent of war,” but he rests that faith on the idea of discipline. War’s success in motivating strenuousness derives from its presence as “the only force that can discipline a whole community.”¹⁴² James further claims that the success of war’s disciplinary nature has perpetuated its existence throughout history, and that “until an equivalent discipline is organized... war must have its way.”¹⁴³ This promotion of “discipline” appears as the element of “The Moral Equivalent of War” most

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., 326.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 326.

removed from James' earlier perspectives on strenuousness. Though always premised on the exertion of energy, James' previous examples of morally strenuous acts all implied internal motivations and internal results. The idea of "discipline," on the other hand, especially one that must be "organized," clearly suggests an external force. In his specific vision of a concrete "moral equivalent of war," James proposes "a conscription of the whole youthful population to form for a certain number of years a part of the army enlisted against *Nature*."¹⁴⁴ The balance between the mountaineer and the "loafer," expressed in "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," as distinct but equal pursuants of an internally defined moral strenuousness has disappeared. Rather, James now seeks to make mountaineers of all his countrymen—and to use the power of the state to compel this transformation.

In addition to his embrace of discipline, James' emphasis on the collectivity in "The Moral Equivalent of War" cut against the grain of some of his earlier writings on strenuousness. While James' social and cultural pluralism always spoke to his attitude toward individuals as embedded in contexts and communities, his earlier ideals of strenuousness remained located on the site of the individual. In "The Moral Equivalent of War," however, his proposed avenue to strenuousness demands that individuals not only belong to a collectivity but cede control to it: "We should be *owned*, as soldiers are by the army, and our pride would rise accordingly."¹⁴⁵ James does not advocate blind adherence to the demands of the state, however, as Holmes did in his speech on "The Soldier's Faith." Rather, the possibility of acting in accordance with an "unhabitual ideal" continues to animate James' discourse on strenuousness, only here the adherent to such an ideal is not the individual but the nation. Military success has always evoked the "civic passion" that James emphasized from his address at the Shaw Memorial onward; the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 325.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 326.

task of those seeking to challenge war is to evoke similar pride at belonging “to a collectivity superior in *any* ideal respect.”¹⁴⁶ James argues that the reverse of this reaction ought to apply as well, that individuals ought to react strongly against the failures of their collective organizations: “Why should they not blush with indignant shame if the community that owns them is vile in any way whatsoever?”¹⁴⁷ Calling to mind James’ critical understanding of patriotism and his anti-imperialism, this idea tempers the prescriptive, disciplinary perspective expressed in “The Moral Equivalent of War.”

“The Moral Equivalent of War” thus incorporates both familiar elements from James’ longstanding quest for moral strenuousness and new ideas that seem out of place in his earlier discourse. While James offers the first large-scale proposal to instill his ideal of moral strenuousness, he does so at the expense of his openness, his emphasis on the internal, and his critique of dominant cultural values. The pluralism of James’ ethics, which derived from his understanding of the universe as unfinished, demanded an open-ended vision of moral strenuousness as well. In his support for daily civic action in the speech at the Shaw Memorial, his dual celebrations of the mountaineer and the “loafer” in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” and his promotion of voluntary poverty in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James enacted his varied, open-ended vision. In “The Moral Equivalent of War,” however, he repudiated this variety. He turned instead to a single, prescribed version of moral strenuousness.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 324.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

“The Moral Equivalent of War” met with some immediate criticism. Two letters James received on February 10, 1910, just after its publication, reflected the continued prevalence of the exclusively militaristic conception of the “strenuous life.” One of these criticisms, from former congressman Frederick George Bromberg, asserted that “compulsory military service” was the only method for “evolving the virtues which [James] would cultivate through some other, as yet unknown and untried, system.”¹⁴⁸ The other, from British archeologist and Oxford professor Percy Gardner, struck rather the same note, condemning James’ search as futile: “As to civic virtue no one has yet learned how to teach it apart from war.”¹⁴⁹ John Dewey leveled a different critique at James’ “moral equivalent of war.” Dewey recognized that James’ proposal to conscript the youth of America into an industrial army of laborers reflected his narrow class bias. To him, James’ “sympathies were limited by his experience; the idea that most people need any substitute for fighting for life...could come only from a man...who had lived a sheltered existence.”¹⁵⁰ No one who had actually experienced hard labor would prescribe it as a morally enriching activity.

Other intellectuals, like progressive writer and reformer Walter Lippmann, embraced the idea of a “moral equivalent of war.” To Lippmann, James’ work broke new ground by recognizing the necessity for reformers to manipulate human instincts, not deny them. Lippmann claimed that “unless the reformer can invent something which substitutes attractive virtues for attractive vices, he will fail,” applying James’ critique of traditional pacifism to social reform in

¹⁴⁸ F. G. Bromberg to William James, February 10, 1910, in *Correspondence*, vol. 12, 433.

¹⁴⁹ Percy Gardner to William James, February 10, 1910, *Correspondence*, vol. 12, 434.

¹⁵⁰ John Dewey to Scudder Klyce, May 29, 1915; quoted in Myers, *William James*, 602n151.

general.¹⁵¹ Lippmann thus adopted the method of sublimation suggested by the “moral equivalent of war,” and took inspiration from James’ apparent endorsement of an active role for the state in diverting people’s irrational impulses toward rational ends. Other progressives also seized upon James’ psychological account of human and institutional ills and the approach to reform that it engendered.

What, then, was the essence of James’ quest for moral strenuousness? Was it a search for heroism outside the arena of war? Was it an attempt to revitalize the upper and middle classes of America through physical labor? Was it an effort to divert people’s desires to serve rational social ends? In truth, the scope of James’ quest for moral strenuousness was much broader than what Bromberg, Gardner, Dewey, or Lippmann realized. It came from a place of revolt—against determinism, against a commercialized culture, and against imperialism and militarism. The forces against which James revolted seemed to have no alternative; indeed, at the time of his death, all three seemed stronger than ever. Scientific determinism continued to spread in intellectual circles. Commercial culture occupied more and more space in American life. A military buildup continued at home, and Philippine independence remained decades away.

James’ revolt against these forces began with his metaphysical pluralism, his recognition, as he put it in *Pragmatism*, of the “fact of ‘no’” that stood “at the very core of life.”¹⁵² The shift in his conception of moral strenuousness, from a belief in multiple paths to its achievement to a prescription for a single direction, reflected the increasing desperation he felt at the “desiccation” of the modern world.¹⁵³ Yet the very belief that prevented James from embracing a progressively optimistic view of the world also made him deny the inevitability of this “desiccation.” The

¹⁵¹ Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 46.

¹⁵² James, *Pragmatism*, in *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, 129.

¹⁵³ William James to L. T. Hobhouse, August 12, 1904; quoted in Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York, W. W. Norton and Company, 1991), 295.

open-endedness of James' view of the universe, with its expansive notion of human possibility, always allowed for an alternative. James' ideal of moral strenuousness reflected his fundamental desire to assert the significance of human action, while its orientation away from both a dominant set of cultural values and their sanctioned military alternative reflected his iconoclasm. The politics of moral strenuousness demanded imagination as well as effort.

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