

WILLIAM JAMES, HIS LIFE AND THEORY ON THE WILL

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Of all the books and periodicals that I have read on the life and philosophy of William James, they all underlined, capitalized, and emphasized this one fact; he was the most renowned and representative of the thinkers of America. Before starting my research work on William James I had never heard or seen his name. Although I knew nothing about William James, I found myself prejudiced against him. Having completed my research work I have changed my attitude towards this pioneer thinker of America. Even though he was wrong in many of his theories, I have great respect for him as an American writer, physiologist, psychologist, and philosopher.

William James was born in New York City, at the Astor House, to Henry James and his wife Mary on January 11, 1842. A year later Henry James, jr. was born, who was followed by Wilkinson, Robertson, and Alice James. William and Henry were quite close during their early years, especially during their early schooling. "Henry became the distinguished author of novels proclaimed for their psychological subtlety and their refinement of style."<sup>1</sup> Wilkinson, Robertson, and Alice did not achieve the fame of their two older brothers.

William was not preceded by a long line of distinguished ancestors but his grandfathers were prosperous farmers, traders, merchants, with hardly a doctor or lawyer among them. However his father, Henry James, was a man of great originality who decisively influenced both William and his brother Henry with his deep and urgent concern with the ultimates of nature and human nature. The father was a philosopher and theologian who at one time studied for the ministry. Both the spiritual and physical life of his father were marked by restlessness and wanderings, mostly in Europe,

which affected the training of his children at school and their education at home.

William resembled his father in his exuberance, his candor, his tenderness, and in his nervous sensitiveness and instability. He was profoundly influenced by his father's indifference to worldly success, his courageous honesty, and above all by his life long preoccupation with the deeper problems of life and religion.<sup>2</sup>

William started traveling in 1843 when the family went to Europe for a year and a half, and then returned to Albany, New York. From 1847 to 1855 the family lived in New York City. While there the schooling of William and Henry was entrusted to a series of "educative ladies", the Institution Virgnes where he studied foreign languages, and the Academy of Mr. Richard Pulding Jenks.

However in June of 1855 William, because of his father's dissatisfaction with the New York schools, went with the family to Geneva for expressly educational purposes. This was terminated abruptly by a return to England in autumn of 1855. In 1856 he studied in London under a Scotsman, Robert Thompson, and spent the year 1857 at Paris with M. Lerambert of Rue Jacob as pedagogue, and at the Institution Fezandie. Also since his interest in art was increasing, he attended the atelier of Leon Cogniet. In summer of 1857 William, having entered the College Communal at Boulogne, "felt for the first time the benefits of good teaching and continual application."<sup>3</sup> "He had by now from his father and from M. Fezandie the optimism of Fourier, who attributed all the evils of the World to the disordered but curable state of human society."<sup>4</sup> Also at this time, he stated that life's value depends upon the use to which you put it, and that to be as much use as possible ought to be everyone's object in life.

Sometime in June, 1858, they again returned to America and lived for a year in Newport, Rhode Island, where William attended the William Leverett School. After the summer of 1859, the James family went to the Academy and University of Geneva. William was next found in Bonn, Germany, where he lived and continued his studies in the house of a certain Herr Stromberg. At this point in his life, eighteen years old, he had acquired the fragments of a liberal education and a fund of memories. He had learned little but languages and the rudiments of mathematics. But compared to an ordinary schoolboy, he had experienced a great deal.

At this time, there were two fields of interest for William; painting and science. Since painting seemed to be dominant at the time, the family returned to Newport, Rhode Island, so William could study at the studio of William M. Hunt. It only took a year to convince William, a real cosmopolitan, that this was not for him, so the autumn of 1861 he entered the Lawrence Scientific School, "and thus inaugurated that career of science, and that connection with Harvard University, which continued until his death".<sup>5</sup> He was devoted mostly at this time to chemistry, comparative anatomy and physiology. From this period on, there are three phases in James' life. The first phase concerns physiology; the second, psychology; and the third phase, philosophy and religion.

In 1864 he entered Harvard Medical School which schooling was interrupted in April, 1865, by his going with the Thayer expedition, headed by Louis Agassiz, to the Amazon where his health broke, so he returned in March, 1866, to the United States and took a medical course at the Massachusetts General Hospital. In Autumn of that same year he returned to Harvard Medical School. But because of his ill health, he

packed his bags again and was off to Europe in April, 1867. He spent eighteen months mainly in Germany at Dresden, Berlin, and Teplitz- working in experimental physiology and the German language.

"It was during these Teplitz and Dresden days of 1868 that James discovered Goethe, and found in him that sturdy realism by which he hoped to steer a middle course between pessimism and super-naturalism." <sup>6</sup>

In his spare time his philosophical interests deepened especially by reading Kant (who, from what I have read of him, seems to be in many ways like James) and Renouvier.

In November, 1868, he went to Cambridge and obtained his medical degree in the following June which he actually never used. However, between 1869 and 1872 William suffered a great mental and spiritual depression, during which time he stayed at his fathers house doing nothing but reading and writing an occasional review.

James' medical training brought him under the influence of the biological sciences. But back of this lay James' own individual problem, the skepticism of adolescence set in a long period of illness that sickened both body and mind. What could he believe that would give him the assurance with which to face life? He demanded the right to believe that he might live. There must be a meaning in life that transcended the mechanistic conception of it which the biological sciences presented. Renouvier fortified him in his refusal to surrender the will to mechanism. The mechanistic doctrine could not be proved, and his own will to believe pulled him out of the pit. <sup>7</sup>

William stated, after reading Renouvier's Traite de Psychologie Rationelle, that his first act of free will would be to believe in free will.

From 1872-76 James served as instructor of physiology at Harvard College, where he taught comparative anatomy, physiology, and hygiene. In 1875 his interest was shifting to psychology with a course for graduates entitled "Relations between Physiology and Psychology". While in Germany

in 1868, he had read some works of Helmholtz and Wundt.

In 1876 William established the first American laboratory of psychology, one of the first in the world.<sup>63</sup> But he was not an experimental psychologist in the sense that he worked in the laboratory because his health was not good enough to take the strain. Besides, he was too nervous and impatient for that kind of work. Also, to James is attributed the "discovery of the sub-conscious mind."<sup>8</sup>

As to his psychological theories, "James was firmly convinced that introspection, i.e., the reflective and retrospective examination by the mind of its contents and operations, while not the sole method of psychological investigation, is an indispensable technique in psychology. The basic postulate of his psychology is that 'no mental modification ever occurs which is not accompanied or followed by bodily change'."<sup>9</sup>

In his theories on psychology there are two which hold first and second place, namely stream of consciousness and nativism.<sup>10</sup>

James held that "our conscious life is a stream of thought (or consciousness) without supposing any other agent than a succession of perishing thoughts, each individual thought constitutes a section of this stream; each section knows and appropriates the previous section and in it all that went before; thus the perception of abiding personal identity is accounted for."<sup>11</sup>

Thought is a pulse according to James, but it is a pulse which comes from no pulsating thing, but simply occurs.

But on the otherhand if we should say that they are due to a spiritual being called our soul, which reacts on our brain states by these peculiar forms of spiritual energy, our words would be familiar enough, it is true, but I think you will have to agree that they would offer little genuine explanatory meaning."<sup>12</sup>

Knowledge is an instrument, for James, existing for the sake of life and not life for the sake of knowledge. Also he posited that the thought is the thinker and a thought is true in so far as it is useful. His nativism was that he overemphasized what is original to what is acquired

by crediting the human mind with a liberal share of inborn traits and aptitudes. We learn actively and not passively.

James was clearly advocating the recognition of the new psychology. It was new in the sense of allying itself with science as well as with philosophy, and in combining the methods of observation and experiment with those of speculation and reflection. This was really a distinct innovation.

Psychology in the United States, at the time of William James, was indistinguishable from the Philosophy of the soul, embracing a brief account of the senses and of association, but devoted mainly to the higher moral and logical processes.<sup>13</sup>

As to how his psychology is looked at today I will say this much: that according to an article in Saturday Review of Literature<sup>14</sup> his famous work, The Principles of Psychology, is still recognized as one of the best books for an introduction for psychology students. And from paging through Principles of Psychology I could not help to be amazed at the diversity of subjects he treats.

William started writing his best seller, Principles of Psychology, which grew out of his class room instructions, in 1878. In that same year he married Alice Howe Gibbons who was known for her serenity of disposition, wit and beauty. William was not a handsome man; he was short, partially bald with a medium sized beard, and very frail looking. William and Alice had five children. One died at birth but three sons and a daughter survived William. It was to take William twelve years to finish his Principles, but when published in 1890 it had remarkable success owing to "the author's erudition and skillful use of citation, his breaking definitely with the past and with the philosophical alliance by proclaiming psychology a science, and because of its style-revealed



his genius for catching the elusive and fugitive states of human experience and transfixing them with a telling phrase. Daring in its humor, colloquial speech, picturesqueness of metaphor and illustration.<sup>15</sup>

In short it was a people's psychology book, which was widely read by people under no obligation to read it. But after finishing this great work, James stated that compared with the problems of philosophy and religion, psychology seemed to him "a nasty little subject" that he was glad to have done with.

Between 1878 and 1890 James made several trips abroad. He was becoming well known in Europe, and in England he became a member of the British Empirical Society which defended the empirical tradition (empirical-pluralistic) against Hegelianism (rationalistic-monistic way). And he met Shadworth and Hodgson who exercised a powerful influence on him with their dictum that realities are only what they are known as. Another meeting was with John Stuart Mill. Also James met Renouvier whom he liked very much because he provided for the efficacy and freedom of the will. Charles Peirce, who occupied an important place in the history of pragmatism, greatly influenced James' ultimate metaphysics. He was not only influenced by these men, but by everyone he came in contact with. "James was a man who nourished his mind by intercourse and by momentary half-acceptance of a multitude of ideas in which his quick sympathy found something of value."<sup>16</sup>

In 1880 James became assistant professor of philosophy at Harvard College. In 1883 he met Josiah Royce, the great idealist, who joined the philosophy department of Harvard, and for many years James tried to combat Royce's idealism with his realism. In 1889 he attended the International

Congress of Physiological Psychology in Paris. After 1890 there was limited time devoted to Psychology and "his studies were now of the nature and existence of God, the immortality of the soul, free will and determinism, the values of life. They were empirical." 17

In 1892 published the Briefer Course which was an abridged form of his earlier work, The Principles of Psychology. From 1894 to 1895, he was president of the British Empirical Society, and in 1899 he published Talks to Teachers on Psychology, a series of lectures he had given from 1890, which not only spread the vogue of his ideas, but gave a powerful impulse to the new subject of educational psychology.

If one wants to get a complete account of James's philosophical development, he would have to begin with his student years in Germany, where philosophers in the nineteenth century studied to some extent. However, I am going to present William as the philosopher he was in the late 1890's: empiricist, pluralist, pragmatist, functionalist, indeterminist, and voluntarist. By touching on these various philosophical positions to some degree I hope to present to you William James, the philosopher. I am treating his philosophy here since this was the period of his greatest philosophical interests. One more thing, there were two central motives which actuated his philosophizing: on the one side, religion; and on the other, science. He felt appeal for both and his central intellectual drive was the necessity of providing for both.

James was an empiricist in the most general sense, in that he insisted on the testing of an idea by a resort to that particular experience which it means. An idea which does not relate to something which may be brought directly before the same mind that entertains the idea, is not properly an idea at all; and two ideas are different only in so far as the things to which they thus lead differ in some particular respect. 18

Therefore his empiricism means, first, that ideas are to be tested by direct knowledge, and second, that knowledge is limited to what can be experienced, which is the effect of the first. So he would deny the existence of such things as substance, unknowables and abstractions. James was a hard and fast realist.

It is said that Charles Pierce and James are the founders of pragmatism. James is said to be the father of it while John Dewey brought it into maturity. James' pragmatic doctrine is the doctrine that the meaning of an idea consists in the particular consequences to which it leads. Such consequences can be either perceptual, practical or emotional and if there is no such consequence the idea means nothing. The true is therefore what is useful. So as a theory of truth, it asserts that any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part is true for just so much, true instrumentally. His voluntarism was putting the will as the highest faculty of man and positing that knowledge depends on the will or subjective motives.

James was a functionalist in the sense that he was interested in knowing, not what the contents or elemental factors of consciousness are, but what mental processes develop into- what purposes they serve in life. This theory was championed by men who had a sincere interest in the workaday world, in that they wanted to establish laws that would help the teacher, pupil, parent and so on down the line.

Pluralism for James means a finite God, who evokes a passionate allegiance because he is in some measure hampered by circumstances, and dependent on the aid of others; or because the evil of the world being external to Him, he may be loved without reserve.<sup>19</sup>

The universe is not absolutely determined, but there exists a multiplicity

and waywardness of things. The each is preferred to the all and the world is a multiverse.

The world is sort of republican banquet where all the qualities of being respect one another's personal sacredness, yet sit at the common table of space and time.<sup>20</sup>

So in a certain sense James' pluralism is thus united with individualism.

James was an indeterminist in that he believed in freedom of the will, which I will treat at length later on. So to sum up his philosophy: although experience is the only ground of what can be strictly regarded as knowledge, this does not wholly satisfy man's moral and emotional nature and must be supplemented by faith. James believed in the immortality of the soul, existence of God, and free will although he held that one could not scientifically demonstrate them. Rather he "accepted the testimony from those whom he envied."<sup>21</sup> So James' philosophy was a union of empiricism and voluntarism.

Some of his moral ideals were the "acceptance of the humane and individualistic tradition of liberalism, his hatred of evil (saying that if governments and priests were done away with evil would cease), and his gospel of strenuousness and heroism"-<sup>22</sup>he who faces life and wills to meet life as it is. He held that religion is irrational and individual, thus making the social and institutional side of religion unimportant for him. He received from his father the goal of trying to get away from the Calvinistic pessimism which was prevalent at that time. He had no sectarian affiliation but he did attend the Harvard College Chapel.

As early as 1897 James began to collect material on the psychology and philosophy of religion. From this time until his death in 1910, William wrote several books and essays and gave a number of lectures. In 1899

James- the adventurer, the active man- lost his way in the Adirondack wilderness, strained his heart and thus suffered a serious breakdown. Again he sought recovery of his health in Europe where he prepared his Gifford lectures and rested.

So from 1902-07, his health having improved, he was able to increase his activities: he taught again at Harvard College one course- The Psychology of Religion, read incessantly, lectured, wrote books and essays, maintained a voluminous correspondence and made two trips to California. In 1903 he received the degree of L L.D. from Harvard College. In 1905 he attended the Philosophical Congress in Rome. He met his last Harvard class on January 22, 1907. His active and fruitful years culminated with the publication of Pragmatism, the public lectures he gave at Columbia University and Lowell Institute at Boston. In his later years James has contact with the French philosopher, Bergson, "who influenced James with his doctrine of primacy of action".<sup>23</sup> He also credited Bergson with giving him the courage to break with the traditional logic which had prevented him from accepting the compounding of consciousness.

In the spring of 1910 there was a return of his cardiac symptoms. Again he packed his bags and went to Europe for a cure, but by mid-summer he returned to the United States. He died shortly after his arrival at his country home in Chocorua, New Hampshire on August 26, 1910.

In summary of his carrer one could note that "William was a talking writer, with a genius for picturesque epithets and a tendency to vivid coloring and extreme freedom of manner."<sup>24</sup> He was popular because he presented philosophy in the form of literature and he was looked to as the common man's philosopher.

It is impossible to divorce his intellectual gifts from his character. His openmindedness, which has become proverbial, was only one of many signs of his fundamental truthfulness. Having no pride of opinion, and setting little store by his personal prestige, his mind remained flexible and hospitable to the end. <sup>25</sup>

He became the friend and helper of those groping, nervous, half-educated, spiritually disinherited, passionately hungry individuals. He was in a way their spokesman and representative before the modern world.

His way of thinking and feeling represents the true America, and represented in a measure the whole ultra-modern, radical world. Thus, the genteel tradition was led a merry dance when it fell again into the hands of a genuine and vigorous romanticist like William James. <sup>26</sup>

The importance of an empirical study of human nature, and its applications to human affairs; the recognition of the significance of the experience of religion, and a comparative neglect of its dogmatic and ecclesiastical aspects; a truce between science and religion through the increased tolerance of science and empiricism of religion; a shifting of emphasis in philosophy from the pure intellect to perception; and an acknowledgment of the play of will and feeling in the formation of belief are some of the items in the record of James' permanent achievement. <sup>27</sup>

His philosophy was too viable and subtle, too hedged, experiential and tentative to have become the dogma of a school. He was too nervous, restless, and impatient to found a school. His philosophy has "functional rather as a germinative of new thought in others than as a standard old system for others to repeat." <sup>28</sup> I can't help thinking William James would have been a great asset to scholastic philosophy if he had been a scholastic thinker. He had the style and love for the common man which would have made scholastic philosophy more popular at that time. So lived William James.

Having given you the life, education and thought of William James, that great American pioneer thinker, I will now attempt to put forth his theory on the will. My source for this was mainly his Principles of

Psychology, in his chapter on "The Will".

I will first give a short summary of his theory on the will, as he saw it, which will enable you to get more out of the more detailed analysis of his theory. The will had been traditionally regarded as a mysterious faculty concealed in the depths of the soul, whose decisions are arbitrary and inscrutable. But James was distrustful of the obscurantism of the faculty psychology; he brought out the will into the light of day by describing the processes of deliberation and by relating them to other phases of the conscious life. Volition was not an isolated phenomenon, unrelated to the rest of consciousness; it was, rather, a specification of a general consciousness, namely, the tendency of all ideas to eventuate into action unless they are prevented from so doing by rival and conflicting ideas. James gave the name "ideo-motor action" to the inherent tendency of ideas to produce movement; every act of will was an instance of ideo-motor action. The essence of volition lay in the ability of the mind to focus its attention on one idea to the exclusion of all others. When this had been accomplished, observable action automatically followed or ensues. Thus the freedom of the will was the ability of the mind to control its effort of attention. James believed that the human will was free. Now for a more detailed analysis.

Desire, wish, will, are states of mind which everyone knows, and which no definition can make plainer. We desire to feel, to have, to do, all sorts of things which at the moment are not felt, had, or done. If with the desire there goes a sense that attainment is not possible, we simply wish; but if we believe that the end is in our power, we will that the desired feeling, having or doing shall be real; and real it presently becomes, either immediately upon the willing or after certain preliminaries have been fulfilled. The only ends which follow immediately upon our willing seem to be movements of our own bodies. Whatever feelings and havings we may will to get, come in as results of preliminary movements which we make for the

purpose. This fact is too familiar to need illustration; so that we may start with the proposition that the only direct outward effects of our will are bodily movements. The mechanism of production of these voluntary movements is what befalls us to study now.<sup>29</sup>

Such involuntary movements as instinct, emotions and reflex do not fall under our willing by the very fact that they are involuntary, because "nerve centres are so organized that certain stimuli pull the trigger of certain explosive parts"<sup>30</sup> He is treating here only voluntary actions, actions in which the act must be foreseen before it is willed which means that no human act can be voluntary in its first performance. So the first pre-requisite of the voluntary life is that there be a supply of ideas of various movements that are possible, left in the memory by experiences of their involuntary performance. In other words, I can not will to run if I do not have an idea of the movements required. So we learn all our possibilities from experience and must wait for the movements to be performed involuntarily.

Now one and the same involuntary movement may leave many different kinds of impressions: remote and resident. By remote impression is meant that our remote organs of sense, or exterior senses, either perceive the effects performed by another, so that they are seen, felt, or heard; or performed by ourselves as when something looks distinct, feels distinct or sounds distinct.

So in short, our impressions of movements either come from others or from one's own experience. These remote effects, strictly speaking, would suffice to furnish the mind with the supply of ideas required before one can perform a voluntary act. But besides these remote impressions we have another set of impressions, resident impressions or kinaesthetic



impressions, which arise from the parts that are actually moved whenever we perform a movement ourselves.

Not only are our muscles supplied with afferent as well as with efferent nerves, but the tendons, and ligaments, the articular surfaces, and the skin about the joints are all sensitive, and, being stretched and squeezed in ways characteristic of each particular movement, give us as many distinctive feelings as there are movements possible to perform. <sup>31</sup>

Also by these kinaesthetic impressions we are made conscious of passive movements, which occur when one moves his arm or any other part of his body. If the feelings of passive movement as well as other feelings of a limb are lost then one has no way of knowing in what position the parts of his body are in, if his eyes are closed. In short there is an absolute need of guiding sensations of some kind for the successful carrying out of a connected series of movements. Now when such a chain of movements is voluntary, one needs to know at each movement at what position he is in this active chain, if he is to will intelligently the next link.

James then sets down as certain that;

whether or no there may be anything else in the mind at the moment when we consciously will a certain act, a mental conception made up of memory-images of these sensations, defining which special act it is, must be there. <sup>32</sup>

Then he goes on to state that there need be nothing else in the mind when we will to do an act but the remote and resident image impressions. And in fact in a perfectly simple voluntary act there is nothing else in the mind but the kinaesthetic idea. Some psychologists hold, however, that there is in addition to this a feeling of innervation which is a consciousness of a characteristic sort that accompanies the excitation of motor nerves. In short, they hold that something additional existing in the mind is essential to the mental determination of voluntary act.

There must be a special current of energy going out from the brain into the appropriate muscles during the act; and the outgoing current (it is supposed) must have in each particular case a feeling sui generis attached to it. This feeling of the current of outgoing energy has received from Wundt the name feeling of innervation.<sup>33</sup>

James holds that such a theory of feeling of innervation is unnecessary and spends several pages proving his point without spending time discussing his proofs. James is simply against it. He says:

They are wrong. The discharge into the motor nerves is insentient, and that all our ideas of movement, including those of the effort which it requires, as well as those of its direction, its extent, its strength, and its velocity, are images of peripheral sensations, either remote, or resident in the moving parts, or in other parts which sympathetically act with them in consequence of the 'diffusive wave'.<sup>34</sup>

He goes on to say that the simplest possible arrangement for producing voluntary movements would be that the memory-images of the movements' distinctive peripheral effects, whether remote or resident, should themselves constitute the mental cues, and that "no other psychic facts should intervene or be mixed up with them."<sup>35</sup> So he thus concludes that there can be no doubt whatever that the mental cue may be either remote or resident image, and that the more practical we become in a movement the more remote do the ideas become which form this mental cue and thus the idea of the end tends more and more to make itself all-sufficient.

So what I have said thus far is that the idea of a movement which must precede an act in order that it be voluntary is the anticipation of of the movement's sensible effects, resident or remote. The idea determines what our movements shall be.

James now asks the question:

Is the bare idea of a movement's sensible effects its sufficient mental cue, or must there be an additional mental antecedent, in

the shape of a fiat, decision, consent, volitional mandate, or other synonymous phenomenon of consciousness, before movement can follow? <sup>36</sup>

And he answers, sometimes yes and sometimes no. For he posits two types of voluntary action: ideo-motor and action after deliberation. In the case of the ideo-motor action there is no additional mental antecedent. But in the case of action after deliberation a fiat is needed.

James says we have ideo-motor action:

wherever movement follows unhesitatingly and immediately the notion of it in the mind. We are then aware of nothing between the conception and the execution. All sorts of neuromuscular processes come between, of course, but we know nothing of them. We think of the act and it is done. <sup>36</sup>

Such is one of the main principles of James' theory on the will, that if I have a single idea of a movement in my mind and it has no opposing ideas, the action will always follow and will follow immediately. So he says; "In all this the determining condition of the unhesitating and resistless sequence of the act seems to be the absence or any conflicting notion in the mind." <sup>38</sup> He gives interesting and amusing examples to prove his point, which space limitations require me to omit. We have many ideas that do not result in action, but that is because other ideas simultaneously present rob them of their impulsive power. So in short an express fiat, or act of mental consent to the movement, occurs when one wants to neutralize the antagonistic and inhibitory idea and not when the conditions are simple.

The first point to start from in understanding voluntary action, and the possible occurrence of it with no fiat or express resolve, is the fact that consciousness is in its very nature impulsive. <sup>39</sup>

However, in another place he says:

Abstractly, ideo-motor action is true; but in the concrete our fields

of consciousness are always so complex that the inhibiting margin keeps the centre inoperative most of the time.<sup>40</sup>

But in all simple and ordinary cases, just as the bare idea prompts a movement, so the bare presence of another idea will prevent its taking place.

Now James proceeds to describe what happens in deliberate action, or when the mind is the seat of many ideas related to each other in antagonistic or in favorable ways. One of the ideas in that of an act, but because there are present some additional considerations which tend to block it and some which tend to help it, the result is indecision. As long as this indecision lasts we are said to deliberate, but when at last the original idea either prevails and makes the movement take place, or is done away with by its antagonists, we are said to decide, or "to utter our voluntary fait in favor of one or the other course."<sup>41</sup> The reasons and motives by which the decision is brought about are the reinforcing and inhibiting ideas. Impatience of the deliberative state and the dread of the irrevocable are motives for and against action.

Turning now to the form of the decision itself, James lists five types of decisions. The first is the reasonable type in which the arguments for and against a given course of action seem gradually to settle themselves in the mind and to end by leaving a clear balance in favor of one alternative, which alternative is then adopted without effort or constraint. "In action as in reasoning, then, the great thing is the quest of the right conception."<sup>42</sup> Then James continues by saying that a reasonable character is one who has a store of stable and worthy ends.

In the second type of decision, before all the evidence influencing

proper movement of the will, we are determined accidentally from without with the conviction that we might as well pursue this course, not the other.

Another type of decision is accidentally determined too but this time from within and not from without.

It often happens, when the absence of imperative principle is perplexing and suspense distracting, that we find ourselves acting, as it were, automatically, and as if by a spontaneous discharge of our nerves, in the direction of one of the horns of the dilemma.<sup>43</sup>

The fourth manner of decision comes about when we suddenly pass from either the easy and careless to the sober and strenuous mood, or its reverse, in consequence of some outer experience of some "inexplicable charge".<sup>44</sup> The fifth decision-type suggests a feeling of effort, subjectively and phenomenally, with both alternatives present to the will.

The immense majority of human decisions are decisions without effort. It is where the normally less efficacious motive becomes more efficacious and the normally more efficacious one less so that actions ordinarily effortless, or abstinence ordinarily easy, either become impossible or are effected, if at all, by the expenditure of effort.<sup>45</sup>

Now where the will is healthy the vision of which course is best before the fiat comes must be right. The action must obey the visions lead. However, an unhealthy will may exist as being precipitate will or a perverse will. The precipitate will is when the action may follow the stimulus or idea too rapidly, leaving no time for the arousal of restraining associates. The perverse will is when the ratio which the impulsive and inhibitive forces normally bear to each other may be distorted although the associates may come. He goes on to say that the symptoms of perversity are the obstructed will in which normal actions are impossible, and the explosive will in which abnormal actions are irrepressible. In

the obstructed will there are too many inhibiting ideas and in the explosive will there are too many impulsive ideas. "The resultant action is always due to the ratio between the obstructive and the explosive forces which are present." <sup>46</sup>

Effort complicates volition whenever a rarer and more ideal impulse is called upon to neutralize other of a more instinctive and habitual kind. But now one is faced with the question: what determines the amount of effort when an ideal motive overcomes a resisting motive? James answers; "The very greatness of the resistance itself." <sup>47</sup> So in short the greater the resistance the greater the amount of effort that has to be given to overcome the resistance.

Thoughts of pleasure and pain take rank among the thoughts which have the most impulsive and inhibitive power. But these are not the only stimuli, because they have nothing to do with the manifestations of instinct and emotional expression. "It is of the essence of all consciousness to instigate movement of some sort." <sup>48</sup> "Our acts cannot all be conceived as effects of representative pleasure, but they cannot even be classed as cases of represented good." As is the case when an impulse which discharges effort of attention on the idea he desires so that it dominates in the mind and is retained, the idea will naturally follow. Again movement naturally following an unopposed idea is stressed as a very important principle in James' theory of the will.

James defines a moral act as that effort of attention by which we hold fast to an idea, which if it weren't for that effort of attention would be driven out of the mind by the other psychological tendencies that are there. "To think, to sustain a representation, in short, is the

secret of will, just as it is the secret of memory." <sup>54</sup> I can not help thinking of James as in a trance, with clenched fists, wrinkled face, and grunting as he seeks to increase his effort of attention. So when one puts effort of attention on a weak idea it begins to call up its own associates ending by changing the disposition of the man's Consciousness altogether. And thus his action changes, because the new object, once firmly in possession of the field of his thoughts, infallibly produces its own motor effects. The whole difficulty lies in the gaining possession of that field of his thoughts. This strain of the attention is fundamental act of will.

"In all of this one sees how the immediate point of application of volitional effort lies exclusively in the mental world." <sup>55</sup> Everywhere the function of the effort is the same: to keep affirming and adopting a thought which, if left to itself, would slip away. So in one case the effort may inhibit an explosive will, and in another, it may arouse an obstructed will. "To sum it all up in a word, the terminus of the psychological process in volition, the point to which the will is directly applied is always an idea." <sup>56</sup> To attend to the idea is the volitional act, and the only inward volitional act that one ever performs. "The only resistance which our will can possibly experience is the resistance which such an idea offers to being attended to at all." <sup>56</sup> So volition is primarily a relation between one's self and his states of mind.

Now this effort of attention that has been tossed around in the last couple of pages is only part of what the word "will" covers; it covers also the effort to consent to something to which one's attention

is not quite complete. For although attention is the first and fundamental thing in volition, "express consent to the reality of what is attended to is often additional and quite distinct phenomenon involved." <sup>57</sup> So if a certain thought fills the mind exclusively, such fullness is consent. But the thought does not have to completely fill the mind for the consent to be there. James admits that he cannot explain in any other way what this consent is, but that it seems to be a subjective experience of its kind which one is able to point out but is unable to define.

Now I come to the final postulate that James holds in his theory on will. In its earlier summation I said that William James believes that the human will is free. I used the word 'believe' because free will to him was one of those postulates or principles that one should believe in, but also one that cannot be demonstrated scientifically. He points out that one can be either a determinist or an indeterminist. The choice is up to each individual. He prefers to be an indeterminist since he has the opinion that the evidence for that is more convincing.

James then asks the question:

Is the effort where it exists a fixed function of the object, which the latter imposes on the thought, or is it such an independent variable that with a constant object more or less of it may be made? If it be really indeterminate, our future acts are ambiguous or unpredestinate: in common parlance, our wills are free. <sup>58</sup>

So he goes on to say that the question of fact in the free will controversy is quite simple. It relates to the amount of effort of attention or consent which one can put forth at any time. He says that it seems that we are able to put forth more or less of it in any given case, so it seems to be an independent variable. Thus free will is in the fact that I am free to put forth more or less effort of attention or consent.



He believes that the question of free will is not able to be proven by psychological methods, since after a certain amount of effort of attention has been given to an idea, it is really impossible to tell whether more or less of it might have been given or not.

The utmost that a believer in free-will can ever do will be to show that the deterministic arguments are not coercive. That they are seductive, I am last to deny." <sup>59</sup>

In the deterministic position all is fate. It is hopeless to resist the drift, vain to look for any new force coming in. There seems to be little, if anything, which is really one's own in the decisions which he makes.

Then James makes the statement that struck me when I first read it: "Psychology will be psychology, and science science, as much as ever in this world, whether free will be true or not." <sup>60</sup> So if it does exist, its operation could only be to hold some ideal object before the mind a little more intensely or a little longer.

In his book, Talks to Teachers on Psychology, he denies that he is a materialist, because he cannot see how such a thing as consciousness can possibly be produced by a nerve mechanism. The possible stock of ideas which a man's free spirit would necessarily choose from would depend exclusively on the native and acquired powers of his brain. One's ideas would be determined by brain currents, and these by purely mechanical laws.

After what we have just seen,-namely, the part played by voluntary attention in volition,- a belief in free will and purely spiritual causation is still open to us." <sup>61</sup>

The education of the will, taken in a broader sense, means the whole of one's training to moral and prudential conduct, and of one's learning to adopt means to ends, involving the 'association of ideas', in all its varieties and complications, together with

the power of inhibiting impulses irrelevant to the ends desired, and of initiating movements contributing thereto. <sup>62</sup>

So ends William James' theory on the will. A theory which James hoped would help the common man. A theory that is more of a description of the processes that are involved in willing than of the will taken as a power of the soul. Just how much of his theory is in line with the Scholastic theory on the will is up to each scholastic philosopher to determine as he interprets William James' theory on the will.

### Footnotes

1. The Encyclopedia Britannica, vol. 12, p. 883
2. Dictionary of American Biography, vol. 9, p. 590
3. Ralph Barton Perry, The Thought and Character of William James
4. Ibid., p. 51
5. Dictionary of American Biography, vol. 9, p. 590
6. Ralph Barton Perry, op. cit., p. 107
7. Mueller and Sears, The Development of American Philosophy, p. 325
8. Mascia, A History of Philosophy, p. 453
9. Thilly and Wood, A History of Philosophy, p. 642
10. Ralph Barton Perry, op. cit., p. 195
11. Gruender, Psychology Without a Soul, p. 129
12. William James, Talks to Teachers on Psychology, p. 160
13. Ralph Barton Perry, op. cit., p. 183
14. Saturday Review of Literature, Nov. 11, 1933, p. 11
15. American Biography, vol. 9, p. 593
16. Ralph Barton Perry, op. cit., p. 200
17. Encyclopedia Britannica, vol. 12, p. 886
18. Perry, Present Philosophical Tendencies, p. 363
19. Ralph Barton Perry, op. cit., p. 209
20. Ibid., p. 210
21. Ibid., p. 256
22. American Biography, vol. 9, p. 594
23. Ralph Barton Perry, op. cit., p. 353
24. Ibid., p. 40

25. Perry, Present Philosophical Tendencies, p. 378
26. Mueller and Sears, op. cit., p. 340
27. American Biography, vol. 9, p. 595
28. Encyclopedia Britannica, vol. 12, p. 885
29. William James, Principles of Psychology, p. 767
30. Ibid, p. 767
31. Ibid, p. 768
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33. Ibid, p. 770
34. Ibid, p. 774
35. Ibid, p. 774
36. Ibid, p. 790
37. Ibid, p. 790
38. Ibid, p. 791
39. Ibid, p. 793
40. William James, Talks to Teachers, p. 176
41. William James, Principles of Psychology, p. 794
42. Ibid, p. 796
43. Ibid, p. 797
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45. Ibid, p. 799
46. Ibid, p. 799
47. Ibid, p. 808
48. Ibid, p. 809
49. Ibid, p. 809
50. Ibid, p. 814

51. Ibid, p. 814
52. Ibid, p. 815
53. Ibid, p. 815
54. William James, Talks to Teachers, p. 187
55. William James, Principles of Psychology, p. 817
56. Ibid, p. 819
57. Ibid, p. 820
58. Ibid, p. 822
59. Ibid, p. 823
60. Ibid, p. 825
61. William James, Talks to Teachers, p. 190
62. William James, Principles of Psychology
63. Encyclopedia Britannica, vol. 12, p. 884

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