

# **The Varieties of Religious Experience Study Guide**

## **The Varieties of Religious Experience by William James**

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# Introduction

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902), William James offers a sense of validity to the formerly abstract idea of spiritual experience. With an understanding of physiology, psychology, and philosophy, James studied cases of religious inspiration and concluded there were specific aspects of human consciousness that contained energies that could come to a person's assistance in time of great need. The result is what he refers to as the religious experience.

Trained in chemistry and medicine, James looked at religious experience as a scientist might, by researching many case studies. However, his theories about religious experience were also heavily influenced by his philosophical interests, which drew him to conclude that an unseen reality does exist and is available to everyone for exploration. His sentiments were somewhat aligned with the beliefs of the transcendentalists, with his work honoring the individual rather than the institutions of religion.

*The Varieties of Religious Experience* is actually a collection of lectures James delivered in Edinburgh, Scotland. The lectures were sponsored by Adam Gifford, who was interested in promoting a series of studies of what he referred to as a natural theology. James's lectures became by far the most popular in the series. James also received international attention and praise as one of the first American philosophers to have his ideas welcomed and respected in Europe. Although not cited as James's best book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* continues to be referred to as one of the best books on religion. In his day, intellectuals tended to categorize religious experiences as no more than a nervous condition or a reaction caused by indigestion. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* portrays the need for a sense of the spiritual as a natural and healthy psychological function.

*The Varieties of Religious Experience* has been so successful that it has been reprinted thirty-six times. It is lauded as being as influential and as significant in the twentieth century as it was when first published. To emphasize this point, the board of the Modern Library established that James's book is the second-best nonfiction book of the twentieth century.



# Author Biography

William James is referred to as the father of American psychology. He is known for his two-volume work, *The Principles of Psychology*, which summarizes his theories in a field that in the early twentieth century was considered a relatively new science. These volumes took James twelve years to write. However, by the time he completed this work, his interests began leaning more toward philosophy.

James was born January 11, 1842, in New York City, to Mary and Henry James, Sr., an independently wealthy man who associated with transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. James's father believed in unorthodox education and sent his children to a variety of schools. James's education included attending schools in London, Geneva, Paris, Dresden, and Boston. By the time James entered Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School, he was fluent in five different languages. Upon receiving his undergraduate degree, James entered medical school at Harvard, but he dropped out in 1865 and instead took a long trip down the Amazon River with Louis Agassiz, a prominent Harvard biologist. Eventually James returned to school, earning a medical degree in 1869. Afterward, he spent a few years in Europe, where he became fascinated with the study of physiology and the New Psychology.

For the next several years, James remained jobless, living off his parents' wealth. Then in 1872 he was offered a chance to teach a newly created course in physiology and anatomy at Harvard. Three years later, James changed the name of this course to "The Relations Between Physiology and Psychology," later refining his material to include only the topic of psychology. At this point, there were no other American college professors teaching courses in psychology. Toward the end of his teaching career, his course underwent another transformation as James's interests switched from psychology to philosophy. However, for all of his interests, it was his studies and experiments in psychology that most influenced international scientific thought.

In 1890 James's *The Principles of Psychology* was published. James had written it to be used as a college guide, and it quickly became a bestselling textbook. Some of the concepts included in the book include stream of consciousness, pain, sensations of motion, the self, imagination, perception, the emotions, and will.

*The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* was the result of the Gifford Lecture Series, which James delivered at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. The lectures explored the relationship between religious experience and what was then termed abnormal psychology. His interest was not in religious institutions and their rituals but rather the individual experience in relationship to whatever that person considered sacred or divine. Along with *The Principles of Psychology*, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is considered James's seminal work. Some of his other books include *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), and *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911). James received several honorary degrees in his lifetime, including doctor of law degrees from three different



universities: Princeton University in 1896, the University of Edinburgh in 1902, and Harvard University in 1903.

In 1878 James married Alice Howe Gibbens, a Boston schoolteacher and pianist, who remained James's closest friend and intellectual confidant throughout their marriage. James, who suffered greatly from depression throughout his life, often credited his wife for helping him maintain his psychological balance. The couple had five children. Among James's own siblings was his famous brother, novelist Henry James.

On August 26, 1910, at the age of sixty-eight, James died of heart disease at his summer home in New Hampshire, nine years after presenting his Gifford lectures in Edinburgh. In his *New York Times* obituary, James is called "America's foremost philosophical writer, virtual founder of the modern school of psychology and exponent of pragmatism." He was survived by his wife and four of his children.



# Plot Summary

## Lectures 1-3

In the first two lectures, James sets the ground rules or parameters of the topic he will be discussing. He begins with definitions and establishes the fact that his lectures are not based on anthropological evidence or studies but rather on personal documents that relay personal experience. He states that as he is neither a theologian nor a scholar in the history of religion, his talks are based on "a descriptive survey" of religious tendencies that exhibit themselves through the examples he offers.

James also discusses how he defines religious experience through the emotion of excitement, which offers immediate delight and dispenses enough good feeling to affect a good portion of the individual's life. Unlike the scientific dialogue of his time in regards to religious experience, he does not judge an individual as mentally deranged merely because that person has an unexplainable incident. Rather, he looks at religious experience by its results.

James emphasizes that his lectures are in no way directed at institutionalized religion but rather at individual experience, or what one person might experience in solitude. He then notes there are two different ways of accepting the universe: a passive, stoic stance, in which one agrees to the circumstances whether one likes them or not; or a passionate happy stance, in which one agrees with the circumstances. The emotional mood of the individual makes the difference.

In lecture three, James writes that most people have a sense of the presence of evil as well as that of good. Mystical experiences are those rare, brief experiences in which a person senses the presence of God. The opposite sensation—that of evil—presents itself in the form of something unpleasant. These feelings often cannot be explained and therefore cannot be proven. This lies in conflict with philosophical rationalism, which discounts mysticism. However, James believes that rationalism provides a superficial account of life.

## Lectures 4-10

James states that one of the primary goals in life is to find and maintain happiness. If this is true, then it is easy to conclude that "any persistent enjoyment may *produce* the sort of religion which consists in a grateful admiration of the gift of so happy an existence." This is not to be confused with a hedonistic outlook on life but rather understood in terms of a deeper, inner happiness. From this thought, it can easily be taken that the proof of a religion might be based on how happy it makes someone feel. Some people appear to have been born with a propensity to see life as entirely good. James refers to a statement by Francis W. Newman in which the concepts of the "once-born" and the "twice-born" are defined. The once-born rarely considers evil, or even



imperfections within the self. An individual is innocent and childlike. James later discusses the twice-born.

Healthy-mindedness is the term James applies to the once-born, who have a way of seeing everything as good. This optimism has led to what James calls the "mind-cure movement," with Ralph Waldo Emerson being one of its strongest influences. The basic belief with this movement is that healthyminded attitudes can conquer all feelings of doubt, misery, worry, and "all precautionary states of mind." In its extreme, this religious philosophy can lead to faith healing. Whereas the mind-cure movement believes that the mind controls and creates reality, scientists often believe that reality is independent of the mind.

The sick soul is discussed in lectures six and seven. The sick soul, in contrast to the healthyminded, maximizes evil, believing that the underlying essence of life is evil. James finds a problem with this way of thought, but he also finds difficulty accepting that everything in life is good. Some people believe in a God that is all good, James writes. But that leaves one to wonder how evil fits in. Where did it come from? People who believe in a benevolent God state that this spiritual head is only responsible for making sure that evil will eventually be overcome. The difficulty of placing evil somewhere on the shoulders of God is one of the basic paradoxes of philosophy, James states.

There are different levels of being a sick soul. For some, evil is just a minor setback or a maladjustment that will eventually be corrected. For others, evil is so deeply rooted that it causes the individual to become neurotic, to the point the person cannot experience joy. The sick soul must be twice-born in order to find happiness.

Lecture eight covers the concept of the divided self and its reunification. The twice-born are said to have inner conflict that must be resolved. They tend to see the other, more positive side of life but tend to believe it is deceptive. James covers different types of conversions of well-known, twice-born individuals, such as John Bunyan, whose conversion was gradual, and St. Paul, whose conversion was very sudden.

In the next two lectures, James discusses various types of conversions. There are some that cause ordinary changes of a person's character. Other types may change the deeper patterns of the habits of a person's life. Some come about of one's own effort and will, while a second type seems to come from an external source. Sudden conversions, which some religions actually demand, may cause a decrease in carnal appetite and crude bodily pleasures. James states that some sudden conversions are similar to neurotic symptoms. Feelings associated with conversions include a sense of control by a supreme power outside of oneself and a sense of assurance, which rids one of worry and in its place instills a sense of perceiving truths never before known.

## **Lectures 11-13**

The topic of all three lectures is saintliness, which contains the attributes of charity, devotion, trust, patience, and bravery. In this state, one feels that life has a deeper



meaning and there is a pronounced belief in an Ideal Power, to which one is willing to surrender. This brings about a feeling of immense elation and freedom, and one's emotions focus on love and "harmonious affections." There appears to be a sense of inner tranquility that resides in an individual with these qualities. In a somber personality, the form of saintliness takes on the essence of submission; whereas in a more cheerful personality, it takes on a sense of joyous consent.

In extreme cases, there is a tendency to want to withdraw from the world, which contains too many distractions of corruption. Examples include the ascetic person and people who resign themselves to monasteries to practice a contemplative life.

James then defines various psychological levels of asceticism, a practice of self-denial. In asceticism, there is a tendency toward simplicity in life, ridding oneself of excessive pleasures and comforts. Pain is tolerated without complaint. These sacrifices tend to make the ascetic person happy. Taken to extremes, this tendency can become a neurosis and may be caused by a pessimistic sense of self or by a perversion of "bodily sensibility." James then explains different levels of asceticism, some of them extreme, such as that displayed by St. John of the Cross, who ate only what he disliked; did only what disgusted him; aspired not to what he considered the highest but what he considered the lowest and most contemptible; and despised himself and wished that others would too. St. John of the Cross was considered a mystic.

## Lectures 14-15

The value of saintliness follows in lectures fourteen and fifteen. James writes that extravagance of saintliness often leads to fanaticism in aggressive personalities, and it can motivate the invention of legends around honored persons who are revered. There are also the saintly personalities who take on what James refers to as "theopathic saintliness," wherein a person becomes so absorbed in the love of God that human love is useless. This type of saintliness usually exists in gentle people. James then refers to German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who was a critic of saintly personalities, finding them to be weak. James disagrees, calling many saintly people the visionaries of the future.

## Lectures 16-20

Lectures sixteen and seventeen deal with mysticism, to which James ascribes the following characteristics: it cannot be defined but only directly experienced; has a noetic quality, leaving one with a feeling of insight or knowledge; is a transient experience; and has a sense of passivity, as if another personality has taken over. Examples of mystic experience include a sense of deep understanding of a particular maxim; an experience of déjà vu; a sense of being completely stripped of all essence of self; and chemical intoxication. There are different practices that can induce a mystical state, or at least discontinue the sense of ordinary consciousness. This sense can be brought on by





nature, by a sense of immortality, or by methods practiced, for instance, in yoga, Sufism, and Buddhism.

In lecture eighteen, James discusses philosophy and its inability to come to terms with the religious experience. Philosophy attempts to construct arguments for God's existence, without success. James believes that the religious feeling is beyond verbal expression and rational assessment.

In lecture nineteen, James returns to organized religions, discussing aspects of religious worship. In lecture twenty, he draws his conclusions, which include the inability to create a science of religion because most scientists are biased against religions. He also concludes that religion should respect individual experiences, in which feeling pervades and fact is in the making.



# Characters

## Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius (121-180 A.D.) was a Roman emperor and renowned stoic who wrote a famous book on how to live. James quotes from Aurelius's writing to demonstrate his stoic nature, which agrees to the circumstances of life but not necessarily *with* them.

## Jonathan Edwards

Theologian and metaphysician Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was born in Connecticut, the only son of eleven children. He graduated from Yale at the age of seventeen and became a minister, as his father and grandfather were before him. James quotes Edwards throughout his lectures but in particular in his first lecture: "by their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots." Man's roots, James expounds, are inaccessible. Only by the empirical evidence of the fruit is something known. This is one of James's basic tenets. Only by the results of a practice does one know if it is true.

## George Fox

Founder of the Society of Friends (Quakers), George Fox (1624-1691) was born in England and traveled around Europe and the New World promoting his religious views. James often uses Fox as an example of a person using his or her pathological features (such as "nervous instability") to help give him or her "religious authority and influence." James states that no one of any reputation would state that Fox's mind was unsound, despite the fact that his published journal abounds in entries that make Fox sound like a "psychopath." Fox often had visions that would direct him to do strange things, such as pulling off his shoes and walking barefoot in winter and crying out that people he met should repent.

## Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

Born in Stuttgart, Germany, Georg Hegel (1770-1831) was the central philosophical influence on Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels. James refers to Hegel's theories in his lecture on philosophy. He mentions two Hegelian school principles. The first is that "the fullness of life can be construed to thought only by recognizing that every object which our thought may propose to itself involves the notion of some other object which seems at first to negate the first one." The second principle states that if a person is conscious of a negation, that person is "virtually to be beyond it." In other words, the concept of the finite, James writes, somehow already acknowledges the infinite.



## Immanuel Kant

German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) had a strong influence on the study of metaphysics and ethics, and spent most of his life attempting to answer the question, "What do we know?" In his lecture "The Reality of the Unseen," James calls upon some of Kant's thoughts about the nature of God and soul. James paraphrases Kant, who believed that since these concepts "cover no distinctive sense-content," theoretically they are "devoid of any significance." However, Kant did concede that the concept of God and soul hold meaning in practice of life and that people have the right to act as if they held substance. In other words, people can live their lives *as if* there is a God.

## Martin Luther

James refers to Martin Luther (1483-1546), whose philosophy was to become the foundation of the Lutheran Church, in his lecture about the sick soul, and in later lectures, because of Luther's rather melancholic disposition. The quotes that James uses display Luther's sense of almost desperate need for a belief in a god.

## Frederic W. H. Myers

Frederic W. H. Myers (1843-1901) was a member of the Society for Psychical Research. During his lifetime, he published several essays on subliminal consciousness, a concept that James addresses in his lectures on conversion. James writes, "this discovery of a consciousness existing beyond the field . . . casts light on many phenomena of religious biography." Myers coined the word *automatism*, to which James refers. It is a reference to unaccountable impulses such as automatic writing, by which an individual writes things of which he or she claims not to understand the meaning. Later, James quotes from a letter from Myers in which Myers discusses prayer.

## John Henry Newman

John Henry Newman (1801-1890) was a cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church, and James quotes him in his lecture on philosophy that states that theology is "a science in the strictest sense of the word." Newman claimed that truths about God could be (and were) known and could be claimed as fact "just as we have a science of the stars and call it astronomy." James uses Newman to point out the dogmatic nature of institutionalized religion, in which feeling is valid only for the individual and "is pitted against reason," which is considered universally valid.



## Friedrich Nietzsche

Born in Prussia, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) has greatly influenced the philosophical world. James refers to Nietzsche's comments on saintliness, of which James states, "The most inimical critic of the saintly impulses whom I know is Nietzsche." Nietzsche contrasts saintliness to the aggressive nature of the military type, with emphasis and advantage on the latter. In other words, according to Nietzsche saintliness was a weakness.

## Saint John of the Cross

Cofounder of the Roman Catholic order of Carmelites and doctor of mystic theology, Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591) provides James in his lecture on saintliness with an extreme type of ascetic personality. James quotes St. John at length in a list of all the ways in which St. John finds to humiliate and humble himself. For example, St. John believed that people should not seek what is best in life but rather they should seek what is worst "so that you may enter for the love of Christ into a complete destitution."

## Edwin Diller Starbuck

Throughout the lecture on conversion, James often refers to the studies of E. D. Starbuck (1866-1947), a Stanford University professor who along with James was considered one of the pioneers in the study of the psychology of religion. In particular, James mentions Starbuck's statistical research on conversion among adolescents. Starbuck published several books after James's death, two of which are *The Psychology of Religion* (1911) and *Religion in Transition* (1937).

## Leo Tolstoy

James uses the story about Russian author Leo Tolstoy's long bout with melancholia and his subsequent recovery as an example of a conversion over a long period of time. Tolstoy (1828-1910) published an account of his depression and religious experience in his book *My Confession* (1887). He suffered from what James calls anhedonia, the "passive loss of appetite for all life's values." During this time, Tolstoy could find no reason to continue with life since everything he accomplished would end with his death. He could find no meaning in life, despite the fact that he was happily married, was a success, and received praise for his work from an international community. He often contemplated suicide during this period, although he states he never actually thought he would do it. Over the course of a year, he slowly began to realize that all humankind was put on this Earth to live for some reason. The concept of an infinite God broadened his scope and made him stop thinking about his own finite parameters.

## Walt Whitman

James uses American poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892) as his prime example of the healthyminded individual. James quotes one of Whitman's students, who states that Whitman could find supreme happiness just strolling outside and looking at the grass, the trees, and the sky. According to James, everything in life pleased Whitman, and he enjoyed a wide readership in his time (a readership that continues in the twenty-first century) because of his "systematic expulsion from his writing of all contractile elements." Whitman wrote in the first person not as an egotist, James writes, but as Universal Man. His poetry reassures his readers that everything in life is good. James also quotes Whitman in his lecture on mysticism, claiming that Whitman's poetry contains a "classical expression of this sporadic type of mystical experience."



# Themes

## Religion

In order to talk about religious experience, James must first define the term *religion*. He quickly points out that the main theme of his lectures is not the institution of religion but rather the personal experience of it. His focus is on the psychological aspects of religion, and to do this, he must deal with the individual. Following the same premise, he also states that it is not the rules and rituals of religious experience in which he is interested but the religious feelings and the emotions of the individual. To this end, he relies on stories about people he has known and works of literature and autobiography he has read. He writes that he does not want to use examples from religious people who follow "the conventional observances" of their country. In other words, he does not want to use examples of people who comply with the dictates of their church. Rather, he wants to use only people who have what he calls original experiences. The religion he refers to is that which "exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever." Having established this definition, James then tackles all aspects of the personal religious experiences.

## Belief

There is a sense of an unknown reality or power that exists in religious experiences. This sense is the basis of belief. Whatever this feeling is, it cannot be seen and yet it gives the believer the idea that there is some mystical order in life. As James writes, religious experience imparts the desire to align oneself with this power, as it is the source of supreme good in which all things are harmonious. This belief, James states, is the "religious attitude of the soul." Belief in general, James writes, is like stating "as if." Taking the concept from philosopher Immanuel Kant, James offers the conclusion that belief consists of accepting various concepts as if they exist, even though they cannot be proven. It is this belief that underlies all religious experience. In all the examples that James offers in this book, his subjects believe that they have had religious or spiritual experiences that make little rational sense, and each the occurrence is very real for the person who has it. Without belief, there would be no religion.

## Happiness and Depression

Having suffered through several years of depression and having come out of this with what he describes as a spiritual experience, James writes about this devastating state of mind as well as its contrasting emotion, happiness. He uses the poet Walt Whitman as the perfect example of healthymindedness, a state of acceptance of life that can lead to happiness. James believes that this state does not just mean the ability to laugh or to indulge oneself in pleasures but to maintain a persistent, enjoyable existence. It is more an inner happiness than an outer one, the kind of happiness that Whitman was able to



portray in his poetry a love of life. According to James, Whitman was able to write his poems in such a way that "a passionate and mystic ontological emotion suffuses" it and in the end persuades "the reader that men and women, life and death, and all things are divinely good."

However, there is a problem, according to James, if that healthy-minded person refuses to accept the existence of evil. In this case, the positive attitude has taken that person too far, refusing to accept reality. People who are so optimistic as to ignore the evil in life decline to even think about evil as that thinking, in and of itself, is also evil.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is what James refers to as the sick soul, an individual who maximizes evil. James writes that the question of evil and the resultant unhappiness that it brings is hard to ignore, for even in the life of a most purely happy individual, death still awaits. Then there is also the question of the source of evil. Is God, the all-good creator, also responsible for evil and unhappiness? Does evil exist as part of the whole, never to be destroyed? Or is it a separate entity that humankind can work toward erasing from reality? A healthy-minded person, James reports, would have to believe in the latter, that is, that evil can be rid from the system, that it is not part of the whole.

For people who believe that evil is a part of the whole, there are different degrees to how it affects them. "There are people for whom evil means only a mal-adjustment with *things*," James writes, "a wrong correspondence of one's life with the environment." This is a more curable type of evil. However, for other individuals, the problem goes much deeper. There is "a wrongness or vice in his essential nature, which no alteration of the environment, or any superficial rearrangement of the inner self, can cure, and which requires a supernatural remedy."

## Spiritual Enthusiam

There is a sense of happiness or excitement, James declares, in religious experiences. This excitement empowers the individual. It makes depression and melancholy fall away. Meaning is restored to life. There is created a deeper piety and desire to be charitable. Confidence and compassion for fellow beings is high. One becomes focused and earnest about one's goals, ridding one of inhibitions. Temptations that might formerly have deterred one from the path of saintliness are extinguished, and feelings of great happiness and freedom are immense. It is through the feelings, or rather through the observation of the one who experiences these feelings, that James measures religious experience. According to James, it is not the words of the individual claiming to have found religion, but rather through his or her being, empowered by strong emotions, that qualifies it as a truly religious experience.



## Pragmatism

The term pragmatism in everyday use implies practicality and common sense. However, the pragmatism to which James refers is actually a word he himself coined in regards to a particular element in the study of philosophy. It was through pragmatism that James attempted to apply scientific inquiry to the process of thinking. In an article for *American Heritage*, Louis Menand states that James suggested that all one had to do "was to ask what practical effects our choosing one view rather than another might have." James's intention in pragmatism, according to Menand, "was to open a window, in what he regarded as an excessively materialistic and scientific age, for faith in God."

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James applies pragmatism to the concept of God, relating his own comfort in doing so because he can eliminate many of the philosophical attributes of the concept of God and maintain only those that have an effect on him. For example, James could not fathom any reason for God to have attributes of indivisibility, simplicity, superiority, and self-felicity in Himself, as these had no practical applications for James. He states that since they have no connections to an individual's life, "what vital difference can it possibly make to a man's religion whether they be true or false?"



## Style

Since *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was originally delivered in the form of spoken lectures, the style of writing is dictated more by the rules of oration than by those of composition. A series of twenty separate lectures were given by James in 1901. In these lectures, James first presents his ideas, then defines their terms and provides examples to demonstrate the significance of his findings.

James talks directly to the audience in the firstperson point of view. His arguments follow a logical path, sometimes using questions to lead his discussion forward and next providing the responses as he interprets them. Since his lectures offer extensive material that must be slowly assimilated, he breaks down his information into easily digestible portions. His use of examples not only adds significance to his theories but also offers a break in the intellectual discourse. The examples put a face on the concepts James is trying to convey and are like stories within stories, often encompassing extraordinary events.

The structure of James's lectures follows a pattern that begins with the basic understanding of religion and neurology and then slowly rises from the more practical to the highest elevations of the spiritual, concluding with lectures on saintliness, mysticism, and philosophy. In so doing, James builds a strong foundation of understanding. He provides a language for all who are listening to him, so they will completely understand his meaning. For example, he makes it very clear that in his talks, he is in no way referring to any specific religious practice or belief. His motive is not to discuss specific established religions and their beliefs. His goal is only to expound on the psychological and philosophical role of religious belief in the individual experience. By carefully defining his terms, he relaxes the audience and helps it more carefully focus on his development as he moves away from definition and begins discourse of more abstract concepts.



# Historical Context

## James's Contemporaries

Alfred Adler (1870-1937), an Austrian psychiatrist, began his studies with Sigmund Freud but eventually disagreed with Freud's emphasis on sexual trauma as the main source of mental disorders and parted ways with him. Adler's main theory was that people should be studied as a whole, as beings who spend their lives reacting to the environment, rather than as a summation of their drives and emotions. In respect to religion, he contended that human belief in a God was one way of aspiring toward perfection. His theories were expounded in his book *Neurotic Constitution* (1912).

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), also an Austrian psychiatrist, is often called the father of psychoanalysis. His research on the unconscious still affects the study of psychology in the twenty-first century. His basic tenet was that people experience conflicts between what they desire and what are the confines of their societal customs. The development of religion, Freud contended, began with a child's need for a relationship with the father. Later in life, Freud published the book *The Future of Illusion* (1927), in which he debunked theories of religion on scientific grounds.

Carl Jung (1875-1961) was at one time a pupil of Freud, but like Adler, Jung also disagreed with Freud's emphasis on sexuality. Jung's interest was in the connection between the conscious and unconscious minds. One of his main theories stated there were two different properties of the unconscious; one was personal and the other was universal. Jung believed that humans have a natural religious function, and their psychic health depends on expressing it. His religious concepts can be found in his *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933) and *Psychology and Religion* (1938).

Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) was born in Germany, the son of a Lutheran pastor. Like James, Wundt was interested in both psychology and philosophy. He did research at the University of Leipzig on sensation and perception—similar to what James was doing at the same time at Harvard, with both men being credited with beginning what eventually was referred to as experimental psychology. Later in his life, Wundt focused on cultural psychology by studying the mythologies, cultural practices, literature, and art of various societies. In *Elements of Folk Psychology: Outlines of a Psychological History of the Development of Mankind* (1916), Wundt develops his concepts of religion.

## Political and Social Developments at the Turn of the Century

During the early 1900s, turmoil spread around the world. In the United States, great monopolies continued despite the passage in 1890 of the Sherman Antitrust Act. Unsafe working conditions at factories often resulted in death, and there were no protective laws in place to keep children out of the workplace. There were no mandatory laws to



provide guaranteed education, and only 10 percent of the population graduated from high school. Civil rights for minorities did not exist, and lynchings were on the rise in the South. A woman's right to vote was not written into an amendment until 1919. Internationally, World War I was waiting on the horizon.

On the positive side, the Wright brothers were perfecting their flying machines and Henry Ford established the Ford Motor Company, which would produce the first affordable automobiles, greatly influencing the overall wealth of the United States, and dramatically changing American culture. American pop culture, fashion, and fads spread quickly overseas. The first electric typewriter was invented, as was the hamburger, ice cream cone, comic book, jukebox, and telephone Yellow Pages. New York City put its first taxis on the streets, and the first Rose Bowl and first World Series were played.

In 1901 Theodore Roosevelt became the twenty-sixth American president. He pursued an aggressive thrust to make the United States one of the world powers in order to protect national security. When he took office, U.S. naval power was only the fifth strongest in the world, but he increased U.S. military strength so that a few years later only Britain exceeded the size and capabilities of the U.S. Navy. The Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which Roosevelt wrote, began the United States' role as a so-called peacekeeper or policeman in the world.

## Literature and the Arts in the Early 1900s

In 1900 Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* shocked the American public with its portrayal of a woman who uses her body and sexuality to attain success. In France, Auguste Rodin completed his sculpture *The Thinker*, while in Britain, Joseph Conrad published his novel *Lord Jim*. Also in Europe, Anton Chekhov produced his play *Uncle Vanya*, and Henri Matisse began the fauvist movement in painting, a form that integrated loud colors, primitive elements, and eccentric ideas on the canvas. A year later, another painter, Pablo Picasso, began his so-called blue period. Also in 1901, the first Nobel Prize in literature was awarded.

In 1903 the movie *The Great Train Robbery* excited audiences, who then demanded more fiction films. In the same year, Jack London wrote *The Call of the Wild*. Isadora Duncan opened the first school of modern dance in 1905 in Berlin. Audiences initially had a hard time understanding this dance form. In London, Richard Strauss presented his opera *Salome*, which included the shocking "Dance of the Seven Veils," a dance that ironically kept people filling the theater despite its so-called lewd expression. Several imitative versions of the opera and dance were performed throughout the United States and Europe in the years to come.

Joel Chandler Harris published *Uncle Remus and Br'er Rabbit* in 1906. Three years later, in 1909, Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* was recorded and packaged, becoming the first commercial "album" produced. That same year, the *New York Times* published the first-ever movie review.



## Critical Overview

When the world celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the publication of James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, it seemed upon rereading that James had written the book not only for the turn of the twentieth century but also for the turn of the twenty-first century. Listed as one of the most read books of the twentieth century, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is experiencing a rebirth and new understanding. This reawakening to James's work has been so strong that it is described by Erin Leib in an article for the *New Republic* as a "recent blizzard." In her article, Leib describes James as an "obsessively religious man, who was committed to devising a philosophy that would provide a foundation for spiritual experience, and to opening up room for faith in an increasingly secular world." In mentioning James's book in particular, Leib comments that *The Varieties of Religious Experience* "became one of the most widely read and most highly influential treatises on religion by an American." It did so, Leib notes, by "inaugurat[ing] a Copernican turn in religious studies away from the objective terms of religion—God, the cosmos—toward the subjective human experience of religion."

Charles Taylor—a professor of philosophy who, like James, has delivered the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh—has written a book on James titled *The Varieties of Religious Experience Today: William James Revisited* (2002). In an article for *Commonweal*, Taylor explains:

It is almost a hundred years since William James delivered his celebrated Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. I want to look again at this remarkable book, reflecting on what it has to say to us at the turn of a new century.

Taylor continues, "In fact it turns out to have a lot to say. It is astonishing how little dated it is. You can even find yourself forgetting that these lectures were delivered a hundred years ago."

In the same article, Taylor states, "James is our great philosopher of the cusp," referring to the space between the definition of religion as created by institutionalized religious practice and the "gut feeling" of the individual. The reason James's work remains so vibrant today, Taylor claims, "is because James stands so nakedly and so volubly in this exposed spot." The book, says Taylor, has "resonated" for over a century and "will go on doing so for many years to come."

Carol Zaleski, a professor at Smith College, wrote an article about *The Varieties of Religious Experience* for *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*. In this article Zaleski states that *The Varieties of Religious Experience* may not be James's best book, "but it is our best book about religious experience, our best defense against skeptics, and our surest incitement to a genuine public dialogue about the significance of personal religious experience for our common life." Although Zaleski is a little disappointed that James does not find spiritual comfort in any organized religion, she nonetheless claims that James's "great contribution is to make religion a live option for those estranged from traditional faith."



Zaleski wrote another article for the *Christian Century*, in the form of a letter to James. In the beginning of her letter, she acknowledges that *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is "the greatest modern book on personal religion." One of the reasons for this, she writes to James, is that "You remain the unsurpassed defender of religious experience against theories that reduce it to the product of this or that implacable force."

# Criticism

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# Critical Essay #1

*Hart, with degrees in English literature and creative writing, focuses her published works on literary themes. In this essay, Hart reflects on James's discussions on sublime happiness and on his reference to Tolstoy's experience with melancholia to better illuminate James's definition of a religious state of mind.*

William James begins his fourth lecture in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* with the question, "What is human life's chief concern?" Shortly thereafter he provides the answer, which is "happiness." Happiness, James tells his readers, is the source behind everything that an individual does, so much so that the overall goal of life is to gain, keep, or recover happiness. It is not mere laughter of which James speaks. It is something that goes much deeper. It goes so deep that this kind of happiness might even be referred to as a religious experience. James clarifies that happiness itself is not religion, but "we must admit that any persistent enjoyment may *produce* the sort of religion which consists in a grateful admiration of the gift of so happy an existence." Although happiness is not a religion, the "more complex ways of experiencing religion" are ways of "producing happiness." But to what kind of happiness is James referring?

To better understand happiness, it might be a good idea to uncover first what James refers to as unhappiness. One of the best examples of this emotional state, or what James calls a "religious melancholy," is provided through an excerpt from *My Confession* (1887) by famed Russian author Leo Tolstoy. Before offering Tolstoy's words, James, who defines Tolstoy's mental condition as anhedonia, or the "passive loss of appetite for all life's values," expounds on Tolstoy's state of mind by describing how the world might have appeared to Tolstoy when he was in the midst of his depression. In this state, familiar things that used to inspire him suddenly lost all value. In such a world of no meaning, emotions are drained from the objects and experiences that surround the person involved. For example, where once the sunset might have stirred the emotions of someone, with its beauty or overwhelming sense of romance, it no longer holds significance. In its place is only the fact that the sun is setting; a rainbow of colors tints the sky; and night falls. That is it. It is an event that does not elicit any feelings. There is no importance in one event over another. James compares the ability of an object to stir emotions to the power of love. A woman can stand in front of a man whom she does not love and no matter what that man does in her favor, if love is not there, it will never be there. It cannot be rationalized into existence. Conversely, if a woman loves a man, no matter what he does, he arouses her emotions. In other words, mental states come involuntarily. However, when certain emotions take over a person's mind, they change that person's life. The emotions, or passions of life, are gifts, James writes. They are also "non-logical." They cannot be explained by the intellect.

Tolstoy seems to agree with James, as he relates that his depression made no sense to him at all. There were no elements in his life on which the melancholy could be blamed. It came over him at a time in his life when he was enjoying tremendous success. He was also very much in love with his wife; his children were healthy; and the family lived in a beautiful home. However, for some reason the value of these things was totally



withdrawn from him, to the point that Tolstoy considered suicide. What did it matter that he had all these things, Tolstoy began to wonder, when in the end he would die and all these things would fade away? No matter how hard Tolstoy tried to reason with his despair, the only concept that came to him was, as quoted in James, "the meaningless absurdity of life." So why continue it?

Tolstoy had lost the gift, the abstraction that gives value to life, and no matter what he did with his rational mind, he could not find it. His passageway out of his depression came to him gradually, in what he refers to as a thirst for God, a feeling that rose out of his heart, not his intellect.

So there are now two aspects that help to define this feeling of happiness that motivates all beings. First it is not something that can be thought up. It has nothing to do with the intellect. Rather, it comes from the heart and it comes as a gift. James also relates that this gift—which physiologists of his day stated came from the personal organism, while theologians said it came from the grace of God—will give the lucky person who receives it "a new sphere of power." When all else fails in the outward world, the person on whom this gift is bestowed will have an inward "enthusiastic temper of espousal" that will redeem and vivify him or her. While those without the gift of happiness will be totally destroyed, the gifted person will triumph.

James adds more information about this emotion that colors and fills life with value by giving it the attribute of solemnity. The concept of solemnity, James admits, is hard to define, but nonetheless, he attempts to shine a little light on the topic. "It is never crude," he writes. It is also never simple. He states that ironically "it seems to contain a certain measure of its own opposite in solution." In other words, within this state of solemn happiness is also the state of sadness, as if the two define one another. This gives the reader a better grasp on the depth of happiness to which James refers. It is now easier to understand how this happiness is not the simple laughter at some joke. Solemn happiness is not caused by what James refers to as any of the animal pleasures of life, those of the body. It is something more sublime and sustaining. "This sort of happiness in the absolute and everlasting," James writes, "is what we find nowhere but in religion."

Only as a religious experience does happiness penetrate a person so deeply. This religious happiness is not a momentary escape from a person's hardships or fears. Again James states that it is hard to explain this kind of happiness; that a person will only understand it if she or he experiences it firsthand. However, he does say that solemn happiness is so great that it causes a person to not even consider escape, because somewhere deep inside, this person knows that whatever is presently considered a challenge has already, on some other level, been overcome. It gives the individual a sense that "a higher happiness holds a lower unhappiness in check." An individual who experiences this kind of happiness is also not afraid of challenges and in many instances welcomes them. Along with the gift of solemn happiness also comes the willingness for self-sacrifice and surrender. Without the gift, a person might be willing to sacrifice and might even do so without complaint; but the person who has this





form of sublime happiness will go out of his or her way to seek such challenges, believing that in doing so his or her happiness will increase.

Returning to Tolstoy's story, readers will find that in his healing process, Tolstoy rekindled his sense of faith. "Faith is the sense of life," he writes. "It is the force by which we live." Taking Tolstoy's comment and adding it to James's concept that happiness underlies everything that people do, readers have to conclude that faith and happiness are related. James actually insinuates this in his narrative on Tolstoy when he writes that Tolstoy struggled with his depression because he was only considering the finite objects of life. This was all that his rational mind could do. It was not until Tolstoy freed his thinking to include the emotions, or irrational sentiments, that he was able to allow faith to enter his consciousness. Not until Tolstoy recognized that the emptiness he was feeling was due to his concentration to please only his "animal needs" was he able to release himself. By changing his focus to his higher, more sacred needs, Tolstoy was able to restore his faith. James writes, "therein lay happiness again."

The infinite, as represented by the concept of an everlasting God, allowed Tolstoy to broaden his ideas about life. Once he concentrated on the feeling of God's presence, "glad aspirations towards life" arose inside of him. After this, Tolstoy simplified his life. He dropped out of the society of intellectuals whose main purpose was to understand living only in context of the rational. He was then able to better understand and appreciate the life of the "peasants, and has felt right and happy . . . ever since."

James claims that Tolstoy's change in life was based on an inner conflict. His soul craved more than the surface happiness of the intellectual society of which he was a major member. He needed a period of deeper inner reflection in order to fully comprehend how shallow his happiness was. He needed to discover his soul's "genuine habitat and vocation," as James puts it. He had to find the truth of his soul. With this statement, James seems to be inferring that it is in finding the truth of one's soul that one finds happiness—the deep, spiritual, and sublime form of this emotion. If happiness is a gift that one cannot find merely in a rational exploration, maybe James is implying that through deep introspection, a person might, in the least, prepare the way for that gift to appear and thus create his or her own variety of religious experience.

**Source:** Joyce Hart, *Critical Essay on The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, Gale, 2003.



## Critical Essay #2

*Norvell is an independent educational writer who specializes in English and literature and who has done graduate work in religion. In this essay, Norvell outlines five key, recurring issues in debate over religious experience and how James's discussion of these issues is relevant to today's readers.*

No book becomes a classic unless it has something to say to generations of readers. One of the remarkable things about *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is how much of it is still timely one hundred years after its first publication, in spite of massive changes in society, culture, and science.

An important reason for the book's lasting relevance is that it deals with many of the polarities that perennially characterize debate about religious experience: psychology versus spirituality, naturalism versus supernaturalism, and so on. Even more important, though, is *how* James deals with these issues. His rational, detached approach sets him apart from a large majority of commentators both in his own time and today, making his book a useful tool for thoughtful readers seeking to make sense of religious arguments that are often fueled more by emotions than facts.

The defining characteristic of discussions of religious matters is that they tend to be extremely polarized. The people who bother to debate religion at all are people who have strong feelings about it. As well, most of them have entrenched positions that they are committed to defending. For example, many commentators are members of the clergy. Whatever opinions they hold have been taught to them by authority figures at least from their school days and possibly from their childhoods. Their careers, their paychecks, their acceptance in their social circles and even within their families are all dependent upon their continued embrace and energetic defense of whatever religious ideas they profess. If they were to admit uncertainty or error on any substantive issue, all the structures of their lives would crumble. This is why religious debate is so often highly emotional and even vicious. The participants have everything to lose, and therefore they defend their long-held beliefs at all cost. Too often, facts and realities that seem to contradict their beliefs are suppressed, denied, or twisted beyond recognition; objective reality is sacrificed to subjective beliefs.

Of course, the same phenomenon occurs on the side of anti-religionists. Psychologists, for example—whose careers and social networks often also depend upon their loyalties to certain belief—may set themselves up against religious interpretations of life (more about this below), refuse to confront facts that do not fit their dearly held theories, and label religious experience as "disease."

This makes James a rarity. He is an objective, emotionally detached commentator. He was a man who, by his own account, did not experience the supernatural and ecstatic states he writes about, yet he had no desire to deem them invalid or pathological just because they were foreign to him. He was a psychologist who was more interested in an accurate understanding of human experience than he was in elevating his own



discipline above the claims of religion. He comes to the discussion not as someone with a position to defend but as someone seeking to understand a particular dimension of human experience. This makes James a valuable mediator of ideas that are often spoken of as being irreconcilable. He subjects the polarities of religious debate to logic and observation. In some cases, he finds that what had seemed to be opposing ideas can be reconciled. In others, he makes a clearly reasoned case for one idea over another.

The remainder of this essay will briefly examine five issues that are as divisive today as they were when James wrote, and James's position on each one.

In James's day, psychology and religion regarded each other as irrelevant at best and as destructive at worst. The leading voices of the two disciplines saw themselves as being engaged in a battle for the same turf, which psychologists called the psyche and religionists called the soul. Each side claimed to have the authoritative truth about the nature of the psyche/soul. To give one important example, conversion experiences sprang from the individual's own mind and were often pathological according to psychology, but had a divine source and a supremely beneficial purpose according to religion.

Although James was a psychologist (among other professions), his conclusions are that there is no real, inevitable polarity between psychology and religion and that religion has things to teach psychology. James reiterates throughout his book that psychology, like other sciences, is incomplete; it does not yet understand all human phenomena. Therefore, he reasons, it is inappropriate for psychology to diagnose and label religious experiences; and it is highly inappropriate to label as pathological a phenomenon such as conversion that has beneficial results. (James's definition of a conversion experience is limited, and he is well aware that not every emotional experience is in fact a spiritual experience that bears the expected fruit.)

Readers who are familiar with the tenor of modern psychology know that it still is often in conflict with religion. In his introduction to a collection of essays on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that appeared in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, editor Michel Ferrari writes that one of the essayists "notes that *Varieties* promotes the radical idea that religious experience has something important to contribute to psychology and wonders why we are no closer to implementing this idea one hundred years after the publication of *Varieties*."

James's efforts at peacemaking may have been ignored by psychology and religion as institutions, but they have no doubt been helpful to countless individuals seeking to make sense of the institutions' competing claims.

The debate between naturalism and supernaturalism raged in James's times and rages on today. Some people believe in supernatural forces and events; some do not. James patiently explains that if an idea or hypothesis cannot be proven, it does not logically follow that the idea is false. It may be that the available methods of seeking proof are inadequate. The history of the humble aspirin tablet is often used to explain this idea.



Unlike today's new medications, aspirin was widely used for about a century before it was subjected to any controlled testing, because such tests simply had not yet been developed. During this time, some physicians and others claimed that aspirin had no efficacy beyond that of a placebo; no one could prove that it worked, they reasoned, and therefore it did not work. When more sophisticated tests were finally available, researchers were able to discover exactly how aspirin worked to alleviate pain and to understand why it was so effective, as millions of "faithful" users had long known. James makes a similar case for the possibility of supernatural forces and experiences; the fact that science cannot (yet) apprehend them is not proof that they are not there.

The medical scientists and intellectuals of James's day generally thought that so-called supernatural experiences were actually side effects of physical disturbances such as fever or trauma. In addition to being a psychologist, James was also an expert in anatomy, and so the medical scientists were part of his intellectual community. Once again, however, he was willing to part ways with them when logic and facts led him to do so. He took the view that science should not call invalid what its methods were incapable of measuring, and based on his own observations and research (and against his own lack of experience of the supernatural) he concluded that the supernatural does exist apart from natural causes such as illness.

Having set himself against his own professional and intellectual communities by making a case for spirituality apart from psychology and for the supernatural, James goes on to set himself against the mainstream religious authorities of his time by endorsing religious pluralism over the exclusive truth-claims of any one religion.

James's research showed him that adherents of many different religions—Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and others—have remarkably similar religious experiences with virtually identical results in the lives of the affected individuals. Therefore, he concluded that it is not logical that one of these religions is true and the others are false.

On this issue, the passage of time has brought a shift toward James's point of view. But the issue is still a divisive one in an American culture that is home to many religions, some of which make competing claims to exclusive truth. Here, too, James's voice is one of calm reason amid a sea of shouts.

Positive thinking, then called "mind-cure," was all the rage in James's day. In the simplest terms, the idea of mind-cure is that evil does not really exist except as an idea in people's minds and that to banish thoughts of evil from one's mind is to be free of all evil. The definition of evil is broad, including physical injury and illness as well as acts of violence. According to mind-cure, any person who never thinks of such things will never fall victim to them.

This issue remains relevant and much debated today because a strain of mind-cure thinking runs through many ideas and philosophies that come under the broad heading "New Age." In the last half of the twentieth century, much of American society embraced, or at least flirted with the idea that all morality is relative and nothing is good or evil in an absolute sense. Often bundled with this philosophy was the concept that individuals



were the creators of their own destinies and had the power, through positive thinking and other similar methods, to determine what would happen to them.

As he often does, James takes a middle course. He acknowledges that the many firsthand reports of success with these methods are evidence that there is some truth in the philosophies underlying them. But he concludes that these philosophies give only a partially accurate view of reality; evil does have objective existence, he argues, and cannot always be escaped under any circumstances. His brief discussion of evil is a valuable contribution to humankind's efforts to answer what may be the most difficult questions of all: Does evil exist, and if so, why?

Finally, there is one further often-debated issue that James addresses in a way that can provide guidance to today's readers. It was true in his time as it is now that people who are trying to evaluate the claims of religion are often faced with a stark contrast between what a religion teaches and how its members behave. Religious seekers who have been assured that adopting a religion will make them better people are more than occasionally disappointed to find that long-time adherents of that very same religion are no better than they themselves are, and perhaps worse. In recent years, Americans have seen some of their most respected religious authorities arrested for horrific crimes and humiliated in the media for immoral behavior. Understandably, this causes some people to conclude that religion has no power to improve people.

James confronts this issue in its particularly American form. American Christianity, more than that of other countries, has focused on the conversion experience as the culmination of spiritual life. So James tackles the question of why people who claim to have had such experiences sometimes behave no differently than they did in the past. The painful spectacle, for example, of baseball player Daryl Strawberry's serial conversions and alternating periods of drug abuse and criminal activity leave many sincere seekers either deeply confused or completely skeptical about the reality and meaning of religious experience.

James's discussions of the nature of the conversion experience and its place in the larger context of spiritual life, and of the broader issue of emotional experience and its relation to moral and behavioral reform, help readers grapple with these issues in a thoughtful, sophisticated way.

Religion and religious experience are difficult subjects to come to terms with, as even James acknowledges. Yet the urge to come to terms with them is virtually universal. A large majority of individuals, at some time in their lives, find themselves engaged with these issues. James's book is a true classic in that it provides valuable help in thinking about complex issues that, in various guises, face every generation of readers.

**Source:** Candyce Norvell, Critical Essay on The Varieties of Religious Experience, in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Gale, 2003.



## Critical Essay #3

*In the following essay, Taylor explores the continued relevance of The Varieties of Religious Experience, finding its ideas concerning the need for spiritual belief in an age of science fitting for today's world.*

It is almost a hundred years since William James delivered his celebrated Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. I want to look again at this remarkable book, reflecting on what it has to say to us at the turn of a new century.

In fact it turns out to have a lot to say. It is astonishing how little dated it is. You can even find yourself forgetting that these lectures were delivered a hundred years ago.

What was James's take on religion? What was the wider agenda of which it was part? Like any sensitive intellectual of his time and place, James had to argue against the voices, within and without, that held that religion was a thing of the past, that one could no longer in conscience believe in this kind of thing in an age of science. A passage in *Varieties* gives a sense of what is at stake in this inner debate. James is speaking of those who are for one reason or another incapable of religious conversion. He refers to some whose "inaptitude" is intellectual in origin:

Their religious faculties may be checked in their natural tendency to expand, by beliefs about the world that are inhibitive, the pessimistic and materialistic beliefs, for example, within which so many good souls, who in former times would have freely indulged their religious propensities, find themselves nowadays, as it were, frozen; or the agnostic vetoes upon faith as something weak and shameful, under which so many of us today lie cowering, afraid to use our instincts.

A fuller discussion of these "agnostic vetoes," and the answer to them, occurs in James's essay "The Will to Believe." Here it is plain that the main source of the vetoes is a kind of ethics of belief illustrated, James contends, in the work of English mathematician and philosopher William Clifford (1845-79). Clifford's *The Ethics of Belief* starts from a notion of what proper scientific procedure is: Never turn your hypotheses into accepted theories until the evidence is adequate. It then promotes this into a moral precept for life in general.

The underlying picture of our condition, according to Clifford, is that we find certain hypotheses more pleasing, more flattering, more comforting, and are thus tempted to believe them. It is the path of manliness, courage, and integrity to turn our backs on these facile comforts, and face the universe as it really is. But so strong are the temptations to deviate from this path that we must make it an unbreakable precept never to give our assent unless the evidence compels it. James quotes Clifford: "It is wrong always, and everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

James opposes to this his own counterprinciple:





Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passionate decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.

Backing this principle is James's own view of the human predicament. Clifford assumes that there is only one road to truth: We put the hypotheses that appeal to us under severe tests, and those that survive are worthy of adoption—the kind of procedure whose spirit was recaptured in our time by Karl Popper's method of conjectures and refutation. To put it dramatically, we can win the right to believe a hypothesis only by first treating it with maximum suspicion and hostility. James holds, on the contrary, that there are some domains in which truths will be hidden from us unless we go at least halfway toward them. Do you like me or not? If I am determined to test this by adopting a stance of maximum distance and suspicion, the chances are that I will forfeit the chance of a positive answer. An analogous phenomenon on the scale of the whole society is social trust; doubt it root and branch, and you will destroy it.

But can the same kind of logic apply to religion, that is, to a belief in something that by hypothesis is way beyond our power to create? James thinks it can.

What is created is not God or the eternal, but there is a certain grasp of these, and a certain succor from these that can never be ours unless we open Jonathan Edwards, whose teachings James draws on throughout his lectures ourselves to them in faith. James is, in a sense, building on the Augustinian insight that in certain domains love and self-opening enable us to understand what we would never grasp otherwise.

What does that tell us about what the path of rationality consists in for someone who stands on the threshold, deciding whether he should permit himself to believe in God? On one side is the fear of believing something false if he follows his instincts here. But on the other there is the hope of opening out what are now inaccessible truths through the prior step of faith. Faced with this double possibility it is no longer so clear that Clifford's ethic is the appropriate one, because it was taking account of only the first possibility. As James notes,

I, therefore, cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, or willfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for the plain reason, that *a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.*

The minimal form of James's argument is, then, that the supposed superior rationality of the "agnostic veto" on belief—don't believe in God until you have overwhelming evidence—disappears once you see that there is an option between two risks of loss of truth.



Everybody should be free to choose his own kind of risk. But this minimal form easily flips into a stronger variant, which is captured by the italicized clause I have just quoted. Taking the agnostic stance could here be taxed as the less rational one.

This is similar grounds to those laid out in Pascal's famous wager. James evokes this early in *Varieties* and treats it rather caustically. But on reflection, this may be because the Pascalian form is specially directed to converting the interlocutor to Catholicism, to "Masses and holy water." But if one takes the general form of Pascal's argument here—that you should weight two risks not only by their probabilities but also by their prospective "payoffs"—then James himself seems to entertain something of the sort. Religion is not only a "forced option," that is, one in which there is no third way, no way of avoiding choice, but it is also a "momentous option. We are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and to lose by our nonbelief, a certain vital good." The likeness increases when we reflect that Pascal never thought of his wager argument as standing alone, appealing as it were purely to the betting side of our nature, to the instincts that take over when we enter the casinos at Las Vegas. He, too, holds the Augustinian view that in matters divine we need to love before we know.

But the issue could be put in other terms again. The single-risk view of the agnostics seems more plausible than James's double-risk thesis because they take for granted that our desires can only be an obstacle to our finding the truth. The crucial issue is thus the place of "our volitional nature" in the theoretical realm. The very idea that things will go better in the search for truth if you keep out passion, desire, and willing seems utterly implausible to James—not just for the reason he thinks he has demonstrated, that certain truths only open to us as a result of our commitment, but also because it seems so clear to him that we never operate this way.

So one way he frames the issue is that the agnostic vetoers are asking that he "willfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game." But from another standpoint, neither side is really doing this. Agnosticism "is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law." To put it in the harsh language of a later politics, those who claim to be keeping passion out are suffering from false consciousness. This is not the way the mind works at all. Rationalism gives an account of only a part of our mental life, and one that is "relatively superficial."

It is the part which has the prestige undoubtedly, for it has the loquacity, it can challenge you for proofs, and chop logic, and put you down with words. But it will fail to convince or convert you all the same, if your dumb intuitions are opposed to its conclusions. If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits. Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of the result; and something in you absolutely knows that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it.

James has in a sense opened up to view an important part of the struggle between belief and unbelief in modern culture. We can see it, after a fashion, from both sides of





the fence: even though James has himself come down on one side, we can still feel the force of the other side. Of course, the objections to belief are not only on epistemological grounds. There are also those who feel that the God of theism has utterly failed the challenge of theodicy: how we can believe in a good and omnipotent God, given the state of the world?

But if we keep to the epistemological-moral issue of the ethics of belief, James clarifies why it always seems to end in a standoff. (1) Each side is drawing on very different sources, and (2) our culture as a whole cannot seem to get to a point where one of these no longer speaks to us. And yet (3) we cannot seem to function at all unless we relate to one or the other.

The reason the argument is so difficult, and so hard to join, is that each side stands within its own view of the human moral predicament. The various facets of each stance support each other, so that there seems nowhere you can justifiably stand out side. The agnostic view propounds some picture (or range of pictures) of the universe and human nature. This has going for it that it can claim to result from "science," with all the prestige that this carries with it. It can even look from the inside as though this was all you need to say. But from the outside it isn't at all clear that what everyone could agree are the undoubted findings of modern natural science quite add up to a proof of, say, materialism, or whatever the religion-excluding view is.

From the inside the "proof" seems solid, because certain interpretations are ruled out on the grounds that they seem "speculative" or "metaphysical." From the outside, this looks like a classical *petitio principii*. But from the inside the move seems unavoidable, because it is powered by certain ethical views. These are the ones that James laid bare: It is wrong, uncourageous, unmanly, a kind of self-indulgent cheating, to have recourse to this kind of interpretation, which we know appeals to something in us, offers comfort, or meaning, and which we therefore should fend off, unless absolutely driven to them by the evidence, which is manifestly not the case. The position holds firm because it locks together a scientific-epistemological view and a moral one.

From the other side, the same basic phenomena show up, but in an entirely different shape. One of the crucial features that justifies aversion to certain interpretations from the agnostic standpoint, namely that they in some way attract us, shows up from the believer's standpoint as what justifies our interest. And that very much for the reasons which James explores, namely that this attraction is the hint that there is something important here which we need to explore further, that this exploration can lead us to something of vital significance, which would otherwise remain closed to us. Epistemology and ethics (in the sense of intuitions about what is of crucial importance) combine here.

From this standpoint, the agnostic's closure is self-inflicted, the claim that there is nothing here which ought to interest us a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. A similar accusation of circularity is hurled in the other direction. The believer is thought to have invented the delusion that beguiles him.



As we saw, the attraction of certain feelings and intuitions has a totally different significance in the two stances. This totality forces a choice; one cannot accord the two rival meanings to these crucial features at the same time. You can't really sit on the fence, because you need some reading of these features to get on with life.

And yet both these stances remain possible to many people in our world. Secularists once hoped that with the advance of science and enlightenment, and the articulation of a new, humanist ethic, the illusory nature of religion would be more and more apparent, and its attractions would fade, indeed, give way to repulsion. Many believers thought that unbelief was so clearly a willed blindness that people would one day wake up and see through it once and for all. But this is not how it has worked out, not even perhaps how it could work out. People go on feeling a sense of unease at the world of unbelief: some sense that something big, something important has been left out, some level of profound desire has been ignored, some greater reality outside us has been closed off. The articulations given to this unease are very varied, but it persists, and they recur in ever more ramified forms. But at the same time, the sense of dignity, control, adulthood, autonomy, connected to unbelief go on attracting people, and seem set to do so into an indefinite future.

What is more, a close attention to the debate seems to indicate that most people feel both pulls. They have to go one way, but they never fully shake off the call of the other. So the faith of believers is fragilized, not just by the fact that other people, equally intelligent, often equally good and dedicated, disagree with them, but also by the fact that they can still see themselves as reflected in the other perspective, that is, as drawn by a too-indulgent view of things. For what believer doesn't have the sense that her view of God is too simple, too anthropocentric, too indulgent? We all lie to some extent "cowering" under "the agnostic vetoes upon faith as something weak and shameful."

On the other side, the call to faith is still there as an understood temptation. Even if we think that it no longer applies to us, we see it as drawing others. Part of the great continuing interest of James's century-old work is that it lays out the dynamics of this battle so well and clearly. He is on one side, but he helps you imagine what it's like to be on either. In one way, we might interpret him as having wanted to show that you ought to come down on one side, the stronger thesis I offered above; but the weaker reading is just that he wanted to rebut the idea that reason forces you to the agnostic choice. As Edward Madden puts it in his introduction to *The Will to Believe*, James might be seen as arguing really for a "right to believe"; the right to follow one's own gut instinct in this domain, free of an intimidation grounded in invalid arguments.

What is especially striking about this account is that it brings out the bare issue so starkly, uncomplicated by further questions. It gives a stripped-down version of the debate; and this in two ways, both of which connect centrally to James's take on religion as experience. First, precisely because he abandons so much of the traditional ground of religion, because he has no use for collective connections through sacraments or ways of life, because the intellectual articulations are made secondary, the key point—what to make of the gut instinct that there is something more?—stands out very clearly.



And this allows us to see the second way in which James focuses the debate. It is after all to do with religious experience, albeit in a sense somewhat more generic than James's. As one stands on the cusp between the two great options, it is all a matter of the sense you have that there is something more, bigger, outside you. Now whether, granted you take the faith branch, this remains "religious experience" in James's special sense, steering clear of collective connections and over-theorization, is a question yet to be determined. But as you stand on the cusp, all you have to go on is a (very likely poorly articulated) gut feeling.

James is our great philosopher of the cusp. He tells us more than anyone else about what it's like to stand in that open space and feel the winds pulling you now here, now there. He describes a crucial site of modernity and articulates the decisive drama enacted there. It took very exceptional qualities to do this. Very likely it needed someone who had been through a searing experience of "morbidity" as James had been, and had come out the other side. But it also needed someone of wide sympathy and extraordinary powers of phenomenological description; further, it needed someone who could feel and articulate the continuing ambivalence in himself. It probably also needed someone who had ultimately come down, with whatever inner tremors, on the faith side; but this may be a bit of believers' chauvinism that I am adding to the equation.

In any event, it is because James stands so nakedly and so volubly in this exposed spot that his work has resonated for a hundred years, and will go on doing so for many years to come.

**Source:** Charles Taylor, "Risking Belief: Why William James Still Matters," in *Commonweal*, Vol. 129, No. 5, March 8, 2002, pp. 14-17.



## Critical Essay #5

Whatever philosophical conclusions were to result from his inquiry, James was convinced that a psychological approach was necessary because of the intimate connection religion bears to individual, personal experience. It was for this reason that he turned to works of piety, autobiographies, confessions, and diaries for his primary material. He made clear at the outset that the question as to what the religious propensities are and what their philosophical significance may be represent two distinct and different orders of question. This distinction in turn translates itself into the difference between determining the origin and nature of something and seeking for its meaning or importance. The former he called an existential proposition and the latter a judgment of value. James held that neither "can be deduced immediately from the other," but that the two can be connected through a theory specifying what peculiarities a feeling, state of mind, or belief taken as fact would have to possess in order to have value for some purpose.

As is well known, James rejected "medical materialism," by which he meant the attempt to "explain" states of mind and their significance for the one who has them through the individual's physical constitution. The conversion experience of Saint Paul, for example, would, on this approach, be understood through his epileptic symptoms. In opposition to this type of analysis, James insisted that causes and origins do not furnish the key to the meaning and value of experience; we must look instead to the fruits of our experience, not excluding the immediate delight we take in it. James's three criteria for judging these fruits—immediate luminousness, philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness—owe much to what he had learned from such works as Edwards' *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* and the writings of Saint Teresa. James was under no illusion about the difficulty of applying these criteria. These tests, as Perry has pointed out, have roots in James's own philosophy, but it would be a mistake to suppose that he imposed them solely on his own initiative, for they reflect as well the criteria he saw being used by those engaged in assessing the validity of their own religious experience.

In marking out the topic, James made it clear that his central concern would be religion as it appears in the life and experience of the individual, in contrast to institutional and theological concerns. This emphasis is most evident in the well-known working definition of "religion" proposed for the purpose of the lectures—"*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*" In a way that is reminiscent of Tillich's characterization of religion as "ultimate concern." James supplemented his definition by calling religion "a man's total reaction upon life," but with the understanding that it must be "solemn" as opposed to a trifling or cynical type of response. In his contrast of religion with morality, James, seeking to lay hold of what is distinctive of religion, set forth one of his deepest insights into the religious dimension.

For James the moral personality is one motivated by objective ends and not merely by personal considerations; dedication to these ends he saw as heroic because it calls for



energy and may bring hardship and pain. James saw morality as a kind of cosmic patriotism always in need of *volunteers*. He chose that term advisedly because it focuses on the distinctive feature of the moral hero—"the effort of volition." "The moralist," writes James, "must hold his breath and keep his muscles tense" in a stance toward life which is akin to an "athletic attitude." This attitude, in James's view, has its own value and is sufficient if all goes well, but it seemed to him that the moral personality lacks something that the religious man enjoys. James believed that the insufficiency of morality becomes manifest when the athletic attitude breaks down in the face of the decay of our bodies, or when a morbid fear arises from a sense of powerlessness and the failure of our purposes. To sustain life under these circumstances we need consolation in our weakness and a feeling that there is a spirit in the universe that recognizes and secures our life despite our shortcomings. James saw at this point what many have come to recognize as the absolutely distinctive feature of the religious: "There is a state of mind known to religious men, but to no other, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God. . . . Fear is not held in abeyance as it is by mere morality, it is positively expunged and washed away." This religious feeling, the "gift of grace" which cannot be commanded at will, James regarded as an addition to the person's life in the form of a special happiness that goes beyond finite escapes, reliefs, and liberations. As James correctly saw, those who think of religion largely in terms of an "escape" miss the essential point; from the religious standpoint there is no need for escape because of the firm conviction that the evil of the world has been *permanently* overcome. How religion annuls annihilation is said to be "religion's secret," and to understand it one must be a religious person of "the extreme type."

We shall, of course, have more dealings with surrender in connection with the sick soul and regeneration. It is sufficient now to emphasize James's concern to grasp what belongs, to religion as such, in contrast to those states of mind which "fall short" of that mark. James was well aware that morality requires a surrender of petty and egotistical concerns, but he regarded the *form* of the surrender in religion as unique. In religion, he claimed, surrender is "positively espoused" in an attitude of joy; in other frames of mind surrender may be accepted as a necessity and sacrifice endured without complaint, but the surplus of joy is missing. It is remarkable indeed and a testimony to James's willingness to follow the facts that, despite his strong commitment to the moral and strenuous life, he nevertheless recognized the limits of moral endeavor and had a genuine appreciation for the religious insight that tells us there are goods in human life only to be attained by surrender or "letting go."

As James rightly saw, religion is not something that can be understood by attending only to the individual self, a fact underlined in his working definition. There he refers to the individual standing in *relation* to whatever is taken to be "the divine," and this means a response to a reality *standing beyond the self*—the unseen order. Religion in the broadest terms involves the belief that there is, an unseen order and that our supreme good is found in harmoniously adjusting ourselves to it. Here he was echoing the view, well established among philosophers and historians of religion, that the most ancient and pervasive conception of the divine is to be found in the idea of a *sacred order*



embracing justice and truth and presiding over human destiny. James repeatedly insisted that whatever other beliefs religion may include, the conviction that reality is not exhausted by the visible world is absolutely essential.

Belief in the unseen world has special significance for James because it shows our capacity to respond to what is in consciousness as an object not of the senses but of thought alone, and he was interested in determining how the sentiment of reality gradually adheres to what comes before us in the form of pure ideas for which there is no corresponding model in any past experience. In passages that may indeed sound strange coming from an "empiricist," James argued that not only in religion but in our knowledge of nature abstract ideas "form the background for all our facts" and that through them we are able to understand and to deal with the world. That our minds can be so determined by abstractions he took to be one of the cardinal "facts in our human constitution." In the realm of religion this background shows itself in the form of an object of belief—the unseen world—calling forth such a powerful sentiment of reality that a person's entire life is affected by it, even though that "object" is not present to our mind in the sense that we could give it a definite description. In support of his claim, James perceptively pointed out that there are "ethical societies" or "churches without a God" where the moral law is regarded as more real than the objects of ordinary experience and that many scientists look upon the "laws of nature" with a reverence that borders on the religious. We shall have occasion later to see the significant role that the idea of the cosmic order came to play in James's development of his hypothesis about the "More" and the individual's relation to it.

James had his ambivalences and ambiguities; he could, for example, denounce rationalism and the *a priori* while commending an experiential approach and yet at the same time side with the *a priorists* in their account of basic categories and necessary truths, concluding that in this matter "the so-called Experience philosophy has failed to prove its point." Therefore we must not be misled by the emphasis he placed on the role of pure ideas in support of his claim about the unseen world. For we are also told that the feeling of reality is more like a sensation than an intellectual function and that feelings of this sort are more convincing than the results of reasoning. It would appear, then, that reason is not the source of the sense of reality nor can it help buttress that sense. According to James, the convictions about what is real that determine the course of lives derive from a level deeper than argument. He was quite confident that we *know* that those premises prepared in our subconscious life which now impinge on our consciousness are *true* than any arguments to the contrary. Bradley once remarked that metaphysics consists in finding bad reasons for what we all believe on instinct; similarly, James maintained that in religion and metaphysics, rational articulation has its force only when feelings of reality "have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion." This would certainly suggest that, despite James's talk about our intuitions and reason working together, the relation between the two is more akin to that of master and slave; "Our impulsive belief," James writes, "is here always what sets up the original body of truth, and our philosophy is but its showy verbalized translation."

To consider the issue posed here at any length would take us too far afield; one point, however, must be noted in an effort to avoid confusion. James could have retained his





view that the sense of reality attaching to belief in the unseen is not the product of coercive argument and even retained his claim that religious experience has no intellectual content of its own, *without* also assigning a status to concepts and arguments which *ipso facto* excludes them from making any positive contribution to the interpretation and appraisal of religious experience. This point is crucial, and it stems entirely from James's failure to develop a consistent theory of the nature and role of concepts; at times he held a positive view according to which concepts perform the valid function of articulating meaning implicit in direct experience, while at others he saw concepts as mere surrogates for such experience, second-hand and derivative forms of expression to be set, as dead formulas, against the individual's living encounters with reality. The latter view, if pushed consistently, would militate against James's own analyses in *Varieties* itself. It is most likely that he did not feel the need to consider the matter further because, as he said, his claim is not that it is *better* for the subconscious and nonrational to hold primacy in religion, but rather "that they do so hold it as a matter of fact." Fact, it would seem, is as capable of ending an argument as it is of supporting one.



## Critical Essay #6

The key to understanding what James meant by the sick soul has two aspects: first, the idea is intimately related to his distinction between the "once-born" and the "twice-born," and, second, the predicament of the sick soul stands in marked contrast to what James called "the religion of healthy-mindedness." The onceborn dwell on the cheer, the goodness, the light, the beneficence, and the kindness in the world and envisage no obstacles that cannot be overcome by holding fast to the attitude of optimism. The twiceborn are acutely aware of the darker aspects of the universe, the evil it contains, and the human propensities that contribute to sorrow, suffering, sin, and corruption; they, moreover, find no resolution for this situation either in the denial of the reality of these facts or in the belief that they can be overcome by human resources alone. *The sick soul obviously falls within the second category and finds the world's meaning not in any turning away from or denial of evil, but rather in coming to terms with it in the fear and anguish of personal life.* The once-born, on the contrary, look upon the expressed concerns of the sick soul as "morbid" and self-defeating, ills that are easily vanquished by firmly adhering to the optimistic frame of mind so well exhibited by Walt Whitman, whom James described as a "paradigm" of this outlook on life.

Here James made everything depend on the two basically different ways in which we regard evil. There are those, James wrote, for whom *evil* means "only a mal-adjustment with *things*" and hence is something that is curable through change and readjustment. At the other pole are those who do not envisage evil as primarily a relation between the self and particular external things, but as "something more radical and general, a wrongness or vice in [one's] essential nature," not to be cured by rearranging the environment or even the inner self because it "requires a supernatural remedy." Ever sensitive to the nuances, James laid hold here of an important and often neglected distinction: those who regard evil as ills and sins in the *plural*, he said, invariably see them as "removable in detail," while those for whom sin is *singular*, something ineradicably ingrained in our natural subjectivity, see no resolution in terms of "superficial piecemeal operations."

From his study of the profound experiences of Tolstoy and Bunyan, James was convinced that our entire emotional state, by which he meant a person's total to the world, basically affects the sort of world we encounter. If we were to strip ourselves of all the emotion the world inspires in us and try to experience the world as it exists purely in itself, the deadness that would result would be unimaginable—there would be no significance, no character, no perspective, no concern. The world would just be "there"—a medley of many colorless things. Tolstoy's temporary *anhedonia*, his experience of the world as remote, sinister, strange, and dull, had, in James's view, the powerful effect of changing his experience of reality because this negative perception induced him to seek a resolution beyond the estrangement that had thrown him into despair. James's chief complaint against the healthy-minded attitude is that it prevents us from ever seeing the force of this predicament. When failure, the awareness of the transiency of things and goods, the disappearance of youth, and the specter of death press upon us, the healthy-minded, sustaining their happy-go-lucky attitude, can say no





more than "Cheer up, old fellow," and James regarded that as no answer at all. Unlike Tolstoy, who confronted his disenchantment with life by posing questions— Why should I live? Why should I do anything? Is there in life any purpose?—and who, through the very concern manifest in these candid questions, sought for and found a resolution overcoming melancholy, the healthyminded can but resign and settle for an Epicurean refinement or a Stoic moral purity, the highest level possible for the once-born. James declared this way of confronting the negative aspects of life as totally inadequate because it leaves the world in "the shape of an unreconciled contradiction" and seeks "no higher unity."

James's appraisal of the impasse that exists between the healthyminded and those who take the experience of evil seriously throws further light on the criteria of judgment he employed. After concluding that "morbid-mindedness ranges over the wider scale of experience," James went on to say that, regardless of the extent to which healthymindedness "works" or fulfills a psychologically important function (and he admitted that for certain purposes it does), it nevertheless breaks down and shows its impotence when melancholy settles upon us. In addition, and this is the important point, James declared healthy-mindedness to be wanting as a "philosophical doctrine" because the evil it refuses to account for or even acknowledge is a genuine part of reality. Since, he argued, the reality of evil cannot be denied, there is a philosophical presumption that it should have some rational significance, and hence those who disregard evil adopt an outlook less comprehensive than one finds in systems that try to include the negative elements in human life. This shows that, for all his criticism of abstract rationality, James had not abandoned it altogether in order to assess beliefs solely in terms of their satisfying certain human needs. There is, in fact, a most interesting mixture of the psychological, the philosophical, and the religious in this part of the argument. Healthy-mindedness has been acknowledged to have a certain legitimacy in meeting *psychological* needs, but it falls short *philosophically* in its failure to come to terms with the reality of evil. Finally, the optimistic attitude is subject to *religious* criticism as well. For in James's view the most complete religions "are those in which the pessimistic elements are best developed," and he cited Buddhism and Christianity as meeting the standard because both are religions of deliverance wherein one must die to an unreal life in order to enter into the real existence. For the once-born there is nothing insurmountable to be delivered from, no unreal life in the first place.

A reader of *Varieties* wonder whether James thought of the sick soul and the divided self as the same. The answer is that he did, but there is some difference of emphasis in his discussion of them. To begin with, both conceptions refer to the twiceborn, but in considering the sick soul James paid more attention to the actual variety of psychological states and moods involved, whereas in his account of the divided self the focus is on a more abstract feature—the fundamental nature of the discordance in the self and on the ways in which the self may be unified in conversion. The point becomes clear when one considers James's choice of a passage from Saint Augustine's *Confessions* as a cardinal example of the divided self. Reflecting on his vivid awareness of the conflict within him between two wills, the carnal will (well established through habit) and the spiritual will (which should have mastery but proves to be too weak), Augustine wrote, "It was myself indeed in both the wills, yet more myself in that which



approved in myself than in that which I disapproved in myself." What more candid acknowledgment of this predicament could there be? Augustine was, as he confessed, convinced that he should surrender to divine love, but he was unable to give up the self that pleased him more, and hence he remained in bondage. His anguish stemmed from the shame he felt in the face of his ambivalence; he knew that the spiritual self should triumph, but he also knew that he was unable to will the victory. This experience served to focus the central concern manifest in James's account of conversion: How is the divided self to be unified and the inner discord overcome so that the higher self may emerge in the process?

As a prelude to considering this question, James made two observations based on the cases he studied. The first is that the unification of the divided self may occur in more than one way: gradually or abruptly, through alterations in our feelings or powers to act, through new intellectual insights, or through mystical experience. In short, there are varieties in the forms of conversion and no single standard pattern. Second, and more important, James conceived the problem of reaching unity out of discord in such general terms that the religious solution is made to appear as but one type among others. New birth may even take the form of a move away from religion, into an attitude of disbelief, or newness of life may be found in abandoning a rigorous morality for a life of liberty and license. Nor are these all the possibilities he envisaged. Firmness and stability in life, he claimed, may result from any number of stimuli—love, ambition, revenge, or patriotic devotion—because we are dealing with the "same psychological form of event," an equilibrium following a turmoil of conflict and inconsistency. Having conceived the situation in such broad terms, James then faced the new problem of distinguishing the specifically *religious* form of conversion from other types.

By "conversion" James meant a regeneration or renewal of life whereby the person acquires assurance that the divided self has been overcome. Transformation of the self means essentially the establishing of a *dominant aim* that expels all rivals and becomes the habitual center of a person's energies. Religious conversion means that religious beliefs previously dormant or merely peripheral now become central and dominant. It is noteworthy that James described the mind of the candidate for conversion in much the same terms he would later employ in his summary statement about the nature of all religion. The individual, he wrote, starts with an awareness of incompleteness, wrongness, and sin, and from this consciousness springs the desire to escape; the transformation is effected when the "positive ideal" for which the person longs becomes the center of life. We have here nothing other than the "uneasiness" and the "resolution" formula that James held to be the "uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet." We shall return to this contention; at this juncture, however, we should note that the "uniform deliverance" helps us to understand the nature of specifically religious conversion. As James repeatedly emphasized, the type of defect in man envisaged by such religions as Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity is not to be abolished by an act of will stemming from the same self that is in need, and this dearly suggests that religious conversion is essentially of the involuntary type. As James's many examples show, the emergence of the regenerated self cannot be conceived as a wholly volitional affair.



One of the most instructive parts of James's psychological account of self-surrender has to do with the new light that it throws on the limits of the will to believe. When we find a man who is inconsolable, caught in a web of sin and want, James wrote, it is simply absurd to tell him that all is well and that there is no reason for worry. For the only consciousness he has tells him that *all is not well*; such advice is not only inappropriate but simply false. "The will to believe," James freely acknowledged, "cannot be stretched as far as that." We may strengthen our faith in an incipient belief already possessed, but "we cannot create a belief out of whole cloth," especially when our experience tells us the opposite. The reason that the voluntary solution cannot work is that the better attitude proposed for overcoming the predicament is a negation of the only mind we have and, as James maintained, "we cannot actively will a pure negation." This should help to dispose of the widely held belief that James had an extravagant conception of the scope within which the will to believe can be effective. He was here making the same point he had made at the beginning of his essay "The Will to Believe." As regards a present fact, the mind is bound down, and the will cannot force belief to the contrary. As he wrote, a man with a high fever may say that he is well, but he is *powerless to believe* it. Similarly, the person in despair is unable to believe that his despair is illusory and that he lives in a world of hope.

James's concern to persuade his audience expressed itself repeatedly in attempts to anticipate objections. In this instance he considered the possibility that the whole phenomenon of regeneration might be a strictly "natural" process, divine in its fruits, but neither more nor less so in its *causation* and mechanism than any other process of man's inner life. Although he referred to "the whole phenomenon of regeneration," the basic question he raised was prompted by a consideration of "instantaneous conversion" accompanied by the belief that a special miraculous visitation from the divine is in evidence. Here the "field" theory of consciousness, according to which a complex mental episode replaces the singular "idea" that was the focus of associationist psychology, provided him with a means of clarifying what might be involved in supposed sudden transformations of the self. Since this field is not determinate, there is in addition to the ordinary field of consciousness an extramarginal one that remains related to the primary consciousness and makes its presence felt. This extramarginal consciousness is what James called the "subconscious self." His main contention with regard to sudden conversion is that the subject must have a well-developed subconscious self congenial to influences from beyond it and that when this essential condition is fulfilled there may come a critical point at which the subconscious takes command and the new self is born. James, however, speaking as a psychologist, did not claim that describing the process in these terms precludes the presence of the divine. On the contrary, he saw the subliminal as a door that might remain "ajar or open" to higher spiritual influences, but he insisted that without that door these powers would be lost in the "hubbub of the waking life."

Now, we may ask, what contribution does this excursion into the matter of sudden conversion make to answering the question of whether the process of regeneration is a "natural" one or not? The answer is that the psychologically acceptable theory of the subliminal self provided James with the mechanism for describing the process of conversion in terms consistent with "natural" explanation, but he clearly understood that



the subconscious does not of itself generate the powers that may impinge on it from without. This "supernatural" dimension was to enter the picture later on when James dealt with the idea of the "More" in reality, especially on its "far" side. At this point, however, it needs to be stressed that, despite what James said about Jonathan Edwards' failure to show that any chasm exists between a supernatural state of grace and an "exceptionally high degree of natural goodness," he did not deny that the "perception of external control," the sense of being related to a transcendent reality beyond our will, is an essential element in any account of regeneration. For after all, James never gave up his contention that the divided self, understood in the religious sense, is unable to unify itself from its own resources.

**Source:** John E. Smith, "Introduction by John E. Smith," in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. xi-li.

# Adaptations

An audiotape of James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, narrated by Flo Gibson and published in 2001, is available from Audio Book Contractors. A 1994 audio version narrated by Erik Bauersfeld is available from Knowledge Tapes.



## Topics for Further Study

James did not put a lot of faith in organized religion, but rather in the personal experience of religious inspiration. Focus on his arguments against institutionalized religion, then research the philosophical ideas of Martin Luther. How do the two men's ideas clash? Write your conclusions and explain where you stand in this debate.

Research the basic tenets of the transcendentalists, and read Emerson's lecture "Self Reliance." Create a dialogue between James and Emerson on the topic of religion based on your comparison.

Choose one of James's contemporaries (such as Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, or Wilhelm Wundt) and compare his theory of people's need for religion to James's. In what areas are they of like minds? How do they differ? In your opinion, are their theories compatible with modern times? Why or why not?

Interview two clerical leaders of two very different local churches, synagogues, and/or mosques. Prepare yourself for the meetings with a list of at least fifteen to twenty questions. These questions should reflect the ideas that James has put forth in his book. Some of the questions might reflect some of your own considerations after reading the book. Write a paper of your findings, comparing the thoughts of the clerics with James's theories.

One of the concluding chapters of James's book deals with mysticism. Research three major organized religions (such as Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, or Judaism). How does each define mysticism? Who are the primary mystics of each religion? How does the subject of mysticism differ from one religion to another.

# Compare and Contrast

1910s: Buddhism becomes popular in the West. Zen Buddhism is spread through the presentations of Japanese Zen leader D. T. Suzuki.

1950s: June 30, 1956, the phrase "In God We Trust" is adopted as the U.S. national motto. In the following year it begins to appear on U.S. paper currency. It was already in use on certain coins since 1864.

Today: Cardinal Francis Arinze, a Nigerian who is on the short list for candidates to succeed Pope John Paul II, travels around the world promoting inter-religious dialogue. He is the president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

1910s: Sigmund Freud publishes his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* in English in 1913, and the first journal devoted to psychology, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, begins publishing in 1917.

1950s: In 1950, Alan M. Turing publishes his article "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" in the quarterly *Mind*, and the American Association of Psychology publishes the first *Code of Ethics of Psychologists* in 1953.

Today: The 27th International Congress of Psychology is held in Stockholm, Sweden, in July 2000. A U.S. Labor Department census for the year 2000 reports that there are approximately 200,000 psychologists employed in the United States.



## What Do I Read Next?

A reading of Bruce Kuklick's collection *William James: Writings 1902-1910* (1988) offers a comprehensive understanding of the range of James's views. This work also includes addresses on Emerson and James's famous essay "The Moral Equivalent of War."

James's *Essays in Religion and Morality* (1982) extends the concepts covered in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. *Essays in Religion and Morality* was published by James's *alma mater*, Harvard University, and includes an introduction by John J. McDermott, a Jamesian scholar.

*The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to "Pragmatism"* (1909) was one of the last books by James to be published before his death. This book delves into the most important of James's philosophical discourses.

James's most significant study, *The Principles of Psychology* (1905), was one of the first comprehensive textbooks about the study of psychology, leading to James earning the title of "father of psychology."

James was close to his brother Henry, a novelist who spent most of his life living in Europe. The brothers' correspondence is collected in *William and Henry James: Selected Letters* (1997), which offers an insider's look at their relationship and shared concepts.

To gain a further understanding of the development of religious experience in the United States, read *The Republic of Many Mansions: Foundations of American Religious Thought* (1990) by Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody. The book contains a study of Thomas Jefferson's religious thoughts as well as those of James and the Puritans, and other general readings on the topic of pragmatism.

In *The Unity of William James's Thought* (2002), Wesley Cooper, a professor of philosophy, argues against the dismissal of James's philosophical discourse by traditional philosophers who claim that James's background in philosophy does not go deep enough to be considered legitimate. Cooper finds evidence to the contrary, demonstrating that James writes on different levels at different times, incorporating his doctrine of pure experience into his theories of psychology and pragmatism.



## Further Study

Feinstein, Howard M., *Becoming William James*, Cornell University Press, 1999.

This biography of James was originally published in 1982. This edition offers a new introduction.

Grattan, C. Hartley, *The Three Jameses; A Family of Minds*, Longmans, Green, and Company, 1932.

Grattan presents the lives of father Henry and his most famous sons, William and Henry.

James, Alice, *Alice James, Her Brothers—Her Journal*, edited by Anna Robeson Burr, Milford House, 1972.

Originally published in 1934, this book presents the lives of the men in the James family (William, Henry, Garth, and Robertson) through the writings of their sister Alice.

Johnson, Michael G., and Tracy B. Henley, eds., *Reflections on "The Principles of Psychology": William James after a Century*, L. Erlbaum Associates, 1990.

This book is comprehensive study of the history of psychology with a special emphasis on James's work.

Olin, Doris, ed., *William James: "Pragmatism" in Focus*, Routledge, 1992.

This is a collection of essays by twentieth-century thinkers such as Bertrand Russell, reflecting on James's concepts of truth, meaning, metaphysics, and pragmatism.

Perry, Ralph Barton, ed., *Collected Essays and Reviews*, by William James, Longmans, Green, and Company, 1920.

James's essays on psychology, philosophy, and psychical research are presented and reviewed by his contemporaries.

Rowe, Stephen C., ed., *The Vision of James*, Element Books, 1996.

Stephen C. Rowe, a professor of philosophy, offers a focused collection of James's philosophical views.

Simon, Linda, ed., *William James Remembered*, University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

There are twenty-five different memoirs in this collection, written by faculty and family members, students, and other friends of James, allowing the reader to see many facets of James. At the beginning of each memoir, Simon explains who the writer is, putting his or her writing in context.

Skrupskelis, Ignas K., and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, University Press of Virginia, 1992.

This ten-volume collection of letters offers a more personal glimpse of James. Each volume corresponds to a specific time period in James's life.

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Menand, Louis, "The Return of Pragmatism," in *American Heritage*, Vol. 48, No. 6, October 1997, pp. 48-57.

Taylor, Charles, "Risking Belief: Why William James Still Matters," in *Commonweal*, Vol. 129, No. 5, March 8, 2002, p. 14.

Turing, Alan M., "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," in *Mind*, Vol. 59, No. 236, October 1950, pp. 433-60.

"William James Dies: Great Psychologist," in the *New York Times*, August 27, 1910.

Zaleski, Carol, "A Letter to William James," in *Christian Century*, Vol. 1, No. 2, January 16, 2002, p. 32.

—, "William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)," in *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, March 2000, p. 60.



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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on



□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).





- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

NCfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NCfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NCfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: [ForStudentsEditors@gale.com](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

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