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William James and His Individual Crisis

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I. Introduction

Students of William James have long commented on how critical periods of his life compelled crucial developments in his philosophical thought. Ralph Barton Perry was the first to capitalize upon this recognition, with his examination of how James's depression resulted in a very practical and highly personalized belief in the necessity of action as the only viable response to the Darwinian "process of the universe" (Perry 1: 322). Charlene Seigfried posits that, in addition to this seminal event, James likely faced two other crises. In 1895, he turned from psychological studies to specifically philosophical issues (William James's Radical Reconstruction 12). In 1908-1909, these endeavors forced him to "give up 'intellectualistic logic'" entirely and depend on a reconstructed "rational strand" in order to answer the old question (first posed in The Principles of Psychology) of how many consciousnesses can be at the same time one consciousness (13).

Such insights have enriched and enlivened James studies, but the generalized conclusion they indicate—that James's philosophy was an intensely lived but largely successful experience—deserves reevaluation. The first part of this judgment is accurate; the second is far less so. James's first crisis was without doubt a lonely experience precipitated by questions of his responsibility to society and his place among others' lives (Perry 1: 322). That he emerged from his black night of the soul fairly unscathed and with a clear sense of his relationship to his world is not nearly as certain. The acceptance of a teaching post at Harvard could not so easily resolve the questions he was asking.

I intend to show how James's career defies more than it supports what might be called Perry's "catastrophic" interpretation of his subject. This is not to deny the strength of James's feeling or the depth of his involvement in his own investigations. Indeed, if a crisis may be said to last nearly thirty years, then James suffered a crisis of astounding proportions. James's thought, however, displays a remarkable continuity from 1870 (when he first came to grips with his private, nihilistic demons) to near the end of the nineteenth century (when he began developing the implications of what would become pluralism and radical empiricism). Throughout these years, James returned time and again to the same subjects of the individual, the value of individual action, and the possibility of individual agency in an evolutionary account of development. This *leitmotif* is evident not only in the journal entries of 1870, but as well in his early publications, such as "The Sentiment of Rationality" (1879 and 1897) and "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment" (1880), and in the memorial address he delivered in 1897 to commemorate the actions of the first African-American combat regiment, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry.

A fair portion of James's career, then, is bounded on the one end by individual questions such as those which led to his appointment at Harvard and on the other by questions of the individual such as those which (most famously) resulted in the publication of The Principles of Psychology. Instead of signaling the end of a second crisis, the late nineteenth century appears to mark the end of a major phase through which one theme runs. What at first glance seem to be two distinct events in James's life—the depression which provoked his choice of a profession and the belated attraction to specifically philosophical issues—proves on second sight to be an extensive and

extended attempt at a coherent defense of individual agency. He would never quite abandon re-statements of individual efficacy, but it is no minor matter that his work after 1900 took a substantially different direction.

There is no doubt that, throughout the period from 1870 to 1900, James construed the individual in various and complex ways. This ambiguity, in fact, does much to account for the neat division of his career into distinct segments, each of which was signaled by a putative crisis. These apparently contradictory senses of the individual, however, reflect what William Gavin identifies as the “fragility” of the Jamesian self. In James’s mind, the individual is always having to make choices that are “forced, living, and momentous” (Gavin 129-30). These choices may well destroy the individual, but made rightly, they may as well cumulatively add to the sum of an individual’s worth. It is these possible outcomes (but especially an anxiety of the former) that provide a consistent tenor and rhetorical tone to James’s early work, and that allow recognition of a continuous strand through his texts of this time despite his abundant diversity of interests.¹ As Gavin states, though without identifying chronology, “James’s activity changes from ‘existential’ to ‘textual,’ that is, [from searching for the conditions of effective action] to writing as protest against inevitability” (130). The consistent urgency with which James defended the importance and ultimate efficacy of individual action during the first thirty years of his professional career suggests that this time marks

¹ Karen Halttunen argues persuasively that this fragility of the Jamesian self is fictively expressed in his brother’s “The Turn of the Screw” (479).

the period of his “existential” or “active,” as opposed to “textual,” interest in the individual.

At rare moments, but most visibly in James’s journal entries of the 1870s, the individual simply appears to foreshadow the agent who exercises the will to believe. This strategy partly derived from James’s sublimated anxiety that the totality of experience might not after all provide “sufficient grounds for belief.” His concern on this point would lead directly to his philosophical attempts to identify the foundation which would secure meaning and would ultimately result in his fallback onto a position of faith (Radical Reconstruction 28-9), but at first the free choice to repudiate nihilism seems to have simply been the motivating force that propelled James into a life of investigation.²

More effectively, and at greater length especially in his early works, James celebrated the findings of Darwin as a vindication of individuality. He often and well employed the British naturalist against those who had already applied the theory of

² Ross Posnock argues that James’s apologia for the individual constitutes “an anxious retreat from the modern industrial order” (109). While James clearly distrusted much of the “modern” world, including its nationalistic jingoism and its mechanistic attitudes, his critical examination of “The Sentiment of Rationality” and his vigorous protest against the Spanish-American War evince little of what has come to be called an “anxiety of the individual.” James, as will be seen, was very much a product of his time, but, as Seigfried suggests, his concerns seem more to have emerged from his investigations into the implications of his own philosophical positions than from some more vague “spirit of the times.”

evolution in unwarranted ways (112). James's earliest forays into philosophy, "The Sentiment of Rationality" (1879) and "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment" (1880), are undisguised assaults on the frame of mind that leads to Spencerian social evolution. Another essay, again using the title "The Sentiment of Rationality" and published in The Will to Believe (1897), in fact expanded on the 1879 article and made explicit the connection between the effective action of individuals and the tyrannical passion for rational explanation.³

Finally, James daily confronted and daily attempted to ignore the threat posed to his faith in the individual by the spectacular failures of his brother, Garth Wilkinson, who had been first a war hero, then an unsuccessful land speculator, and at last an undistinguished accountant-partner in an engineering firm. Much as a more resolute Lambert Strether might have, Garth had died in 1883 under a cloud of familial disapproval as much for making a bad "match" as for his demonstrated economic ineptitude. As with his proclivity for belief, William James was only dimly aware of how

³ The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (1897) is a veritable gold-mine for any topic concerning the individual in James. Since I am here attempting to show that a common concern runs throughout the first thirty years of his professional career, the examples that I have selected at least as well as those I have overlooked (which, in The Will to Believe, includes such provocatively titled works as "The Importance of Individuals" and "Is Life Worth Living?" and the revised and re-titled "Great Men, Great Thoughts and the Environment") serve to show the continuity of James's thought during these years.

much of a dilemma Garth represented to his own philosophy of the individual.⁴ His letters to his brother are usually curt and always superficial, although in correspondence with other family members, William more readily expresses the complex association of feelings Garth evoked, including admiration, envy, and scorn.

In one especially remarkable public instance, however, James confronted the self-destructive impulse that seemed undeniably present in his brother and at times in humanity as a whole. This tendency perpetually mystified the public intellectual from Harvard and always brought into sharp question his own existential requirement that individual action continue to possess some morally meaningful purpose. At the 1897 dedication of the Augustus St. Gaudens' monument to the truly heroic but fatally conceived attack of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment on Battery Wagner, South Carolina in 1863, in which Garth had been critically wounded, James was simultaneously able, first, to lay uneasily to rest his brother's unsuccessful (and, so cosmologically inconsequential) life and, second, to forge a place in his own scheme of things for the massive failure and the utterly insignificant act by filtering his brother and those like him through the idealized figure of Robert Gould Shaw. James took the opportunity to use the historical facts of the assault to raise on a larger scale the moral and social quandaries that Garth had represented. He was even able to advance some part of Garth's memory in the guise of the regiment as a monument to greatness, though this move could not be

⁴ It is impossible to read either William or Henry James for long without being struck by their apparent inability to long engage in personally self-reflective thought.

made without some trepidation, primarily because of the passivism that James developed during the war-years.

Within the context of this period of James's own life, it is important to note that the months immediately preceding the address at the St. Gaudens' memorial had been momentous ones. In 1890, he had published the long-delayed The Principles of Psychology. More recently and more regularly since 1895, he had been leaving behind his empirical investigations of the phenomenological individual that had prompted his course in psychology and had instead been developing the pragmatic implications of his theory (Radical Reconstruction 12). In addition, the publication of The Will to Believe in the same year as the dedication of the monument to the 54th Massachusetts, provided a mature and full expression to his early confident assertions of individual agency. The complementary versions of "The Sentiment of Rationality" evince a completion of the thought that was barely formed in 1879. The uncharacteristic "Robert Gould Shaw" and the previously published apologies for the individual thus can feasibly be read as two aspects of one phenomenon. The 1897 speech is the private James more publicly epitomized in The Principles and The Will to Believe, but the effect of both is the same: to announce an end to one stage of James's pilgrimage, and to herald another. The modern James, concentrating on the crisis of the individual, was being eclipsed by

another, post-modern James who was (at least consciously) more intrigued by chaos and all of its possibilities than by positivism and its consequences.⁵

II. The Vastations of the Father

The depression suffered by William James in 1870 is so obvious a fact of his life that, like the self-evident everywhere, the unique manifestations of the agony he suffered are easily obscured beneath the summary diagnosis which contains them. Perry's breezy assertion that James's difficulties were "pathological" in origin is not inaccurate, but it is misleading to the extent that it encourages overlooking the moral philosophical issues with which James was grappling. Certainly, it is noteworthy that James should have been among the first moderns afflicted with one of the common diseases of modernism, but what is more striking is that his descent into darkness was provoked by the question of whether or not the individual human possessed worth in a morally blind universe. The recurrence of this topic throughout the first months of 1870 presents a credible reason for suggesting that philosophy proved the reason for as well as the restorative to James's "soul-sickness" (Perry 1: 323-24).

In order to place the events of 1870 in their properly expanded perspective, it is necessary to note among other things (and without questioning the sincerity of James) that he was very much the son of a father who had experienced a similar, but far more

⁵ For more on James's theory of relations, see Seigfried's study, Chaos and Context: A Study in William James (1978), and the Winterthur Seminar essays edited and collected by Walter Corti in The Philosophy of William James (1976).

devastating period of depression. Although Henry, Senior, subsequently referred to his incapacitating horror at Windsor in 1844 as a Swedenborgian “vastation,” his terrified paralysis is religious only in the sense that it assumes the metaphorical cloak of depravity. In contrast with William, what is notable of his Father’s experience is that the left hand of darkness seems still ready to tighten its grip even thirty-five years later when Henry recalls the moment. One glorious May, he was suddenly and inexplicably struck “by a perfectly insane and abject terror.” It was as if, he remembered, there were “some damnèd shape squatting invisible to me within the precincts of the room, and raying out from his fetid personality influences fatal to life” (McDermott 3).

Clearly, James inherited from his father a tendency toward what was still at that time referred to as “melancholia,” and it is as clearly impossible, therefore, to describe the subsequent depression of the son entirely in terms of mimicry. The jottings of James during the crucial months of 1870, however, reveal little incapacitation of the sort suffered by his father. These tantalizing passages little more reflect a “desperate neurasthenic condition” (Perry 1: 322). They are apparently, rather, the expressions of a deeply felt philosophical condition and in this they echo the intensely personalized rhetoric of Henry, Senior more than they do his mental agony. Henry had established the model for his son by employing his private vastation as exemplary of social history in “Socialism and Civilization” (Lewis 61). In a more immediate, but not dissimilar fashion, William examines the personal consequences of prevailing philosophical and social themes in his diary entries of 1870. Later, in The Varieties of Religious Experience, he would creatively revise his experience in precisely the same manner as his father (Perry 1: 322).

On February 1, 1870, James simply recorded that on that same day he had “about touched bottom,” but even at this date the cause of his despair was patently philosophical: “shall I *frankly* throw the moral business overboard,” or “shall I follow it” for its own sake, rejecting moral behavior derived from “utilitarian ends” (1: 322). The young, rather directionless graduate was groping toward formulating a response to the philosophical nihilism then particularly prevalent among his generation, as Turgenev, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky in other countries demonstrated (Radical Reconstruction 28). In a loose leafed entry that seems to date from the same period as the February entry, James more succinctly than they expressed the root of all this nihilistic despair. Is it possible, James demanded of the cosmos, “so to sympathize with *the total process of the universe* as to heartily assent to the evil that seems inherent in its details” (Perry 1: 322; emphasis added)?

Here, as throughout this major phase of his life, James concludes that if a man—and the characteristics that contribute to successful individual agency are always very male traits for James—is to lead a moral life, then the answer to this question is critical. Only when an individual has “vigor of will enough to look the universal death in the face without blinking” can he resist “the brute force” of the cosmos. The ‘vigorous will’ that makes effective resistance to the brutal process of the universe possible is recast two months later as Renouvier’s “free will” whereby the individual makes an ‘existential choice’ for one manner of acting over another (1: 323). This last formulation will mutate and yet remain constantly identifiable throughout James’s texts and will reach its fullest expression in the will to believe. What was likely more critical to James at this point was that free will served as the instrument first conceived in February. With it, he broke the

chain of reasoning which held that the “total process of the universe” entailed not only evil but blind disregard. Free will is thus a *vigorous* denial of the proposition that such a process negates the moral value of individual action and the events of April confirmed those of February, even if they did not bring an end to them. In the intervening month, James’s thought had moved forward naturally although of course not equably. As H. S. Thayer remarks, the diary entries of the 1870s might not reflect the substance of pragmatism, but they do disclose its “central motives and circumstances in . . . [its] making” (134). Still it is clear that if James had reached some sort of resolution (and he had), the answers were only contingent and far from proving themselves philosophically viable.

III. The Sentiment of Great Men

James’s first publications evince a desire to share the insight he had achieved with a like minded audience, but before he could do this he had to respond to what he saw as its most philosophically dangerous alternative: the evolutionary philosophy of Herbert Spencer. For this reason, James’s first texts are explicitly polemical and forthrightly aimed at different aspects of Spencer’s thought. As early as 1878, James had taken Spencer to task in a ponderously but accurately entitled essay, “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence.” In this article which had appeared in the January issue of the Journal of Speculative Philosophy, James showed that Spencer’s materialist definition of mental activity did not and could not explain the “entire process of mental evolution” (“Remarks” 8). Any accurate account of evolution would include a

description of how we developed the ability to form judgments as well as one of how we perfected the skill of discrimination.

James's demonstration of this fact either did not satisfy him, or he concluded that it would not satisfy his audience, because in subsequent crucial works during the period 1878-1897, James returned to expand upon his initial criticism. In the 1879 "The Sentiment of Rationality," he argued that the simplicity in Spencer's thought that led to his correspondence theory of mental activity reflected a broader and not uncommon philosophical condition. In the wider-issued "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment," James continued his objection to Spencer's unwarranted simplification and argued for the contrary position: that Darwinian theory emphasized not a mechanism which drove species development but the accidental and distinctly individual variation which then found a favorable place in the environment.

"The Sentiment of Rationality" that appeared in the July 1879 issue of Mind is a thorough if not wholly satisfying proof that the magisterial labor of philosophy, whether on the grand, unifying scale of metaphysics or the finely detailed level of empiricism, depends on other than rational foundations. An effective presentation of this argument would allow James to subsequently show that the philosophical account was not necessarily definitive and final. The demonstration undertaken by James turned on the single initial premise that philosophical rationality constituted a quest for a ruling "conception" or "teleological instrument" ("Sentiment of Rationality" [1879] 319).

If this proposition was valid, the history of philosophy could be written as a straightforward attempt to find the "right" guiding conceptions. To this end, philosophy was also motivated by and driven to answers that reduced "the manifold to simple form"

(320). As Spencer had in the previous article, in this text he provided the typical example of where such a reductive mania could lead. It is suggestive of James's rapid philosophical progress that by this time, Hegel's rejection of the "principle of contradiction" is also employed as another instance of the sentiment of rationality, but Spencer remains the primary target of his argument.

Alongside the reductivist drive which constitutes the main topic of this essay, James recognized a contending, "sister passion which in some minds—though they perhaps form the minority—is its rival. This is the passion for distinguishing; it is the impulse to be acquainted with the parts rather than to comprehend the whole" (322). The empirical interest in distinctions and analysis would draw more thorough criticism from James not too much later in his life. At this point, the dissecting mind served as much to indicate how the desire for simplicity must conveniently ignore a multitude of data in order to achieve its end.

Broadly understood, these sentiments together represented "the two great aesthetic needs of our logical nature, the need of unity and the need of clearness" (325). Philosophy, James vaguely hoped, would learn to balance these two needs. The pleas for compromise interspersed throughout this work mark it as the product of a still relatively inexperienced if not naïve philosopher, but there would never be any doubt in his own mind of the fundamental soundness of the guiding assumption. Philosophy's historical tendency toward simplification could only benefit from attending now and then to the pluralism of life rather than the monism of existence.

Empiricists could not deny (and James placed himself at this date in his life among the heirs of Hume) that necessary truths possessed an inward reasonableness that

discrete sensory phenomena do not. The “association” of “outward” appearance was “custom-bred,” just as Hume said (327). The “identification” of data as possessing of predicational attributes, however, itself exhibited the passion for simplification. As an example, James produced the seeming evolutionary definition of all parts of a flower as “modified leaves.” This description he showed to be the finally mathematical, and therefore necessarily true, but not very effectual classification of a flower’s parts as “later appendages of the axis” (328).

If an attributional identification of a sensory phenomena was to be other than tautological, therefore, it must serve some “practical” end. This further move was allowed by James’s contention that science proceeds by identifying certain classes with previously recognized associations of phenomena (329). When we have identified some being as, ‘tool-making,’ for instance, then we can conclude that all such beings display an ability to choose. James himself did not supply this step in his reasoning, but it is implicit in the example he chooses of prisms as distorting media which refract light toward the perpendicular.

What James provided in either case is the last move which allows us to sketch in even at this point his entire rational activity loop which he will announce in the second “Sentiment of Rationality.” An act may be called rational if it consists of a theory which produces some practice of association which results in an effective, i.e., further productive, action. Darwin’s theory is thereby warranted in that it provides its own pragmatic consequences. Spencer, in now pointed contrast, fails to move beyond the tautological phase of identification when he reduces sensation to a record on a “mental molecule” (336).

Social evolution, it becomes obvious, will not lead to any further systematic practice nor will it produce effective action leading to new associations. At best, it allows a “limited process” of reasoning. If useful at all, the philosophy of Spencer is worth advancing as one of the first instances how the desire for rationality can end in unwarranted assertions. If Spencer’s work epitomizes some more positive fact, it is that “the reduction of the phenomenal Chaos to rational form must stop at a certain point” (337). That *schwerpunkt* in the mind of James will always be the moment at which practice bears its most vital fruit.

James followed up on this conclusion in the next year with the publication of “Great Men, Great Thoughts and the Environment.” Darwinian thought, James showed Spencer in this article from the popular Atlantic Monthly, was far from making the individual an insignificant datum within a scientific theory. Rather, Darwin presupposed the criticality of the individual variation which attracted scientific attention precisely because it did not fit what had come before. This essay prefigures the future shape of Jamesian philosophy with its emphasis on scientific theory as indeterminate in its findings. It much more clearly reflects James’s dominant interest of the moment.

The discovery of individual efficacy which had precipitated James’s emergence from his initial depression was here granted scientific status. This argument had the dual value of at once countering Spencer’s philosophy and simultaneously offering an instance of how causal relationships are key in our understanding of experience. The latter subject would again provide the basis for James’s metaphysics of relations that continues to tantalize philosophers in its anticipation of contemporary thought (Chaos and Context 6), but James was more specifically concerned at this juncture with

accounting for how failure to recognize this same phenomena formed the basis of Spencerian philosophy. If James could at least describe how great societies could not develop without great men, then he had sufficient grounds to dispute the mechanistic models put forth by thinkers such as Spencer.

Otto von Bismarck provided James with startling proof of his thesis, as his intellectually impoverished Boston was pressed into service as an equally remarkable negative example. Bismarck was the necessary ingredient added to the German culture which allowed it to spring, Athena-like, from the addled head of Europe. The ferment of Boston, meanwhile, was wasted without the individual who, like Bismarck, gave the necessary but not sufficient “human material” an effective “form” (“Great Men” 446).

James, here as elsewhere, displays his own societal limitations. Beyond question, he “identifies” (to use his own term) greatness with the male gender and its manifestations. These traits of masculinity were the same as those which obligated James to strenuous displays of his own manhood, such as his trip to Brazil, and which led to much of his self-doubt, such as his introspective moods after the wounded Garth was brought home (Lewis 148). It is another indication of his maturing sense of self and of the crucial nature of this period in his life that by 1899 he could satirize Teddy Roosevelt’s praise of “The Strenuous Life” as so much masculine “crowing” that would have terrible cultural consequences (Perry 2: 310).

At the same time, James’s study of individual greatness remains an accurate estimation of Darwin’s theory and method. His cheerful acceptance of provisional knowledge and conviction of the reality of relations gave him the ability to refute Spencer in cogent and experiential ways. By using Darwin as an alternative case, James

reveals how Spencer commits the ‘productive fallacy’ in which a scientist attempts to describe how a phenomena is produced, a process which leads to the infinite regression noted by the ancient philosophers (444). Darwin’s model, in contrast, describes what leads to the *preservation* of one or more species-specific traits. Darwin does not study what chain of causation produced the ovum; he examines the ways in which it acts in its environment (445).

By the time he wrote the 1897 “The Sentiment of Rationality”—an essay that summarized the earlier text of the same name and to which he appended a portion of another article, “Rationality, Activity, and Faith”—James could return with confidence to his initial subject in order to round out the implications of individual agency. Without any doubt, he had moved beyond contending with Spencer. In the latter “Sentiment,” James barely touched on social evolution; he posited instead that the sentiment of repose, rest, or peace which motivates rationality also possessed a moral and practical dimension.

Practically, this sentiment serves an evolutionary end, much as an environment requires the presence of significant individuals in order for evolution to proceed. In the same fashion, our passion for certainty evinces an early necessity that we “banish uncertainty” by making *methodic* choices (“The Sentiment of Rationality” [1897] 68). Our deep-seated biological requirement to make distinctions implies simplification on a rational order, but the same need is integrated into investigation in ways only intimated in the 1879 “Sentiment.”

This experimental method will become part and parcel of pragmatism, but it is nowhere more evident than at this point in the later essay that pragmatism cannot easily be examined in isolation as a method of investigation or as a way of talking about

meaning or truth. In moral terms made explicit by James in this article, the practical and methodological organization of experience into distinct events makes empirical explanation in particular and rational in thought in general subject to intersubjective agreement. What a community of investigators agree to, after all, is that they reach common conclusions by means of the same conceptual instrument. In Pragmatism, James will emphasize by means of this proposition how we habitually cling to our current truths and so perforce make new phenomenal facts “compatible with ‘the whole body of other truths already in our possession’” (Thayer 149). In 1897, it leads him to the more immediate observation that the sentiment of rationality is in part aesthetic, as our preference for one explanation when faced with two equally acceptable accounts demonstrates (“The Sentiment of Rationality” [1897] 66).

Due to this quality of subjective interest which dictates intersubjective concurrence, the individual can plainly and easily wreck any rational system by bluntly denying its ruling aesthetic passion, whether it be for simplification or complexity. Surprisingly, at this juncture where the individual attains her greatest significance, James reduces that impact to its most concise form in a tantalizing display of rationality’s method. By this formulation, the rational explanation or, more broadly, the “the total matter of philosophic propositions” (“M”) is never complete unless it includes the ability to infinitely add individual agents (“x”) to the sum of such knowledge. The solution to the philosophic equation of “M + x,” then, is that philosophy must at least potentially comprehend its own negation in the manner of Arnold’s “Aberglaube” or “but-belief” (75) or, in Jamesian terms of the individual, by comprehending the personal albeit “infinitesimal . . . component” (81).

This insight is what allows James to begin his renovation of the philosophical house. James side-steps the “schools” of idealism and materialism by nullifying their key claims. He shows how all philosophical traditions (or world views) that preach an absolute reality are not at the very last oppressive or even terribly evil. They are, rather, “indeterminate, susceptible of forming part of a thoroughgoing pessimism on the one hand, or of a meliorism, a moral (as distinguished from a sensual) optimism on the other. All depends on the character of the *personal contribution* ‘x’” (84; emphasis added). By emphasizing this critical contribution of “x” to “experience,” James evades both the paradoxes of (1) determinism and (2) positivist science. If experience really is encountered as an intermediate phenomena, as James’s early friend, C. S. Peirce, particularly noted, then it matters not whether “M + x” is fixed or free: it is whichever we choose. Simultaneously, the equation rejects the notion that truth equates to its manner of experimental verification as even early positivists such as Peirce had held. James asserts, rather, that any individual “belief [even an aberglaupe] creates its [own] verification” (84).

There is, as a consequence, no last goal toward which human inquiry tends, and there can therefore be no final word on the importance of the individual in an ostensibly evolutionary process. Individuals do not deduce from some hypothesis “an experimental action ‘x’” which is added to the “facts ‘M’ already existing.” Rather, they “corroborate” some action with some experiment (that is, they conduct experimentation because of some desire). If this corroborative element is attended to at all, it will follow that a “theory will be reversed by nothing that later turns up as . . . action’s fruit” (86). If we may act in any way, we may at will refute all the truths marshaled against us.

The obvious result is threefold. First, we need never fear the deadening "anesthesia" of any absolute or any totality. No external world will cause or "justify a conclusion in advance of my action." The "evidence will not be 'in'" until the "last man has had his say and contributed his share" (87). Second, we are never in a position from which we may trumpet a truth. Our own realities are, at least in part, uniquely possessed and professed. Our truths are necessarily fallible, to use Peircean terms. Still, insofar as addition is an infinite process by which new sums are eternally created we have not only a right, but a duty according to James to join a swelling chorus of human affirmation. Third, rational explanations of whatever type, but especially scientific ones, must find immediately experiential ways of justifying themselves.

Rather than humanity adapting to reason, in sum, reason must respond to human life and take into account its own provisional nature. Explanatory systems are what they are: reflections of a biological compulsion. Moreover, reason can only progress beyond this base level of brute fact by the application of experimental ends which serve clear purposes. With these recognitions, James was ready to follow the two strands of his nascent philosophy into pluralism and radical empiricism. He had more generally, if quietly, announced the end of his philosophical apprenticeship and his readiness to move beyond the isolated individual as a discrete subject of investigation.

IV. The Cash Value of Failure

Before he moved on to other fields, James said a last goodbye to the occupations of his youth in the memorial speech, "Robert Gould Shaw." In this too infrequently studied address, he reiterated his not inappreciable insights of the preceding thirty years

and introduced one of the clear statements of moral philosophy that are rare enough in James's corpus to have provoked from Abraham Edel the observation that James always leaves us with "much less [of a moral philosophy] than we need or hope" (Corti 245). Although Edel's focus is on the exceptional discussion of the subject in "The Moral Philosophy and the Moral Life" (an essay again contained in The Will to Believe), the same motif of moral existence is ostensible in the posthumously published "Robert Gould Shaw." In the latter text, however, James calibrated his moral philosophical instrument by means of the same questions that had preoccupied him in 1870. Of what worth is it, he asked in both cases, if people cast their experiential lots with their moral lives only to have that choice nullified by other events?

"Robert Gould Shaw" is especially important, too, because the occasion of the memorialization of the 54th Massachusetts would have compelled William to confront the most vivid exception possible to his faith in the efficacy of individual action. William had proven his rhetorical point well in the various versions of "The Sentiment of Rationality" and "Great Men," but in very personal ways the spectacular failure of his brother in business and his apparent poor "match" threatened to invalidate both Garth's courage at Battery Wagner and William's own boundless confidence in the individual. The dedication, in short, allowed William to find a place for failure on an epic as well as personal scale in his evolutionary cosmology. At the unveiling of St. Gaudens memorial, James put what Henry would call the "dead past" to a final rest.

William achieved this remarkable resolution by recasting the fact of unrealized possibility as a differently valued (and differently figured) version of experience. The measure of success was not, he asserted, military or cultural or personal accomplishment.

It was not even evaluated by “historical significance . . . [,] material magnitude, nor by its immediate success” (“Robert Gould Shaw” 39). Instead, at least one warranted measure of moral value was the degree to which an individual act bears “witness to the brotherhood of man” (54).

By this measure of quiet heroism—James praised the memorial as the first “soldier’s” monument to “comparatively undistinguished men” (42)—the largely inconsequential life of his brother gained a resounding worth. As crucially, William’s passivism and therefore his own practical inconsequentiality during the struggle were granted a fortuitous credence. By this light, the war was a cultural tragedy that could have been averted. Even the eventual success of the union cause was no final cause for celebration. “Democracy,” James warned, “is still upon its trial” (60). The individual act, in other words, gains moral credence by its democratic intent rather than its effect.

That James employed the figure of Robert Gould Shaw in this context, as an example of the value of a failed but still morally meaningful action, is demonstrated by his decision to eschew historical rules by which the bravery of Shaw and his regiment could be measured (39). Not only was their assault on Battery Wagner a tactical defeat, it should never have been required in the first place. If James was to make his point to any more than the immediate acquaintances of Shaw, however, the situation of the Commander of the 54th must be made to exemplify all who had found themselves similarly situated (such as Garth and the valiant soldiers Shaw commanded, as well as the less conspicuous heroes such as William) in the belated struggle for an expanded democracy.

In his address, then, James consistently and clearly used Shaw as an exemplary and even allegorized soldier. The romanticized description of Shaw could as easily be that of his own brother, as James imagines Shaw sitting “on horseback . . . , the blue-eyed child of fortune, upon whose happy youth every divinity had smiled” (40). Shaw, like Garth and William and Henry and the even more tragic brother, Robert, was obviously born with a moral duty to perform.

But the figure of Shaw stood as a sign to other than the distinctly privileged: “What Shaw and his comrades represented was that in such an emergency Americans of all complexions and conditions could go forth like brothers” in order to insure that faith in democratic efforts “shall not become a failure on earth” (43). As a broader image of moral value, Shaw was an example “for all time, an inciter to similarly unselfish public deeds” (44). James did not wish to strip the 54th of its valor, but he did wish to distinguish “the moral service” of their act “from the fortitude” they displayed, and so, as he concluded his address, he directed his audience to examine the actions of their friends and of themselves in the light of what Shaw had shown. “You,” he directed them, “think of many as I speak of one” (59). By this means, they could evaluate the moral worth of their own lives and deeds even through the lens of those who had been overwhelmed by circumstance.

V. Conclusion

Because James displayed such continuity and consistency in his thought during the years 1870-1897, it should come as no surprise that he would now and then return to the same issues. As previously observed, however, the individual as such ceased to be a

significant subject in its own right after 1900. It is instructive to note in closing, therefore, some of the ways in which the individual was recast in his later work.

In Essays in Radical Empiricism (posthumously published in 1912), for instance, James glanced back at his work on The Principles. His early endeavors, he observed in a footnote of the later text, had opposed the individual to the environment in an attempt to examine how an “activity deserved the name of ‘ours’” (170). He could have made the same point of most of his investigations prior to 1900, including “The Sentiment of Rationality” and “Great Men” and “Robert Gould Shaw,” for the same dualistic presumption underwrote these. In all of them, the individual was similarly and pointedly distinguished from the surrounding situation.

By contrast, Radical Empiricism placed the individual within a larger, perspectival framework. Here, there was no neat division between the “self” and the “world.” Instead, the individual was “the storm centre, the origin of co-ordinates, the constant place of stress” already *within* a preexistent, but effectively neutral, environment where the “word ‘I’ . . . is primarily a noun of position, just like ‘this’ and ‘here’” (170).

It is important to recognize that James did not surrender in later life any of the individual empowerment he had so painfully achieved. He saw “no inconsistency whatever in defending, on the one hand, ‘my’ activities as unique and opposed to those of outer nature” and, on the other, of examining the individual *in situ* rather than in isolation (171). What his new investigations were leading him to, rather, was the insight that our environment is made at least as much as it is given. He was leaving behind the ostensibly “modern” world into which he had been born, where the individual had been engaged in

a struggle for existence. He was now fashioning a new and more integrated sense of self which suggested a negotiated existence, rather than a combative one.

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