William James's Argument for a Finite Theism

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In his biography of William James, Robert D. Richardson describes a terribly affecting episode in the history of the James family. Henry James Jr., the novelist, reads out loud a note written by his brother William at the gravesite of their recently departed father: "All my intellectual life I derive from you, and though we have often seemed at odds in the expression thereof I'm sure there's a harmony somewhere, and that our strivings will combine."[1] Henry James Sr. was something of a self-made theologian, a quasi-Swedenborgian who befriended Ralph Waldo Emerson and espoused an ontology in which the material world is a shadow of the spiritual and the self a fiction. His son William, the great psychologist and philosopher, would spend his long career fighting the "block universe" entailed by the idealist and monist philosophies so predominant in his time. Undoubtedly, and most evident at the cemetery, there were both a hint of rebellion and subsequent guilt in the relationship of William's theological concepts to that of his father. But even if he recognized this, it would never have hindered him from carrying through with his pluralism. It was William James, after all, who taught us that metaphysical positions are not merely abstract ideas. On the contrary, they have a tremendous bearing on how we live; and no matter how well they are argued, they are the product of a sensibility, a pre-rational hold on things, a root intuition. We feel before we think.

The innermost core of James's intellectual concerns, while personal in origin, inform standards of truth and inquiry intended to be universal in scope. In offering his positions, James promotes his readers and listeners to actualize their highest possibilities as human beings. In this endeavor, James is in good company; Pierre Hadot includes him as one of those rare thinkers who "conceived of philosophy not only as a concrete, practical activity but also as a transformation of our way of

[1] Richardson (2006), *William James; In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*, p. 229.

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inhabiting and perceiving the world."[2] The necessity of doing justice to the full-blooded character of lived experience and the urge to advocate the morally rigorous form of life are, in fact, among James's most vital concerns, the "hotspots" in his consciousness—to borrow a phrase from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Following closely from these themes is the promotion of an open-ended universe—one plastic, malleable, and improvable through human effort. As we explore and assess James's arguments for a finite theism we will encounter these positions in more detail.

One condition for the morally active life is the acceptance of personal autonomy, the affirmation of freedom over determinism. This topic was of central interest to James, whose epiphany while reading the French philosopher Renouvier ("my first act of free will shall be to believe in free will") was instrumental in his own struggles against a paralyzing depression and anxiety. James also held that for freedom to be morally significant, reality must be pliant enough for our choices to make a difference. But the idea of an uncertain future is a challenge for traditional theism. For if there is an all-knowing and all-powerful god, a being who plans and shapes the course of history beforehand, then all events may very well be pre-established and therefore unchangeable.

Toward the end of "The Dilemma of Determinism," James argues for the compatibility of theism with a measure of contingency in the universe. The deity is here compared by James to a master chess player who, sitting across from an amateur, is in fact blind to whatever strategy his or her opponent will take. Although prepared for every possible move, and fully intent on eventually winning the game, the master simply "cannot foresee" each and every decision made by the face on the other side of the board. "I will lead things to a certain end," James has this god proclaim, "but I will not *now* decide on all the steps thereto." In promoting a deity who relinquishes full knowledge and control over events in order to make room for chance, James demonstrates that the existence of providence does not necessarily entail determinism.[3]

Later, in the Gifford lectures, better known as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James argues for a god, or gods, limited in power and unable to assure the world's salvation. Hence, in setting out his "overbeliefs," his personal doctrines concerning the divine reality, James revokes providence entirely.[4] Furthermore, the deity's limitations are intrinsic, and not self-imposed as in "The Dilemma of Determinism."[5] Continuing in this direction through *Pragmatism*, he suggests a god who, far from the all-encompassing Absolute of the professional philosophers, is only one player "in the midst of all the shapers of the great

[2] Hadot (2002), *What is Ancient Philosophy?,* p. 270.

[3] James (1956), *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, pp. 180–183.

[4] James (1958), *Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 396–397.

[5] This is not stated explicitly. Although it remains *conceivable* that the deity's lack of omnipotence and omniscience in James's mature thought might be self-imposed after all (an equivalent to the doctrine of the *tzimtzum* or God's "contraction" in Lurianic Kabbalah), the fact that the deity is in active tension with other forces in the cosmos makes this highly unlikely.

world's fate."[6] In both the Gifford lectures and *Pragmatism*, James argues that the acosmistic One envisioned by so many mystics and idealists relegates the everyday world of struggle to a mere appearance, a move which invalidates rather than promotes the need for personal initiative and moral exertion. After all, if perfection were already beneath and about us, what is there to struggle against? It is in the Hibbert lectures of 1908, however, wherein James's religious philosophy is the most refined. Subsequently titled *A Pluralistic Universe*, it includes and deepens most of the theological ideas outlined in his earlier works, and therefore serves as a most adequate place to examine his mature arguments for a finite theism.

James opens the Hibbert lectures by choosing between ontological frameworks based upon a criteria of *intimacy*: Our living connection with the cosmos rather than our alienation from it. His reasons, as usual, are both phenomenological and moral in nature. Intimacy, first, speaks to James's doctrine of "radical empiricism." At once a method and an ontological position, radical empiricism holds "pure experience" to be the one fundamental reality underlying the artificial distinctions between subject and object, mind and matter.[7] As a method, it retains as real whatever is directly found within our experience, and excludes all that isn't. The relations subsisting between facts are therefore considered to be part of the very fabric of reality, and are neither relegated to the deep structures of the transcendental self (as seen by rationalists) nor slapped onto sense experience due to the associations formed through habit (as interpreted by empiricists). In short, intimacy connotes the continuity of the self with the cosmos as found within the immediacy of our perceptual life; and ontologies, for James, can be evaluated by the extent to which they approximate the world as we actually live and experience it.[8] Second, to understand our relationship to the universe as one of intimacy is to encourage an active participation in things rather than a passive resignation. It is precisely this sense of kinship with the cosmos, what James labels the "sympathetic" as opposed to the "cynical temper," which motivates the need to continually improve it.[9]

Employing intimacy as a standard, spiritual worldviews in which we feel at home in the universe are preferred by James to the cold impersonality of materialistic ones. Similarly, pantheistic theologies which espouse the closeness between God, nature, and humanity are chosen over a dualistic theism in which the deity's "connexion with us appears as unilateral and not reciprocal."[10] The image of a transcendent

[6] James (1975), *Pragmatism*, p. 143. Much of what James articulates more elaborately in *The Varieties* and *Pragmatism* concerning God is briefly proposed toward the conclusion of an earlier essay, "Is Life Worth Living?" James (1956), *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, p. 61.

[7] See, for instance, James (1996a), "A World of Pure Experience," found in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*.

[8] David Lamberth states: "Whereas on a first reading James's distinction comes across as arbitrary, ascribable perhaps only to *his* psychological temperament, on a second reading one can see James drawing his distinctions according to a particular philosophy's adequacy in accounting for the phenomenological concreteness of our actual, lived experience." From Lamberth (1997), *The Cambridge Companion to William James*.

[9] James (1996b), *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 23.

[10] Ibid, p. 26.

and infallible being with the world firmly in its control, an entity who could suddenly vanquish evil if it so pleased, simply does not lend itself to an ontology in which humans are required in any essential way. Pantheism is itself broken down into two distinct types: A monism or "all form" which indentifies God with the entire cosmos, and a pluralism of "each-forms" in which the universe, however infused with the divine, exceeds any attempt to collect it into a totality.[11] And it is here, in the contest between monistic and pluralistic pantheism, wherein James sets out the puzzles and contradictions for which the doctrine of a finite theism is the answer.

In a nutshell, James argues that monistic pantheism, in its own way, transforms into a dualism every bit as alienating as the most "monarchical theism." Conceiving the universe as the Absolute is to envision a state of perfect knowledge as well as a freedom from suffering. But to encounter the cosmos from *our* vantage point, a perspective "incurably rooted in the temporal point of view," is to live through the muddied prism of ignorance, pain, guilt, and all of the contingencies of mundane life. Phenomenologically speaking, the pristine unity of the mystics and idealists shares nothing in common with everyday experience; morally speaking, it negates and even insults the difficulties and limitations which beset the human condition. The Absolute of monistic pantheism turns out, paradoxically, to be every bit as foreign to us as the God of Calvinism.[12]

Toward the end of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James depicts our awareness as continuous with a wider sea of consciousness, a transpersonal Mind whose concrete effects on our personal life are noted by all of the world's faiths. The pluralistic pantheism of the Hibbert lectures grounds this picture upon a deeper ontology. This includes a *pansychism,* influenced by Gustav Fechner, wherein all of nature is understood as possessing a degree of consciousness. In his attempt to account for the full range of human experience, James sought to reconcile the facts of spiritual intuition—the sense of our immersion within an immanent and spiritual reality—with his usual concern to preserve the integrity of lived experience and moral purpose. His strategy is to postulate the existence of a superhuman consciousness which, though far more extensive than our own, possesses "an external environment, and consequently is finite."[13]

As one force among many in the cosmos—including, possibly, other deities—the superhuman consciousness is itself faced with issues to surmount and problems to overcome. In this fashion, one can feel the divine presence surging through his or her awareness, and yet be compelled to struggle against evil; one can refer agreeably to Emerson's description of becoming an invisible eyeball in *Nature*, and yet not deny the existence of the mundane realm. Finally, dwelling within the heart of an unfinished and precarious cosmos, this is a deity for whom human beings are partners instead of mere subjects. Our actions and decisions *add* something to the universe.

[11] Ibid, p. 34.

[12] Ibid, pp. 38–40.

[13] Ibid, p. 311.

In a relatively recent study of James, this reconciliation between mystical experience and moral purpose has been challenged. In *The Divided Self of William James*, Richard Gale argues that James's thought faces two *aporias* or inconsistencies. First, there is the clash between the *passive* self which seeks blissful union with the sacred, and a morally *active* self which engages in a perpetual struggle against evil. Even if God, being finite, possesses an environment and is set off by other forces or deities, mystics aim to transcend their private will in order to identify with this larger and supernatural entity. The will is to be either nullified or affirmed; one cannot have it both ways at once.[14] A second and far more intractable clash, according to Gale, is between the respective worlds inhabited by each self. The morally active self is linked to James's notion of Ontological Relativism (as labeled by Gale), the "metadoctrine" wherein our perspectives on reality are mediated by the use of concepts and are relative to a particular person at a particular time. By contrast, the metaphysical claims of the mystics are non-relative intuitions into the very heart of things, direct and unqualified revelations of the real.

At one point Gale admits that the clash between the mystical and moral selves, the first aporia in the thought of James, has been exaggerated. Perhaps, he suggests, passive immersion in the divine is a kind of rest and recuperation after which the self is then able to devote more energy to the ethical life. Gale here approvingly quotes Andrew Reck: "Refueled by relating to the divine, the individual is, in James's account, readied to cope once again with the arduous moral tasks of human existence."[15] There is ample support for this interpretation in James's work. In the *Varieties* for instance, James argues that mystical experience can kindle and animate the moral quest (he quotes Saint Theresa of Avila, for instance, on how ecstasy leaves one "admirably disposed for action").[16]

There is yet another issue concerning the tension between the mystical and moral selves in James's thought, one far more integral to the religious life and by no means mollified by the rest and recuperation thesis of Gale and Reck. True faith, for Paul Tillich, is aptly defined as the whole-hearted devotion to "the object of our ultimate concern."[17] Contemplatives East and West do not seek absorption in the god-head primarily for the feeling of ecstasy it brings, nor solely for a respite from the vicissitudes and contingencies of life. Rather, the greatest attraction of mysticism is the possibility of uniting oneself with the core of all meaning and value. In James's metaphysics however, god, being one force among many, is *itself* involved in a struggle for the good—an aim toward which morally awakened human beings are also directed. Even in the rest and recuperation model, the ethical self does not pine for God in any final sense, since unity with the deity is but a pit-stop for a renewed

[14] Gale also points out the difficulties of how one mind can be morally autonomous while being a part of another, broader consciousness. See Gale (1999), *The Divided Self of William James*, pp. 271 and 304.

[15] Ibid, p. 312. Gale of course reaffirms that this synthesis fails to solve the second aporia between the Ontological Relativism of the moral self and the non-relative reality claims of the mystics.

[16] James (1958), *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 318.

[17] See, for instance, Tillich (1957), *Dynamics of Faith*.

engagement with evil. The ethical self seeks not God, but what God seeks. Thus, the superhuman consciousness of James's religious philosophy is merely an object of *relative* concern. It is a means to another end, and not quite the supernal goal of human existence which has ignited the hearts of the devout for centuries. All of this may seem trivial to professional theologians and philosophers seeking to harmonize different perspectives. But this would be no consolation for James, who, after all, not only sought to capture the authentic and defining character of spiritual experiences, but claimed his pluralistic and finite theism to reflect the true religious sensibilities of the common people.[18]

Can James's theological perspective overcome its problems? Perhaps another proponent of a finite theism, a philosopher profoundly influenced by James, can point us in the right direction.

In *Process and Reality* Alfred North Whitehead argues for a deity with persuasive as opposed to coercive power; a being who cannot force its will upon the living events or "actual occasions" which constitute reality. In Whitehead's theodicy, humans work with the divine in order to enhance the harmony and aesthetic intensity of the universe. But our moral efforts are not merely *with* God, while passing him for some other purpose. According to Whitehead's dipolar theism, the "primordial" aspect of God grounds the possibilities which structure the universe while the "consequent" part inherits each and every stage of its development. Including and preserving the memory of every actual occasion within its everlasting nature, the deity is therefore the beneficiary of our collective moral striving. Alternatively stated, our good deeds continually enrich the inner life and being of God. Here is a divine reality which, though finite, is simultaneously the object of *both* our spiritual and ethical vocations.

In "Is Life Worth Living?" James likewise suggests the existence of a deity who draws sustenance from our beliefs and actions. He goes as far as to depict the expansion of God as a vindication of the "sweat and blood and tragedy of this life."[19] According to the overall tenor of James's mature philosophy however, the foremost endeavor of the moral self is not to perfect the deity, but to assist God in amending the universe. In rushing to wrestle with the loose ends and hazards of the cosmos, the corners of the universe lying outside of God's domain, the aspiration of the ethical self diverges from the need of the mystic to bask within the divine presence. In this context, the peace of the contemplative, even if an essential part of the story, is of auxiliary importance for the urgency of the moralist.

Whitehead defines metaphysics, or "speculative philosophy," as the fashioning of a set of categories through which to interpret the full range of human experience.[20] He argues that any philosophical generalization weaned from experience should not only be logically compatible with the rest of our generalizations, but must be revisable in light of our future experiences. In holding *all* insights as equally

[18] See James (1958), *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* p. 396.

[19] James (1956), *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, p. 61.

[20] Whitehead (1978), *Process and Reality*, p. 3.

tentative—religious, scientific, and aesthetic alike—the thought of Whitehead is less afflicted by the second aporia perceived by Gale in the work of James. Of course, this can never placate the contemplative who typically feels as if his or her knowledge of the ultimate reality is beyond all doubt. But this is of little consequence for Whitehead, who famously equates dogmatism and "finality of statement" with folly.[21] Whitehead's position still runs afoul of Gale's contention that to treat mystical experiences as mere hypotheses is to rob them of their "salvific consequences."[22] But this is to assume that it is the aura of infallibility alone which grants a religious experience its potency and meaning. It is telling that Whitehead's philosophy of organism, with its flat rejection of "axiomatic certainties" and absolute knowledge-claims, continues to speak to the most integral moods and instincts found within every major faith-community.[23]

In his discussion of "Mysticism" in *The Varieties*, James repeatedly asserts that the non-contemplative is under no obligation to accept the declarations of the mystic.[24] That James occasionally takes the *noetic* or revelatory character of mysticism quite seriously however is evidenced by his last published article, "A Pluralistic Mystic." Referring to the intuitions of Benjamin Paul Blood, a friend and fellow experimenter in nitrous oxide, James expresses genuine relief that his pluralism has gained "the kind of support which mystical corroboration may confer."[25] No longer, James triumphantly explains, does the monist have a choke-hold on this most compelling form of human feeling and cognition.

It is frequently claimed that Whitehead unpacks and systematizes many of James's most novel contributions to philosophy.[26] One of the more Jamesian features of Whitehead's mature thought is the important role given to experience as a testing ground for even our most rarefied concepts.[27] Although Whitehead pushes the ideas of James into further consistency, for both philosophers a general condition for

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[21] Ibid, p. XIV.

[22] Gale (1999), *The Divided Self of William James*, pp. 309–310. Gale also states that religious experiences can never become "working hypotheses" because they cannot be translated into full propositions (complete with a specific person, a time…etc). He further argues that moral agents require more than hypotheses upon which to base their actions. To fully assess Gale's take on these important matters requires a study beyond the scope of the present essay.

[23] The quote is located in Whitehead (1978), *Process and Reality*, p. 13. As for the relevance of Whitehead for different theological and religious systems, a good place to start is David Ray Griffin's *Deep Religious Pluralism* (2005).

[24] See James (1958), *Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 325–328.

[25] James (1978), "A Pluralistic Mystic" is found in *Essays in Philosophy*.

[26] For instance, John Cobb Jr. claims that Whitehead "accepts and adopts many of James's key insights, and then goes on to develop them in rich and rigorous detail." See Cobb (1993), *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy*, p. 166.

[27] In Whitehead (1978), *Process and Reality*, Whitehead compares "the true method of discovery" to the movements of an airplane. When conducted properly, abstract thought both takes off, and lands, in the particulars of experience (p. 5). In James (1996c), *Some Problems of Philosophy*, James states that "Perception prompts our thought, and thought in turn enriches our perception" (p. 108).

accepting a concept is that it serves to deepen and broaden our perception of the world. In *Some Problems of Philosophy*, James explains that all higher-order abstractions, including the sciences, are but elaborate schemes of such ideas; working models designed to steer us through the flux of experience. James's finite god, a notion continually refined throughout his philosophical career, is one such scheme. It is a model intended not only to illuminate our perception, but to intensify our sense of moral direction.

Despite publishing a volume of his father's writings, James never did make good on his promise to Henry James Sr. The son's defiance of Absolutism was never harmonized with the man who perceived the self to be a pernicious illusion. While the elder James rejected the title of "pantheism" for his theology, William thought the term more than apt (intending it, of course, in the monistic sense), and describes his father's thought as one wherein God "is the sole positive substance in the universe, all else being nothingness."[28]

To be fair, James does note the presence of a synthesis of sorts in the writing of his father, a theological position "monistic enough to satisfy the philosopher, and yet warm and living and dramatic enough to speak to the heart of the common pluralistic man."[29] Regardless, James explains that a philosophical pluralism, one fashioned consciously and "hardened by reflection," is set against monisms of *all* kinds.[30] This includes any ontology which places all power in the hands of a single principle.[31] James utilizes one effective way to maintain a spiritual worldview while avoiding such a hegemonic and centralized cosmology: To argue for a god limited in scope and influence.

The cogency and appeal of this brand of theism was not lost upon many subsequent theological currents. From the "process panentheism" of Whitehead's intellectual descendents, to Open Theism with its denial of a deity who can foresee the future, the doctrine of a finite god remains a "live" theological option—to quote *The Will to Believe*.[32]

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[28] James (1885), Introduction to *The Literary Remains of the Late Henry James*, p. 19.

[29] Ibid, p. 115.

[30] Ibid, p. 116.

[31] The metaphysics of James Sr. is not a "*bald* monism," states William, "yet it makes of God the one and only *active* principle; and that is practically all that monism demands."

[32] James (1956), *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, p. 3.

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