

A Stroll With William James, Jacques Barzun 1983

Prologue: Principles of. Psychology 1890

He is for me the most inclusive mine I can listen to, the most concrete and the least hampered by trifles.

The Man

Mind, as we actually find it, contains all sorts of laws – those of logic, of fancy, of wit, of taste, decorum, beauty, morals, and so forth, as well as perception of fact.

For the Christian, whose mental law is to discover the will of God, and make one's actions correspond thereto, that is the reality.

Self-acceptance is not egotism; it is in fact modest when compared with self-contempt, for the latter may well result from an overblown estimate of one's powers, which “circumstances”, “fate”, or “the system” have kept from blossoming.

In other words, in the minds we call creative [as against Mayor data processors], a great work takes its own time for incubation.

The Masterpiece

Brain function is the physical response to the myriad stimuli that aroused it – the things we call the world outside. The mine, which is not brain function, depends upon that response for its very different activity.

Thought is not the brain, closely as it seems to be connected with it. (It is a pity that the terms that James adopted – neurosis for the nerve action and psychosis for the mental event – were diverted by heedless psychiatrists into the meanings now attached to them. For they make clear the brain-mind distinction now so persistently blurred.)

A sufficient answer is that becoming acquainted, through James, with the workings of the conscious mind will open up new vistas on every subject of interest, general and special.

The familiar failure to see ourselves as others see us is bad enough, but the reverse blindness is even more dangerous; we scarcely begin to know what reality the multitude of selves around us perceive.

Once the distinction is clear between brain function and mind, the question of paramount interest as: what sort of thing is mind?

The mind is first of all a stream: it flows, the stream of consciousness. In the light of this description the analogy so passively received now-a-days of the mind as computer, is manifestly fallacious. A computer does not think, it feels nothing, and what it is said to

know – bits of information all cast in the digital mode - has no fringe. Nor has it a memory, only storage room. (Intelligent confusion is not a paradox. As James points out, confusion and reasoning are generically the same process. The difference between a muddle-head and a genius is that between extracting [from experience] wrong characters and right ones. All eminently muddle-headed persons have the temperament of genius.)

For as one cannot step into a river twice – the water has flowed on – so one can never think the same thought twice: the stream of thought has flowed on. But the new thought can acknowledge the return of its object.

James says: my experience is what I agree to attend to.

That stock is known as the apperceptive mass. The inertia of the intaking mass is tremendous. One can feel it and what I think of as the rubber-band effect. Explain to someone why something is not as he thinks, giving reasons, facts, and authorities, and if he is intelligent and interested, he will follow and even take pleasure in his new acquirement. But 10 minutes later he will say something that shows he has snapped back to his old misconception as if nothing had been said. This common occurrence helps to explain why new ideas, new art, new attitudes to life take so long to be understood, let alone accepted. To change an intellectual tradition one must change the apperceptive mass.

The best minds themselves work and apperceive as much with error, superstition, and perverse fancy as with sound knowledge and decent feeling. As any biography shows, no grade of intelligence or education makes us free of these deformities.

Conception

Conception, the making of concepts. These are abstractions, not objects but ideas drawn away from objects, on the strength of one or more points of similarity. Sameness is the very keel and backbone of our thinking. Conceiving is made firm with the aid of words.

Concepts can be constructed at will to serve our convenience.

True concepts are primary ideas such as these. The concepts of taxation, crime, or health each signify a general topic of thought. The physical acts or facts that they cover – this tax, that crime, his poor health – are so many concrete particulars linked by the concept which, whenever thus actualized, ceases to be a concept.

(James himself was bothered about the word concept, but for a different reason. In his time, concept was beginning to be used by some writers as if it represented the object somewhat as a blueprint represents a house. He accordingly preferred for psychological clarity to use the word conception – to show what is plainly an act of mind. By now, conception is used by careful writers to mean precisely the comprehensive plan, the blueprint, and concept has lost exact meaning: Here I shall use concept in its oldest sense, The concept of identity means complete sameness which is never found in experience.)

Concepts are shorthand notes taken on reality, and like notes they may be misleading even one perfectly definite in themselves.

The jargon that blocks communication is conceptual verbiage.

(When Pres. Truman came to Columbia University on a lectureship and political science, the most striking fact of his performance on the platform and in discussion with students was the unfailing concreteness of his thought and speech. His experience seemed to be stored up in examples, incidents, or factual suppositions which he had apparently felt no need to translate into concepts or generalities. This trait may have limited his philosophic range, it also wonderfully limited his capacity for talking nonsense.)

People think from word to word instead of imagining from word to fact. True intelligence uses the two functions, which is why many intelligent people make poor academic records. For learning is mostly words.

Yet keeping hold of the concrete and the particular is not to take sides against concepts and conceptions, ideas and general truths. On the contrary, it is to value these so much that one remembers to be fastidious in their use and demanding as to their quality.

On the subject of reason and emotion the 20th century is fond of using a pair of clichés that can only mislead. One is “wishful thinking”, which is meant to scout an idea by attacking the way it was reached. James shows that all thinking is wishful.

The Test of Truth

Pragmatism is not a philosophy; it is an attempt to explain how the mind ascertains truth. If correct, this explanation supplies a means of testing truths.

Historically, that is, for James, the term Pragmatism covers the steps we go through before we can say: this is true: that is not. How do we know? In the history of Western thought two accounts have been repeatedly offered: that is true which copies or matches reality; that is true which is consistent with itself and other truths.

The American Charles Sanders Peirce wrote a popular article in 1878 entitled “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”. In it he suggested that a good way was to ask whether any practical difference would follow if some change were made in the statement of any idea. If the change left the consequences identical, then there was no difference between the two statements. To this rule of thumb he gave the name Pragmatism from the Greek pragma, meaning a thing done. Peirce was a neighbor in Cambridge whom James read and admired, corresponded with and befriended.

“Pragmatic”, one concludes, is one of those words like “romantic” that are thrown into a sentence for the small pleasure of labeling without thinking.

The divine right of kings arouses indignation or laughter, because we have forgotten its usefulness in quelling local warlords and in holding the central ruler accountable to the law of God. (Note an application: the nation state from its inception down to 1914 fought on the dueling principle, using professional armies as its champions. Since the first world war, for technological and democratic reasons, people have reverted to the “family feud” system, which involves every man, woman, and child in the great quarrels. And since other groups, ideological or religious, cannot muster whole nations in their cause, they resort to piecemeal raids – terrorism – like feudal chieftains.)

Pragmatism describes the way we think, but to think well is rare, precisely because it is not straight “reasoning” or straight intuition, but a weaving together of all the relevance – abstract and concrete, obvious or recalled, known or imagined.

Every mind remembers times when it fought a truth which it later yielded to with surprise and gratitude. Hence the impression that the truth stands outside, waiting to be recognized and finally compelling submission from all right minds.

But in truthmaking there is also action: truth is what acts or enables us to act.

The Varieties of Experience

Common sense is a philosophy in disguise and one not quite well knit from end to end. Philosophy is essentially second thoughts, and we must be ready to follow them with athletic fortitude.

The spectacle of the past is inevitably a reflection of the quasi-chaos of experience itself.

(Marx thought he had upended Hegel and put his feet on the ground by substituting for the Hegelian idea solid earthly things. But all Marx substituted was conceptual talk of such things – the “class struggle”, the “means of production”. These concepts are so empty of details and remote from the conditions of various nations that they have occasioned all the bloody debates of the Marxist sect and the failure of its predictions.)

Conceptual knowledge must thus be called a self-sufficing revelation admitting us to a world of universals rather than that of perishable facts; of the essential qualities, immutable relations, eternal principles of truth and right. Hence the appeal to the intellectually ambitious.

Concepts can be so handled as to suggest that they positively exclude what they do not positively affirm. This is their “privative use”. James, who had to combat it in his campaign against the Absolute, called it “vicious intellectualism”.

The best-qualified judges of affirm contrary conclusions like the blind sages describing the elephant.

The “edifice of science” is a mere verbalism; science comprises specialties without end, mostly inaccessible to outsiders; it is a cultural pluralism if ever there was one.

He was sure also that there would never be the philosophy, verified in all its parts and so convincing to all the world that it would end all debate. From the very relation of finite minds to a multifarious universe no philosophy can ever be anything but a summary sketch, a picture of the world in abridgment, foreshortened bird’s eye view of the perspective of events.

James said, “I fear that few of you will sympathize with the attempt to limit the role of concepts. It is too much like looking downward and not up. James wanted criticism and believe that candor and the revelation of biases were the best way of ascertaining truth.”

For concepts, no matter how often misused, or mistaken and revised, are as real as any perceptions; abstractions command as much feeling and action as the concretes with which they deal: that is why they are so dangerous and must be watched within us and without.

Life is full of significance, of meaning, of success and of defeat, of hoping and striving, of longing, of desire, and of inner value. It is a total presence that embodies worth. To live our lives better in this presence is the true reason why we wish to know the elements of things.

Freedom and Risk

In the struggle with the bureaucracies of business and government and education, what makes a public hate “the system” is that it is not a system.

Our belief in truth itself is that there is a truth and that our minds and it are made for each other.

So in the absence of evidence one has the right to believe in free will, for not deciding would be to decide against it.

Not the superficial wish but the deep-seated will is a strenuous expression of the self

But belief is a far from simple thing. The test of willing, as usual, is action.

Life being full of maybes, it forces every conscience being to act 1000 times on the strength of the will to believe.

Refuse to believe, and you shall indeed be right, for you shall irretrievably perish. But believe, and again you shall be right, for you shall save yourself.

This is what happened when the issue of licensing physicians came before the Massachusetts legislature and James was asked to testify; he spoke against the bill. He pointed out that medical knowledge was far from complete and changing rapidly; new ideas should get a hearing and be tested no matter whom they came from. He was ever suspicious of professional bodies and their prejudgment, which so often shuts out experience; any considered regulative laws mere abstract paper thunder, under which every ignorance and abuse could still go on.

The increasing disenchantment with the professions in our time has proved James right on both counts. Complaints of abuses and incompetence have been directed from many sides not only against doctors and lawyers, but against licensed practitioners in general and school teachers in particular. With them it is not merely individual ignorance that is chargeable, but institutionalized obscurantism in the licensing requirements themselves. During the same period we have allowed many kinds of psychologists, counselors, and therapists to perform unlicensed, on the strength of their training and degrees, which is what James wanted the whole field kept open for.

His testimony scandalized his colleagues. He was said to have been gulled by the faith healers, because he had publicly recognize the natural basis of their occasional success. But he had equally publicly warned against their claims and their hocus-pocus. Besides, he rightly thought the patent-medicine racket much more dangerous. In any event, he took no adolescent pleasure in defiance and he was sorry to forfeit the esteem of the medical and other supporters of licensing.

“I never did anything that required as much moral courage in my life.” James.

That lonely kind of courage (civic courage, as we call it in times of peace) is the kind of valor to which the monuments of nations should most of all be reared. Of 500 of us who could storm a battery side-by-side with others, perhaps not one would be found ready to risk his worldly fortunes all alone in resisting an enthroned abuse.

He may have had in mind what happened to young Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes when he asserted the contagiousness of puerperal fever and its cause. This battle took place in Boston at the same time as Semmelweis was waging his on the same subject in Vienna – 1843 – 44. The outcome was not so tragic for Holmes as for Semmelweis; but 20 years after his first paper, Holmes was still being attacked: he had said that the doctor’s filthy hands and instruments killed the women after childbirth.)

James knew that a nation always needs to be saved from its internal enemies. The civic genius of the people does the saving day by day, by acts without external picturesqueness. And in the licensing issue as well as more picturesque ones, James was faithful to his idea of day-to-day moral affirmation.

It is the curse of the half-educated to seize upon something interesting and novel – a phrase, a title, an observation – and without further look or caution to fabricate out of their resources what they would make it mean.

Anyone is ready to be savage in some cause. The difference between the good man and the bad man lies in the choice of the cause.

The Reign of William and Henry

What unites and age is not its warring “solutions” but its vision of common needs.

Generalization is suggested, not literal, and exceptions and qualifiers are not excluded by being omitted.

Note: There was a lot about Darwinism in this segment that I feel did not serve my purpose.

Beyond the Conscious Mind

James worked with “psychics” because he had no preconceived ideas about what the mind could or could not do; and also because the purpose of the Society for Psychical Research was scientific. Science was not being flouted but enlarged. (Open minds)

The Genius

He said: “Greatness with simplicity”; and he added: “I mean by greatness the absence of smallness in any respect”.

Whitehead mentioned: Simplicity is the last perfection – it is there are it isn't; one cannot work for it.

The mission was what great minds have always taken as their duty: to spend life for something which outlasts it.

For there is nothing more inimical to writing than talking. The two are indeed rooted in the same impulse – to express, to explain – but one mode of communication disables the mine for the other. (The mental contrast between writing and teaching.)

James achieved ecumenical expression, as others have done, by tireless revision and rewriting. A wording that really exhausts the author's intention comes only from an effort that exhausts the author, too.

Some thinkers are uncommonly truth-prone, not in the sense of telling the truth but of finding it.

Epilogue-Anthology

Many books on my shelves accordingly carry on the flyleaf notations of the contrasts and parallels. The contrasts are instructive but only to be expected; it is the parallels that surprise and entertain by popping up in unlikely contexts and authors.

Long before Samuel Butler defined faith as the proposition “I bet that my Redeemer liveth”, Pascal had written at length on the necessity of the wager in belief:

Reason has no means of deciding... A game is being played which will come out heads or tails: which will you bet? By reason alone you can choose neither the one nor the other... so don't go blaming those who have made a choice – you know nothing to the purpose. – No, I shan't blame them for making this or that choice but a choice, for the right thing to do is not to bet it all. – Ah, but you must bet; it's not optional: you are embarked, so which will you take? Come since you must choose, let's see what will affect you least...: You may lose two things, truth and righteousness: and you have two things to stake, your knowledge and your happiness... Now do the computation: if you bet that God exists, you win everything. If you lose, you lose nothing. So don't shilly-shally and bet.
Pascal, Pensees, Article III, No. 233 (1657-59?)

In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark... If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that too is a choice: but whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril.

James Fitzjames Stephen, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, Ch. VII (1873)

We cannot write well or truly but what we write with gusto. The body, the senses must conspire with the mind. Expression is the act of the whole man, that our speech may be vascular. The intellect is powerless to express thought without the aid of the heart and liver and every member.
Henry David Thoreau, Journal, Sept. 2, 1851

The kind of philosophy a man chooses depends upon the kind of man he is. For a philosophic system... is animated with the spirit of the man who possesses it.
Fichte, Science of Knowledge, Introduction (1794)

Personal note: I suggest interested readers Google William James and Jacques Barzun. I became familiar with Jacques Barzun over 30 years ago.

The Professions Under Siege, Jacques Barzun, Harpers, Oct. 1978 (1982 by me) Barzun, with no affiliation with healthcare in general, and medical care in particular describes in detail what has always been missing in the healing arts (medicine, dentistry, etc.) and how those professions have systematically failed the people they claim to seek to serve. As one who has confronted the Code of Silence that dominates every hospital medical staff (and lost) I was then, and still can fully appreciate Barzun's indictment. The delivery of medical care in America will continue to exist in chaos until, and unless medical peer review can replace medical malpractice litigation (sue or forget it) as the principle system for the review of questionable patient care. The Siege of the Professions sadly continues.

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