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2012

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

**WILLIAM JAMES'S EVOLUTIONARY PRAGMATISM: A STUDY IN
PHYSIOLOGY, PSYCHOLOGY, AND PHILOSOPHY AT THE CLOSE OF
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

PHILOSOPHY

by

Lucas Robert McGranahan

June 2012

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	vii
List of Abbreviations.....	viii
Abstract.....	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Introduction.....	1

Part I.

1. The Darwinian Structure of James's Vision.....	26
1.1. Introduction	26
1.2. Ways of Reading James's Darwinism	27
1.2.1. Free-Willism.....	31
1.2.2. Anti-Platonism.....	33
1.2.3. Fallibilism.....	36
1.2.4. Summary.....	43
1.3. The Varieties of Selectionism	43
1.3.1. Biology	47
1.3.2. Social Theory.....	56
1.3.3. Psychology.....	61
1.3.4. Epistemology	65
1.3.5. Ethics.....	69

1.3.6. Summary and Table	72
1.4. Selectionism as the Key to James's Philosophical Darwinism	76
1.4.1. Free-Willism Revisited	77
1.4.2. Anti-Platonism Revisited	80
1.4.3. Fallibilism Revisited	83
1.5. Conclusion.....	86
2. James's Evolutionary Worldview in Focus	89
2.1. Introduction	89
2.2. The Distinctiveness of James's View	91
2.2.1. Social Darwinism.....	92
2.2.2. Sociobiology	100
2.2.3. Generalized Selectionism	105
2.2.3.1. Proliferation and Generalization	106
2.2.3.2. Externalism and Internalism	118
2.2.3.3. Recipes and Replicators.....	119
2.2.3.4. Criteria for Selectionism.....	126
2.2.4. Summary.....	129
2.3. James's Evolutionism Revisited.....	130
2.3.1. Against Asymmetric Externalism: Selectionism, Constructionism, Saltationism.....	131
2.3.2. James's Current Allies: Dialectical Biology, Developmental Systems Theory	135
2.4. Conclusion.....	143

3. Physiology, Psychology, Pragmatism: The Individual at the Center of James's

Vision	146
3.1. Introduction	146
3.2. James's Philosophical Anthropology.....	151
3.2.1. Taxonomy of Philosophical Anthropology: Four Types.....	151
3.2.2. Reflex Action and Selectionism	158
3.2.2.1. Reflex Action 1881: "Reflex Action and Theism"	161
3.2.2.2. Reflex Action 1890: <i>The Principles of Psychology</i>	163
3.2.3. The Jamesian Will: Ideo-Motor Action, Freedom, Creativity.....	176
3.2.4. Summary.....	186
3.3. The Continuity and Unity of James's Work.....	187
3.3.1. On James's Seeming Dividedness	188
3.3.2. Character Ethics from Psychology to Psychology.....	190
3.3.2.1. Character Ethics 1902: <i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i>	194
3.3.2.2. Character Ethics 1907-09: <i>Pragmatism</i> and <i>The Meaning of Truth</i>	197
3.4. Conclusion: On James's Continuity and Unity	206

Part II.

4. James in Context: Nietzsche, Husserl, Hegel, and Philosophical Anthropology

Redux	213
4.1. Introduction	213
4.2. Master's and Saints: James, Nietzsche, and the Ethics of Character.....	214
4.2.1. James on Nietzsche in <i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i>	221

4.2.2. The Irony of James's Reading of Nietzsche	226
4.2.3. Summary.....	237
4.3. James and Husserl on Temporality.....	238
4.3.1. James's Specious Present	238
4.3.2. Husserl's Tripartite Present	241
4.3.3. Comparison.....	244
4.3.4. Summary.....	245
4.4. Vicious Intellectualism: James on Hegel's Idealism	246
4.4.1. Vicious Abstractionism, AKA Vicious Intellectualism	247
4.4.2. Hegel's Encyclopaedia Logic	249
4.4.3. James's Critique of Hegel	253
4.4.4. Morse's Analysis	256
4.4.5. Summary.....	260
4.5. Philosophical Anthropology Redux.....	261
4.6. Conclusion.....	268
Conclusion	270
Bibliography	275

List of Tables

Table 1. James's Selectionist Systems	75
Table 2. James's Internal Selectionist Systems	173

List of Abbreviations

Except for correspondence and where otherwise noted, all citations to James's writings are to *The Works of William James* (Harvard University Press, ed. Burkhardt, Bowers, and Skrupskelis). Full references are provided in the Bibliography.

Cited Volumes of *The Works of William James*

- PP *The Principles of Psychology*. 1890/1981.
WB *The Will to Believe*. 1897/1979.
VRE *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. 1902/1975.
P *Pragmatism*. 1907/1975.
MT *The Meaning of Truth*. 1909/1975.
PU *A Pluralistic Universe*. 1909/1977.
ERE *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. 1912/1976.
EIP *Essays in Philosophy*. 1978.
ECR *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*. 1987.
ML *Manuscript Lectures*. 1988.

Frequently Referenced Essays

- RS "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence." First published 1878. Included in EIP.
GM "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment." Lecture given 1880. First published 1880. Collected under the title "Great Men and Their Environment" in *The Will to Believe* in 1897. Included in WB.
RA "Reflex Action and Theism." Lecture given 1881. First published 1881. Collected in *The Will to Believe* in 1897. Included in WB.
OH "On Some Hegelianisms." Originally published 1882. Collected in *The Will to Believe in 1897*. Included in WB.
DD "The Dilemma of Determinism." Lecture given 1884. First published 1884. Collected in *The Will to Believe* in 1897. Included in WB.
MP "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." Lecture given 1891. Originally published 1891. Collected in *The Will to Believe* in 1897. Included in WB.

Correspondence

- LWJ *The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James. 1926.
CWJ *The Correspondence of William James*, ed. Skrupskelis and Berkeley. 1992.

Abstract

WILLIAM JAMES'S EVOLUTIONARY PRAGMATISM: A STUDY IN PHYSIOLOGY, PSYCHOLOGY, AND PHILOSOPHY AT THE CLOSE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Lucas McGranahan

American psychologist and philosopher William James (1842-1910) poses a problem for interpreters. Although James himself claims that interpretation means locating an author's "center of vision," his own writings seem to lack continuity because of his shift from psychology to philosophy and perhaps even unity at a given time because of his apparent vacillation between active and passive conceptions of human existence. As a result, despite his impressive position as the father of American scientific psychology and popularizer of the philosophical school of pragmatism, James may appear to have little to offer readers by way of a coherent worldview.

In this study, I argue that James's thought is much more continuous and unified than is generally thought. In particular, I locate the center of James's vision in a model of the individual that James develops in the 1880s and which remains in the background of his subsequent thought, providing the basis for his mature conceptions of freedom, morality, and pragmatic meaning. Although I accept the view, proposed by scholars such as Ellen Kappy Suckiel and James Pawelski, that the Jamesian individual is structured by a sensori-motor "reflex arc" such that the function of thought for James is to discharge in action, I argue further that for James the reflex

are itself consists of a series of “selectionist systems,” that is, systems that are structurally analogous to, if distinct from and not reducible to, Darwinian natural selection. Indeed, I contend that the Jamesian individual is a nexus of such systems, the crux of which is a selective will that filters cognitive variation from “beneath” and thereby generates variation for further systems “above.”

Freedom on this model consists in the will’s ability to select among possibilities for action delivered by sensation and cognition. Although the will is not able to produce its own possibilities directly, the most important effect of willful choice for James is its manner of *biasing* its own future possibilities by way of the breaking or entrenching of embodied habits. Because of this, James’s philosophy of pragmatism, which understands meaning in terms of the practical effects of ideas, is shown to be a form of character ethics founded on a Darwin-inspired conception of human freedom.

This study closes by further contextualizing James within the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought, demonstrating James’s strong affinities with Nietzsche, while also using comparisons with Husserl and Hegel to draw pragmatist lessons about the limits of abstraction.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation was not written alone. My advisor, Rasmus Winther, has been generous with his time and full of excellent advice for a young philosopher-in-the-making. His guidance through the variegated terrain of Darwinism has certainly enriched this project in ways that I could not have imagined had we not struck up a working relationship when we did. David Hoy, with whom I have studied the longest, has been a consistent source of encouragement, critical feedback, and genuine human warmth. Jocelyn Hoy has spurred my thinking, especially about Nietzsche, in addition to being the best instructor to TA for (and perhaps *überhaupt*). Ellen Suckiel's expertise on James has been invaluable, and her William James graduate seminar in particular provided me with an amazing opportunity to explore James's writings in a rigorous and structured environment. Colin Koopman has also been a source of encouragement and perceptive feedback, which is of particular value because of our shared interest in connecting pragmatic and continental thought.

Many of the ideas presented in this dissertation were first incubated in a writing group consisting of UCSC graduate students Kaija Mortensen, Jake Metcalf, Ben Roome, and Andrew Delunas. I hope that I was nearly as much help to them as they were to me. Others at UCSC who provided various forms of support or productive conversation include Paul Roth, Jon Ellis, Dan Guevara, Abe Stone, John Bowin, Wlad Godzich, Brij Lunine, Edward Kehler, Hollie Clausnitzer, Christoph Durt, Evan Lam, Alexis Mourenza, Amena Coronado, Ryan Scherbart, Al Petrie,

Sara Orning, Michael Ursell, Trevor Sangrey, Miki Foster, Mark Davidson, and Daniel Brown. Special thanks to Sara Smith, Adam Hefty, Brian Malone, and Jessy Lancaster for successfully reinvigorating UAW 2865 during a time of harsh austerity.

I would also like to acknowledge the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, which gives me hope that philosophers may be practical, cooperative, and civically engaged. Chapters 1, 2, and 4 of the present study are downstream versions of papers that I presented at different SAAP meetings, the latter two of which benefited from official commentary by Mark Moller and Megan Mustain (respectively). Other SAAP members who have been valuable interlocutors, whether in conference sessions, on meandering walks, or over drinks, include Nick Smaligo, Tibor Solymosi, Zachary Piso, Peta Long, Tess Varner, Adam Riggio, Charlie Hobbs, Steven Miller, Alexander Livingston, Mike Brady, Brad Brewster, Trevor Pearce, and Charles Carlson.

Finally, certain portions of this dissertation were presented at the Berkeley-Stanford-Davis Graduate Philosophy Conference in April 2010 and the Humanities Education and Resources Association Conference in April 2009. An earlier and much-condensed version of Chapter 2 was also published as “William James’s Social Evolutionism in Focus” in *The Pluralist* 6(3).

Thank you to all.

Oakland, May 2012

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, Lynn McGranahan and Robert McGranahan, who have always been supportive of my peculiar interests; and to Jessy Lancaster, whose courage, humor, and love remind me that life is worth writing about.

Introduction

William James once remarked that “Any author is easy if you can catch the centre of his vision.”¹ The present study attempts to turn this method back on James, that is, to catch the center of James’s vision. Oddly enough, it is argued that James’s vision centers on his very concern with centers of vision—on the structure and dynamics of what he calls the “intimate character” from which one philosophizes and lives.² James’s philosophy is thus more concerned with questions of character and self-transformation than is generally recognized. It is also argued, however, that James’s account of the individual and of its relations to the surrounding world is structured by a particular logic that he adapts from Darwinian biology. James’s philosophy must therefore be understood against the background of a detailed knowledge of the influence of evolutionary theory on his work. In short, whereas a certain conception of the individual lies at the *center* of James’s vision, the *structure* of this vision is, in deep and perhaps unexpected ways, a Darwinian one.

A full elaboration of this argument is the burden of the next several chapters. This introduction prepares the ground by explaining the aims and relevance of the present study and by providing an outline of the chapters to follow. Although the present study is not principally a work of biography or intellectual history, it will be

¹ PU, 44.

² PU, 14.

instructive to begin with a brief description of the life and works of the figure whose philosophy it considers.³ From there I will move on to defending the value of reconstructing James's thought as a whole and of my particular way of doing so.

William James was born into an affluent family in New York City in 1842. William's father, Henry James, Sr., was a cosmopolitan intellectual and a follower of a mystical sect of Christianity known as Swedenborgianism. Henry James, Sr. traveled in elite social circles and was a friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was William's godfather. The James family was not just in good intellectual company, but would also produce two great luminaries of its own: Celebrated novelist Henry James (Jr.) was William's younger brother, and William himself holds the twin honors of founding (in large part) American scientific psychology and popularizing what is arguably America's only home-grown philosophical movement, pragmatism. An eclectic thinker, William James is also well known for penning an influential work of religious studies, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).⁴

The course of James's educational and professional life provides some insight into his singular style of thinking. Although as a teenager James had studied to

³ James's early authoritative biographer is Perry (1935). For a recent biography, see Richardson (2006). Intellectual histories that give James a prominent role include Croce (1995) and Menand (2002). For a history of the James family extending back to eighteenth-century agrarian Ireland, see Lewis (1993).

⁴ The *Varieties* became a founding document of Alcoholics Anonymous because of its emphasis on character-development and conversion experiences. Similarly, James's 1910 essay "The Moral Equivalent of War," which recommends putting the martial virtues to work for civic ends, became a founding document of the Peace Corps. These are two of the lesser-known channels of Jamesian influence in contemporary culture.

become a painter, in 1861 he abandoned his artistic aspirations to enter Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School to study chemistry. Within a few semesters, however, James switched from chemistry to anatomy and physiology, which he then used as a basis for studying medicine at Harvard Medical School beginning in 1864. After a couple of significant interruptions—a geological expedition to Brazil in 1865-1866 with famous anti-Darwinian biologist Louis Agassiz, and a trip to Germany to study the new science of physiological psychology in 1867-1868—James finally took his M.D. in 1869. (James would never practice medicine nor take any other degree.) Harvard then hired James on as Instructor in Physiology in 1872, where he would remain under various titles for the remainder of his career and life.

In his early years teaching at Harvard, James's work revolved around the new scientific psychology, which he was instrumental in establishing as a discipline in America. James's notable achievements as the "father of American psychology" include founding America's first psychology laboratory (1875);⁵ supervising the first PhD in psychology granted in America (to G. Stanley Hall, in 1878); and penning America's first important treatise on scientific psychology, now a classic in the field, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890).

James's thinking seems to have undergone a shift, however, around the middle of his career. Evidence of this shift includes the fact that James turned over

⁵ There is dispute about this, and sometimes this honor is given to James's student G. Stanley Hall for his laboratory at Johns Hopkins. One issue involved is the question of how large or sophisticated something must be to be considered a "laboratory." See Bjork (1983).

Harvard's psychology laboratory to his colleague Hugo Münsterberg (1892); that he stopped writing about psychology proper after condensing and revising *The Principles of Psychology* (first as *Psychology: The Briefer Course* in 1892 and again as *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* in 1899); and that he turned his attention to more recognizably philosophical topics such as religion, truth, and metaphysics thereafter. James's writings on meaning and truth in particular were among the key texts of the burgeoning philosophical school of American pragmatism, the leading early figures of which were James, his friend Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey.⁶ By the time he died of heart failure in 1910, James was devoting himself increasingly to developing a metaphysics of "radical empiricism," which aims to transcend the epistemological subject-object dichotomy by positing a primordial level of reality or "pure experience" that is prior to both the knower and the known. It was in this rarefied metaphysical atmosphere that James, a trained scientist and medical doctor and who never formally studied philosophy, finished his life and career.

A key wager of the present study is that James painted in broad strokes a worldview that is much more coherent—if not *systematic* in a traditional, philosophical sense—than it might appear at first glance, and that this worldview may be reconstructed using a finer brush than it was generally James's temperament to wield. This will mean exhibiting both diachronic continuity and synchronic unity:

⁶ This canonical list omits Chauncey Wright, a long-time conversation partner of both James and Peirce who is better described as a positivist than a pragmatist, as well as other members of the Harvard-based philosophical discussion group that Peirce once referred to as the "Metaphysical Club." See Menand (2003) and Richardson (2006).

James's thought is *continuous* in that he was not merely a pioneering psychologist who became a pioneering philosopher but rather was at all times an innovative philosopher-scientist who addressed a consistent set of concerns using a distinctive theoretical framework; and his thought is *unified* in that his writings over the years yield a coherent and interesting worldview.

I am not the first to seek unity in James's writings. One seminal unifier was James's colleague and early biographer R. B. Perry, who argues in *The Thought and Character of William James* (1935) that James's thought centers on the conflict between science and religion. Two important later attempts at unification are Ellen Kappy Suckiel's *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James* (1982) and Charlene Haddock Seigfried's *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (1990). Whereas Suckiel argues that James's philosophy is unified by (1) his conception of humans as inherently goal-oriented or "teleological" and (2) his view that reality just is that which is capable of being experienced, Seigfried contends that James is concerned mainly with "establishing a secure foundation in experience which would overcome both the nihilistic paralysis of action and the skeptical dissolution of certain knowledge brought on by the challenge of scientific positivism"⁷ Like Suckiel, the present study places the purposive individual at the center of James's vision; and like Seigfried, it reads James's worries about science as being about the possibility of an active and purposive response to life. Indeed, the present study takes all of James's

⁷ Seigfried (1990), 2.

concerns about the conflict between science and religion—or, more interestingly, between different *ways* of being scientific or religious—as concerns about how an inherently active individual might conceive of its mode of agency in the world. Differing types of scientific explanation in particular are close to the heart of this study.

A more recent and rather influential interpretation is found in Richard Gale's *The Divided Self of William James* (1999). The chief “divider” among readers of James, Gale argues that James's writings contain an irresolvable tension between “Promethean pragmatism,” which is informed by a conception of the individual as active, purposive and willful, and “anti-Promethean mysticism,” which is informed by a conception of the individual as passive, receptive, and capable of mystical union with reality. Gale believes that this results in a number of inconsistencies in James's thought, the most important of which he calls the “Big Aporia”: Whereas the Promethean pragmatist views concepts instrumentally and relativizes ontological claims to purposes, the anti-Promethean mystic identifies meaning and reality with the direct perception of present reality. Furthermore, Gale is insistent that the active/passive tension in James's philosophy is synchronic, that is, that James's philosophy is divided against itself when taken as a whole, or at any given point, in a fundamental and irrevocable way. Gale's James is thus hopelessly divided in his conception of humanity and thus in the philosophical positions to which this divided conception leads him.

Among the works that have challenged this reading are Wesley Cooper's *The Unity of William James's Thought* (2002) and James Pawelski's *The Dynamic Individualism of William James* (2007). Cooper makes James's ontological claims consistent but at the price of distinguishing between empirical and metaphysical "levels" in James's thought, where the former is constructed, in a sense, from the latter.⁸ In contrast, Pawelski responds to Gale's concerns about activity and passivity more directly by providing a developmental reading of James on which James was in the process of integrating the passive and active aspects of his model of the individual toward the end of his life, for example, in his final work, *Some Problems in Philosophy* (1911). The present study is closer to Pawelski's than it is to Cooper's, focusing on the constitution and dynamics of the individual as opposed to James's metaphysical claims about reality in general; it also shares with Pawelski the view that the active/passive tension in James's works is a reflection of a constitutive feature of human existence rather than a centrifugal force that divides James's philosophy against itself. It differs from Pawelski's reading on a number of particulars, however, most importantly in that it understands the key theoretical model for understanding the Jamesian individual to be one that he gleans from Darwin's theory of natural selection and then applies in various domains.⁹

⁸ Notably, whereas the central metaphor of Cooper's study is that of *construction*, a central metaphor of my study, as described below, is that of *selection*.

⁹ See Chapter 3 of the present study.

This brings me closer to a specification of what exactly is original in my reconstruction of James's thought. Here it will be useful to return to James's conception of an author's vision, with which I opened above. James describes this idea in *A Pluralistic Universe* as follows:

Get at the expanding centre of a human character, the *élan vital* of a man, as Bergson calls it, by living sympathy, and at a stroke you see how it makes those who see it from without interpret it in such diverse ways. [...] Place yourself similarly at the centre of a man's philosophic vision and you understand at once all the different things it makes him write or say. But keep outside, use your post-mortem method, try to build the philosophy up and out of the single phrases, taking first one and then another and seeking to make them fit 'logically,' and of course you fail. You crawl over one the thing like a myopic ant over a building, tumbling into every microscopic crack of fissure, finding nothing but inconsistencies, and never suspecting that a centre exists. I hope that some of the philosophers in this audience may occasionally have had something different from this type of criticism applied to their works!¹⁰

Because James views one's philosophy as a function of one's "center of vision," he thinks that the best way to assess an author's works is to enter into a state of empathy with the author's vision in order to view the world through the cognitive-affective lens that it provides. The value of this method is that it opens one up to various ways of being comported toward oneself and toward the world. How do things show up when one philosophizes like Hegel, or J. S. Mill, or Nietzsche? Consistency and coherence may be desired, but to spend all of one's time comparing sentences is to miss the point on James's view.

¹⁰ PU, 117.

The present study attempts to do James the favor of applying this method to James's own works. In particular, this work is organized around the distinction between the *center* of James's vision and this vision's *structure*,¹¹ which is basically a distinction of content and form. Whereas I take the center of James's vision to refer to his deepest and most abiding philosophical concerns, I take the structure of his vision to be the logic (or logics) that he employs in order to theorize about these concerns. This distinction is not meant to be absolute, since one might attend to the structure of one's own theorizing and thus make the structure a part of the center. (At an extreme, one could have a passion for logic *per se*, such that the center and structure converge.) Nevertheless, in James's case this distinction is worth drawing, because the structure of James's vision is submerged, distinctive, and reveals a great deal about how the center manages to hold (or so I will argue).

I argue that the center of James's vision is his conception of the individual as active, multivalent, self-fashioning organism. I reconstruct the Jamesian individual through a novel interpretation of James's adaptation of the physiological concept of the "reflex arc," arguing that this model, in conjunction with the often-overlooked moral theory contained within *The Principles of Psychology*, issues in an distinctive ethics of willful character-formation that underlies James's later philosophical writings on religion, meaning, and truth. James can therefore be described as principally a sort of *character ethicist* or *virtue ethicist*, insofar as his philosophy

¹¹ Similarly, James distinguishes between the center of an author's vision and that author's *technique* (PU, Lecture III).

seeks to cultivate a state of *eudaimonia* or flourishing in the moral agent. This is not to claim a strong connection between James and any particular ethical tradition such as Aristotelianism, nor is it to downplay the non-classical and indeed modern and scientific lens through which James approaches questions of character. It is only to suggest that James's philosophy takes as its starting point the question "What kind of person ought I become?" rather than, say, the deontological or consequentialist question "What kind of acts ought I perform?"

This is a non-standard reading of James, since it is generally believed that James either had very little to say about ethics or merely proffered an ethics of belief that is disconnected from his psychology and from any broader project.¹² If James is thought to put forth a general theory of ethics (and not just an ethics of belief), it is generally traced to what seems to be a modified version of utilitarianism in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (1891).¹³ James's ethics of belief is traced to his position in "The Will to Believe" (1897) that it is sometimes rational to make a momentous decision in the absence of evidence. Unlike most readers but like Colin

¹² I have located four monographs on James's ethics: Brennan (1962), which is mainly expository; Roth (1969), which emphasizes the "existentialist" dimension of James's in a manner that is somewhat consonant with my approach, while lacking my Darwinian framework; Franzese (2008), which is the closest to the present study in certain ways and yet does not in my view do enough with James's evolutionism; and Slater (2009), which does emphasize *eudaimonia* in a sense, but in the context of a study of James's religious views and not in relation to the kind of character-formation I have in mind. See Chapter 3 of the present study.

¹³ Like Franzese (2008), I read "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" as an argument against the possibility of ethical theory as traditionally practiced (which is what James claims at the opening of that essay).

Koopman,¹⁴ I locate an ethics of self-transformation in *The Principles of Psychology* and consider this to be heart of James's moral theory. However, whereas Koopman's reading identifies the moral theory of the *Principles* with James's position in "The Will to Believe" (plausibly, in my view), my reading extends the reach of this moral theory to different areas: first to *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and then to *Pragmatism* (1907) and *The Meaning of Truth* (1909).¹⁵ This reading thus demonstrates strong continuity in James's thought over time.

This way of explaining the present study should give a fuller meaning to my opening statement that the center of James's vision is his very concern with centers of vision. In particular, it shows that there are two distinct ways in which James's idea of vision figures in the present study: firstly, as one piece of *evidence* for James's abiding concern with individual character (including its philosophical manifestations); and secondly, as *inspiration for my method* of seeking a center of vision in James in the first place. That is, in taking James's advice about how to interpret James, I find that James's advice itself (considered as a part of his philosophy) serves as a clue to how James's philosophy is organized. This is perhaps dizzying at first blush, and yet it seems to me correct.

¹⁴ Koopman (unpublished).

¹⁵ My exact psychological mechanism for Jamesian ethical freedom is also spelled out somewhat differently than Koopman's, insofar as it draws more heavily on several features of James's general understanding of evolutionary processes. See Chapter 3 of the present study.

If a certain conception of the self-fashioning individual lies at the center of James's vision, then what is the *structure* of this vision? Here it is crucial to note that James was deeply immersed in evolutionary biology during his education and early career.¹⁶ The most important example of this influence, I believe, is a theoretical model that James abstracts from Darwin's theory of natural selection and then applies in a variety of domains. This model, which I call "selectionism," explains systemic patterns in terms of the interaction of variants (things of the same kind that differ) with environments, thus allowing James to explain patterns in psychology, social theory, epistemology, and ethics in a way that is analogous to, but independent of and not reducible to, biological natural selection.¹⁷ As a result, James construes the individual as a nexus of selectionist systems running "down" into the mind as well as "up and out" into the surrounding world. This is why the center of James's vision must be understood in light of its structure: The self-transformative activities of the individual (the center) only make sense in the context of an evolutionary worldview consisting of variation and selection at multiple hierarchical levels of reality (the structure).

Although I am not the first to discuss James's selectionism, the extant discussions are few; they are scattered throughout philosophical, psychological,

¹⁶ See, for example, Perry (1935), Croce (1995), and Croce (1995a). See also Chapter 1 of the present study.

¹⁷ I borrow this term and general concept from the history and philosophy and science, for example, Amundson (1989), Darden and Cain (1989), Hull (2001), Nelson (2007), and Aldrich et al (2008).

educational, and information-theoretic publications; they all omit one or more of James's particular selectionist theories; they tend to focus on "selective attention" without recognizing James's broader applications (including non-psychological ones) of this Darwinian framework; and none of them uses selectionism as the main organizing principle for understanding the structure of James's philosophy as a whole as I do here. The best extant exegesis of James's selectionism in terms of scope and engagement with evolutionary theory is Jonathan Schull's "William James and the Broader Implications of a Multilevel Selectionism" (1996), which singles out several important features of James's evolutionary worldview, including its multi-layered quality and its embrace of the activity of individuals. However, this piece does not take a detailed historical approach to James's works and misses the fact (as I would have it) that the main purpose of selectionism in James is as the mechanism for ethical character-development.¹⁸ I would therefore argue that the present study provides the most comprehensive and systematic account of James's selectionism available.

In reconstructing James's philosophy, I have of course myself made selections. In particular, I have chosen to construe James's conception of the

¹⁸ Schull focuses instead on the headier and more cybernetic idea of nested levels of super-consciousness of which finite individual human consciousnesses may take part. Two other essays that emphasize James's selectionism in the context of the philosophy of science are Schull (1992), which is a less developed version of Schull (1996), and Richards (1987). Scholars of James's philosophy and/or psychology who discuss the *selectivity* of the mind, nervous system, and/or society, without developing the concept of a *generalized selectionism* to the extent that I do, include Wiener (1949), Roth (1969), Suckiel (1982), Seigfried (1984), Woodward (1992), Gale (1999), Pawelski (2007), Crippen (2010), and Crippen (2011). See Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 of the present study.

individual as the center of his vision, which is to say that I emphasize those texts that set the foundations for this conception (including writings in physiology and psychology), in addition to texts that are normally counted as part of James's philosophical pragmatism (e.g. *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth*). One cannot include everything, however, and I have not attempted to incorporate James's writings on the paranormal into my account,¹⁹ for example, nor his views on the philosophical value of experimenting with drugs.²⁰ Perhaps most importantly, I have not attempted an extended treatment of James's metaphysics of radical empiricism, which I consider to be bold and fascinating but under-developed and somewhat removed from the pragmatist-ethical thrust of his overall body of work. This is an area where I have decided not to force unity, although I acknowledge that a study that closely integrates James's theory of the individual with his radical empiricism could provide a useful supplement (or indeed challenge) to the interpretation I am offering presently. There is always more work to be done. Here I would only add that an interpretation that achieves such an integration by de-centering questions of individuality and ethical character-development, or by ignoring the selectionist structure of James's thought, will find resistance in the arguments given throughout the present study.

¹⁹ See "What Psychical Research Has Accomplished" in WB.

²⁰ See the final note in "On Some Hegelians (WB, 217-221), or James's review of Benjamin Blood's *The Anaesthetic Revolution* (ECR, 285-288).

Beyond the scholarship on James in particular, this study also has implications for the broader history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy. Specifically, by offering a novel interpretation of one of the chief figures on the American scene during this period, it contributes to a growing body of work about the interpenetration of scientific and philosophical concerns that characterizes classical American pragmatism more generally.²¹ In particular, it provides a detailed case study showing how the pragmatists' interest in the logic and methodology of science informs their concern about the nature of values and human existence in the decades immediately following the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). In doing so, it provides reason to look more carefully before John Dewey for an important American interpreter of Darwinism in philosophy, thus resisting the tendency enshrined in the title of Jerome Popp's recent work *Evolution's First Philosopher: John Dewey and the Continuity of Nature* (2007).

Additionally, for those interested in the resonances between Continental and Anglo-American thought during this time period, this study concludes with a chapter-long exploration of James's philosophy vis-à-vis several important German figures. Here I examine James's critiques of Hegel's idealism and Nietzsche's "master" figure, as well as his relationship to Husserl's views on temporality. The Nietzsche comparison is of particular interest because of how little James's and Nietzsche's

²¹ See Wiener (1949), Kuklick (1977), Croce (1995), Menand (2002), and Popp (2007). To this list I would add the in-progress work of Rasmus Grønfeldt Winther, Trevor Pearce, Michael Brady, and Charles Carlson.

remarkable similarities have been noticed in the century since their deaths:²² These two contemporaries not only level many of the same critiques of the philosophical tradition (and both for reasons that intimately involve their reactions to evolutionary theory), but they also share important features of the ethical framework that I attribute to James. Therefore, this study provides an enriched understanding both of American pragmatism and of some unseen connections between the latter tradition and some of the most influential figures on the Continent.

This study also has implications for the history and philosophy of science, especially because the type of explanation that I am calling “selectionism” has been of considerable interest in recent philosophy of science.²³ If Darwin’s theory of natural selection is just one instance of a more general theoretical model, then how do we characterize such a model and what kinds of patterns can it be used to explain? Here James stands out as an early but largely unnoticed example of a Darwinian generalizer. Unlike some of today’s more prominent Darwinian enthusiasts such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, however, James understands Darwinism, including the form of explanation he gleans from it, as an antidote to reductive and simplistic modes of theorizing and indeed as a way of defending individual agency. James thus serves to remind us of an older and more “pragmatic” image of

²² The most notable exception here is a dissertation (in German) by Hingst (1999). See Chapter 4 of the present study.

²³ Lewontin (1970); Hull (1980); Sober (1984); Amundson (1989); Darden and Cain (1989); Hull (1990); Cziko (1997); Hull (2001); Hull et al. (2001); Bickhard and Campell (2003); Aldrich et al. (2008); Godfrey-Smith (2009).

Darwinism, defined by a commitment to fallibilism, to an anti-Platonic suspicion of static forms, and to taking the individual organism as a meaningful level of analysis in our explanations. Here James's Darwinism resonates with certain critical schools in current biology and philosophy of science that stress the individual's role in creating its own conditions, rather than allowing the individual as such to disappear at the boundary of (internal) genes and (external) environment.²⁴ Indeed, James's very point in proliferating selectionist explanations is to portray the individual as a site of agency within the simultaneously cultural and natural world it inhabits.

I hope to have given some sense of the use of my reconstruction of James's thought for James scholarship, for the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy, and for the history and philosophy of science.²⁵ It will now be instructive to take a closer look at how this argument plays out chapter-by-chapter.

²⁴ These schools include the dialectical biology of Levins and Lewontin (1985), the related niche construction theory of Odling-Smee (2003) and Laland et al (2003), and the developmental systems theory of Oyama (1985/2000), Oyama (2000), and of several authors in Oyama et al (2003).

²⁵ That is, I hope to have justified my reconstruction of James's project in particular. It is a deeper question whether one *ever* ought to seek a unified author or body of work behind a series of texts. What justifies building a philosophical project around something called "William James" or "William James's work" after, for example, Foucault has argued in "What is an Author?" that the author is a historically contingent functional principle of discourse rather than an originary source that antecedes the text? Such questions can hardly be treated satisfactorily in this space. Suffice it to say that I agree with James (if I may continue invoking this author here) that *all* concepts are provisional constructions that may be critiqued based on their function within discourse. In particular, I follow James in holding that the use of a concept is warranted to the extent that it enriches our experience rather than impoverishing it, where "enriching" may mean indefinitely many things (according to the indefinitely many interests satisfied through a conceptual re-orienting of concrete experience), but where "impoverishing" means one thing chiefly: "vicious abstractionism," or the practice of dogmatically treating one set of abstractions as equivalent to the reality from which they are abstracted, to exclusion of other potentially useful abstractions. (See e.g. MT,

This study is divided into a Part I and Part II, flanked by this Introduction and a Conclusion. Part I, which consists of Chapters 1-3, explicates the structure and center of James's vision, explaining the multiple senses in which James's philosophy is "Darwinian" and showing how James employs selectionist explanations in outlining his conception of the self-fashioning individual. Part II, consisting of Chapter 4, situates James within the broader context of the philosophy of his time, focusing in particular on resonances and contrasts with seminal figures in the Continental tradition.

In Chapter 1, "The Darwinian Structure of James's Vision," I argue that, although the influence of Darwinian biology may be traced along several paths in James's writings, all of these paths can be traced to a single, most important, but relatively unappreciated source: James's *selectionism*, that is, the general model that he abstracts from Darwin's theory of natural selection and subsequently applies in non-biological domains. Selectionism is the key to James's philosophical Darwinism in that his other Darwin-inspired positions can only be fully understood in light of its particular logic. This chapter is therefore an important first step in explicating the Darwinian structure of James's thought as whole.

135.) In short, I am only committed to the idea that I am engaging in *one potentially fruitful way* of composing a philosophical study. The reader may judge how worthwhile these goals are, or whether they are usefully pursued (as I think they are) via reconstructions of authors and their worldviews. In any event, I do not claim to have said the last word about James or about how one may make intellectual use of the texts that bear (or do not bear) his name.

Chapter 1 consists of three main sections. In the first section, I distinguish between four different lines of Darwinian influence in James's writings: (1) free-willism, (2) anti-Platonism, (3) fallibilism, and (4) generalized selectionism. In the second section, I demonstrate that the fourth area, generalized selectionism, provides the key to understanding the logic of the other three areas. I do this by demonstrating how James employs selectionist explanations—explanations of patterns in terms of a process of interaction between variants and an environment—in a variety of domains, which are as follows:

1. Biology: organic evolution
2. Social theory: individual development within the context of a society; societal change itself ("social evolution")
3. Psychology: sensory, perceptual and cognitive processing; learning
4. Epistemology: individual and communal knowledge-growth
5. Ethics: historical ethical change; individual character-development

In each of these domains, James explains some pattern or patterns in terms of the interaction of variants with an environment, where the relations among the elements of the system are further characterized by the following three principles:

1. Non-directedness of variation: variation not produced in direct response to environmental structures
2. Niche construction: reciprocal influence between variants and the environment, such that variants are not merely passively sorted
3. Hierarchical construction: systems "sitting atop" one another, such that variants may "graduate" from one level to another

As a result of James's employment of selectionist explanations in the above five domains, characterized by the above three features, it can be seen (1) that James's selectionist account of the functioning of the mind motivates (and provides evidence for) his view that the will is free (free-willism); (2) that James's selectionist account

of the constitution of the world entails that neither reality nor our conceptions of it should be taken as static or eternal (anti-Platonism); and (3) that James's selectionist account of individual and communal knowledge-growth underwrites his view that knowledge is of necessity provisional (fallibilism). This chapter includes a schematic definition of selectionism, as well as a table of James's particular selectionist theories so that they may be compared side-by-side.

In Chapter 2, "James's Evolutionary Worldview in Focus," I demonstrate the distinctiveness of James's evolutionism, thereby further elucidating James's overall philosophy and allowing for a clearer view of the how James's evolutionism might bear on current conversations about evolutionary theory. In order to do this, I go beyond exhibiting the relationships among the different threads of Darwinian influence in James's work (as in Chapter 1), situating James within the history and philosophy of science, especially vis-à-vis certain contentious discourses surrounding the relationship between the biological and the socio-cultural. Without such contextualizing efforts, James's position is susceptible to careless and anachronistic interpretations that assimilate it to one or another familiar "ism" or "ology"—a problem that is especially acute because of the kind of ire that evolutionary discourses sometimes incite, which could lead to the hasty dismissal (or acceptance!) of James if he is pigeonholed. This discussion prepares the ground for the next chapter, in which I focus more closely on James's conception of the individual, demonstrating how selectionism informs his conception of the self-fashioning individual.

Chapter 2 consists of two main sections. In the first section, I distinguish James's evolutionism from several other positions: Firstly, I show how James's Darwin-inspired social theory is different from social Darwinism, demonstrating that James has no interest in importing a "struggle for existence" into the social sphere; secondly, I distinguish James's position from sociobiology, showing that James is not attempting to explain social behaviors in terms of their contribution to Darwinian fitness but rather is proliferating a certain kind of "Darwinian" (i.e. selectionist) explanation at multiple, independent levels of analysis; and thirdly, I situate James within the literature on selectionism, comparing his position, for example, to the theory of memes. In the second section, I explain the purpose of James's overall, multi-layered evolutionary worldview, making some suggestions about how a Jamesian position might bear on current thinking in the philosophy of science. Here I assert that the main goal of James's use of evolutionary modes of explanation is to fight against *asymmetric externalism*, that is, the explanation of a system in terms of "outside-in" influence without reciprocal influence in the other direction. I therefore suggest that James could serve as an ally to current schools in evolutionary theory and the philosophy of science that critique conceptions of passive adaptation and simplistic dichotomous thinking, such as the dialectical biology of Richard Lewontin and the developmental systems theory of Susan Oyama. I close by claiming that in particular theorists ought to take seriously James's critiques of "vicious abstractionism," or the practice of reifying an abstraction at the expense of all other

potentially useful abstractions. Models may be viewed as complementary rather than competing, and all models should be viewed as approximate and provisional.

In Chapter 3, “Physiology, Psychology, Pragmatism: The Individual at the Center of James’s Vision,” I examine James’s conception of the individual, reading James as a kind of *philosophical anthropologist*, that is, a philosopher who relates all questions back to concerns about the structure, growth, and sense-making activities of the finite individual human. Here I interpret James’s mature pragmatism against the background of his earlier views on the constitution of the individual, showing that his philosophy does not turn, for example, on his doctrine of the will-to-believe, or on his pragmatic theories of meaning and or truth *per se*, but rather that these positions must be understood in relation to his understanding of ideas as potential avenues of self-transformation. This is a non-standard reading of James, who is generally considered either not to have said much about ethics or merely to have proffered an ethics of *belief* that is disconnected from his psychology and from any broader ethical project.

Chapter 3 consists of two main sections. In the first section, I provide a taxonomy of four types of philosophical anthropology, suggesting that James’s philosophy can be viewed as a mixture of a (1) essentialism, (2) naturalism, (3) existentialism, and (4) culturalism. I focus in particular on the existentialist aspect of James’s philosophy that emerges from his writings on reflex action, will, and habit. In the second section, I leverage my analysis of the Jamesian individual in the service of reconciling putative synchronic and diachronic divides in James’s work. In particular, I address Richard Gale’s claim that James’s thought is divided between privileging

activity and privileging passivity, arguing based on a selectionist interpretation of James's conception of reflex action that this tension actually generates freedom on James's view. I also show substantial diachronic continuity in James's writings by showing how his early philosophical anthropology and its attendant moral framework remain in place in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and in the mature pragmatism of *Pragmatism* (1907) and *The Meaning of Truth* (1909). I argue in particular that, because James's pragmatism understands meaning in terms of the practical effects of ideas, and because the most important practical effect of an idea is not its discharge into the world as overt action *per se* but rather its feeding back so as to alter the individual's very constitution, pragmatism for James is principally a form of character ethics.

In Chapter 4, "James in Context: Nietzsche, Husserl, Hegel, and Philosophical Anthropology Redux," I broaden the investigation by exploring resonances and contrasts between James and several seminar figures in the Continental tradition. The purpose of this investigation is to demonstrate the breadth and richness of James's thought, adding further depth and nuance to the unified worldview attributed to him in the first three chapters, while also showing the various lines of connection that historians are still only beginning to unearth between the pragmatic and Continental thought.

This chapter consists of four main sections. In the first section, I address James's reading of Nietzsche in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, arguing that this is both uncharitable and ironic given that James critiques Nietzsche on a point

where they actually share a great deal in common: their ideals of ethical character. In particular, I show that, despite James and Nietzsche's sharp divergence on certain specific normative stances, they share an entire framework for thinking about ethical character-formation. In the second section, I compare James's and Husserl's conceptions of temporality, and in particular their conceptions of the punctual "Now" in relation to a notion of the present as extended. Here I argue that, whereas Husserl reserves an epistemically privileged place for the Now within the extended present, James's pragmatism eschews a sort of foundationalism by refraining from doing this. In the third section, I explicate James's critique of Hegel's idealism, which James considers to be the best example of "vicious abstractionism," or the practice of taking an abstraction to stand in for the reality from which it was abstracted. In the fourth section, I claim that the sort of non-foundationalist, non-reductive naturalism that James shares with the German tradition of philosophical anthropology (*philosophische Anthropologie*) can give us an enriched picture of the human being without sacrificing individual agency, and that a challenging question for future research along Jamesian lines is that of how to generate prescriptions beyond the demand for strenuousness as such.

Part I.

1. The Darwinian Structure of James's Vision

1.1. Introduction

Although it is clear that James was thinking a great deal about Darwinism, especially during the first half of his career, it can be difficult to discern exactly how the influence of Darwinian biology ramifies throughout his thought. This chapter argues that, although the Darwinism's influence can be traced along several paths throughout James's writings, all of these paths relate back to a single, most important, but relatively unappreciated source: James's *selectionism*, that is, his abstraction of a general model from Darwin's theory of natural selection and subsequent application of that model in non-biological domains. This provides an important first step in demonstrating the selectionist structure of James's thought in general, including ways in which this model informs the conception of the individual that I will argue forms the center of James's philosophical worldview.

This chapter consists of three main sections. In the first section, I provide some historical background on James and Darwinism and then distinguish between four different lines of Darwinian influence in James's writings. I label these (1) free-willism, (2) anti-Platonism, (3) fallibilism, and (4) generalized selectionism, respectively. In the second section I focus on selectionism, tracing this model throughout James's writings on biology, social theory, psychology, epistemology, and ethics, concluding with a table of James's selectionist theories so that they can be

compared side-by-side. Finally, in the third section I demonstrate that James's generalized selectionism provides the logical basis for his other three Darwin-inspired views and is in this sense the deepest aspect of his philosophical appropriation of Darwinism. This sets the stage for the following chapter, in which I demonstrate the distinctiveness of James's evolutionism vis-à-vis a several other discourses and research programs.

1.2. Ways of Reading James's Darwinism

Charles Darwin's major contribution in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) was not the idea that species change over time or that different species have a shared ancestry but rather his particular way of explaining such phenomena: natural selection by way of the differential survival and reproduction of organisms with different heritable traits. At one point in the *Origin* Darwin summarizes this idea as follows:

Variations, however slight and from whatever cause proceeding, if they be in any degree profitable to the individuals of a species, in their infinitely complex relations to other organic beings and to their physical conditions of life, will tend to the preservation of such individuals, and will generally be inherited by the offspring. The offspring, also, will thus have a better chance of surviving, for, of the many individuals of a species which are periodically born, but a small number can survive. I have called this principle, by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved, by the term Natural Selection.²⁶

Assuming a competitive "struggle for existence" in which not all organisms can succeed equally, those organisms that happen to be endowed with traits that increase

²⁶ Darwin (1859/1998), 88.

their relative ability to survive and reproduce will tend on average to leave more offspring, thus spreading their (heritable) traits in the population. This process, which Darwin describes as a sort of mindless selective breeder, is meant to explain, not only changes in the characteristics of a species, but also, given enough time and divergence of characteristics, the creation of new species themselves.

It is no secret that Darwin's theory was an important influence on William James's intellectual development.²⁷ In the words of James's early biographer R. B. Perry, "The first philosophical problem to which [James] devoted himself systematically was the problem of evolution."²⁸ The importance of Darwinism to James can be explained in part by the fact that James enrolled in Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School in 1861, close on the heels of the publication of the first edition of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), when Lawrence was a veritable hotbed of controversy surrounding Darwin's theory. Although James began his studies in chemistry, he quickly turned to anatomy and physiology, where his supervisor Jeffries Wyman familiarized him with natural selection. Both Wyman and eminent Harvard botanist Asa Gray were both among Darwin's personal correspondents and early American proponents, and Gray in particular engaged in public defenses of Darwin's theory against Harvard's most prominent anti-Darwinian, Louis Agassiz.

²⁷ See Perry (1935); Richards (1987); Croce (1995), chaps. 4 and 5; Croce (1995a); Menand (2002), chaps. 5 and 6; and Richardson (2006). For a more pointed treatment, see Taylor (1990).

²⁸ Perry (1935) I, 209.

As James transitioned from studying anatomy to studying medicine and physiological psychology in the mid-1860s, he found his own sympathies increasingly to be in line with the Darwinians—despite, or perhaps because of, his increased exposure to Agassiz’s dogmatically anti-evolutionist attitudes during a research expedition to Brazil.²⁹

Another site of James’s early engagement with Darwinism seems to have been the storied Metaphysical Club, a philosophical discussion group that began in the early 1870s and included James, C. S. Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and Chauncey Wright, among others.³⁰ Although Holmes would become a U. S. Supreme Court justice and Peirce and James would become renowned as the founding figures of pragmatism, by all accounts the most central figure in the Metaphysical Club at the time was Wright. Notably, Wright was enamored of the theory of natural selection and numbered, like Harvard’s Wyman and Gray, among Darwin’s personal correspondents.³¹ Thus, whereas both Peirce and Wright worked to disabuse James of his youthful enthusiasm for Herbert Spencer’s neo-Lamarckian evolutionism, Wright was the group’s strongest champion of natural selection in particular and thus was

²⁹ For a discussion of James’s intellectual development in terms of the models provided him by Darwinian and anti-Darwinian figures at Harvard in the 1860, see Croce (1995), chap. 4-5 and Croce (1995a). See also Perry (1935) I, chap. XI-XII; Menand (2002), chap. 4-6; and Richardson (2006), chap. 6-14.

³⁰ See Menand (2002), chap. 9; Richardson (2006), chap. 19.

³¹ In fact, in 1871 Wright published a defense of Darwinism that Darwin so enjoyed that he circulated it as a pamphlet in England at his own expense. See Richardson (2006), 132.

likely the most important source of James's reflections on Darwinism during this time.

From the very outset, James's publication record reflects his engagement with Darwinian biology: James's very first two published pieces, written while he was still a medical student in 1865, are reviews of works of biology by Darwin's chief British promoter T. H. Huxley and natural selection's co-discoverer A. R. Wallace, respectively;³² in 1868, James published two separate reviews of a book by Darwin himself, *Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*;³³ in 1878, James published his first substantive original philosophical essay, "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence," which offers a Darwin-inspired critique of Herbert Spencer's evolutionary psychology; and in 1890, James criticizes Lamarckism while embracing natural selection in the final chapter of his first book, *The Principles of Psychology*.³⁴

It is one thing to note that James was clearly thinking about Darwinism, but it is another thing to say exactly how the influence of Darwinism plays out in his thought. A number of scholars have proposed different ways in which Darwinism informs James's various philosophical positions.³⁵ Here I distinguish between four of

³² James (1865); James (1865a).

³³ James (1868); James (1868a).

³⁴ PP, chap. XXVIII.

³⁵ A classic source on evolution and pragmatism is Wiener (1949). More recent studies that read James through his Darwinism include Seigfried (1984), Richards (1987),

James's positions where Darwinism has putatively exerted an influence, which I label as follows:

1. Free-willism
2. Anti-Platonism
3. Fallibilism
4. Generalized selectionism

After introducing the first three areas, I will explain my reasons for giving a certain logical pride of place to the fourth.

1.2.1. Free-Willism

Free will was a subject of immense personal importance to James, who famously was once raised from a period of depression through his embrace of a defense of free will penned by French neo-Kantian Charles Renouvier. As James confesses in his diary in 1870,

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second *Essais* and see no reason why his definition of free will—'the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts'—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.³⁶

This reference to Renouvier encapsulates the basic conception of free will that James would later articulate through his writings in psychology: Freedom consists in the

Croce (1995), Croce (1995a), Schull (1996), Bredo (2002), Shaw (2010), Crippen (2010), and Crippen (2011).

³⁶ Perry (1935) I, 323.

willful sustaining of a thought when it otherwise might have been crowded out by other, competing thoughts. Given James's adoption of a version of the "ideo-motor theory" of sensor-motor functioning, which holds that ideas tend automatically to discharge in their associated actions unless impeded, this theory of willful attention is tantamount to a theory of willful action.³⁷ To attend to an idea for James is to keep it, and its attendant potential action, alive while other conflicting ideas fade away.

Darwinism was important to James's conception of free will because he believed that it provided scientific evidence for that conception. In particular, James believes that it serves an evolved function. According to James in *The Principles of Psychology*, for example,

The brain is an instrument of possibilities, but of no certainties. But the consciousness, with its own ends present to it, and knowing also well which possibilities lead thereto and which away, will, if endowed with causal efficacy, reinforce the favorable possibilities and repress the unfavorable or indifferent ones. The nerve-currents, coursing through the cells and fibres, must in this case be supposed strengthened by the fact of their awaking one consciousness and dampened by awakening another. *How* such reaction of that consciousness upon the currents may occur must remain at present unsolved: it is enough for my purpose to have shown that it may not uselessly exist, and that the matter is less simple than the brain-automatists hold.³⁸

James is here pitting his free-willism against T. H. Huxley's epiphenomenalist position that consciousness is like the steam of a train—emitted by mechanical processes but not “reaching back down” to affect those same processes—arguing

³⁷ For James's place in the history of ideo-motor theory, see Stock and Stock (2004). See also Chapter 3 of the present study.

³⁸ PP, 144-145. This argument appears as early as the late 1870s. See the 1878 Lowell Lectures on “The Brain and Mind” (ML, 16-43).

instead that the very existence of consciousness is evidence that it must have evolved by natural selection and that it must therefore serve *some* function.³⁹

According to James, this function is just the one that Renouvier spoke of, that is, the selecting of certain options for acting over others, thus stabilizing the nervous system by choosing courses of action from among the myriad possibilities offered by the brain. James admits that he does not know exactly how consciousness can achieve this self-reflexive maneuver, and yet he insists that in any event “it is inconceivable that consciousness should have *nothing to do* with a business to which it so faithfully attends.”⁴⁰ Interestingly, therefore, rather than sharing the common fear that Darwinism destroys agency by explaining all of life in mechanistic terms, James employs Darwin’s theory in order to argue that individual agency is an emergent product of evolution.⁴¹

1.2.2. *Anti-Platonism*

³⁹ This assumption may strike today’s reader as naïve, given the warnings of Gould and Lewontin (1979) against the “adaptationist” belief that every organism can be decomposed into discrete traits that have a history of improving the fitness of ancestors. The mere *existence* of a feature in an organism does not guarantee its utility (now or in the past), since it could be a mere byproduct of other evolutionary developments. The question of whether a trait has evolved by natural selection relies centrally on the question of whether it should be understood as a highly complex and specialized organic system, assuming that the latter sort of system is unlikely to be generated in nature by any other means.

⁴⁰ PP, 140.

⁴¹ For the perceived threat of Darwinism for human freedom in early American psychology, see Greenwood (2008). See also Richards (1987) and Crippen (2011).

A second way in which Darwinism influenced James is that it encouraged his anti-Platonism, that is, his belief in the contingent and mutable nature of form in general. James seems everywhere to assert the reality of flux as against stasis, or becoming as against being. In the *Principles*, for example, James argues that the “substantive” portions of the stream of thought, in which one encounters nameable things, are no more real or epistemically primordial than the non-substantive or “transitive” portions, such as feelings of relation among things.⁴² In fact, James holds that all of the “things” encountered in consciousness are gerrymandered out of the flux of experience based on one’s prior interests and are therefore relative and provisional. Importing this position from psychology to metaphysics, James argues by the end of his life that the most primordial level of reality, “pure experience,” consists of neither knowing subjects nor known objects but rather is the basis from which both subjects and objects may provisionally resolve.⁴³ Thus, James holds that forms of all kinds are not static or eternal but rather are more derivative and ephemeral than many traditional philosophers have thought.

James’s very first publication, a review of Huxley’s *On the Classification of Animals, and on the Vertebrate Skull*,⁴⁴ gives a clue as to how Darwinism may have encouraged his anti-Platonism early on. Although the review is ostensibly a

⁴² PP, 236-237.

⁴³ See especially the first two essays of ERE.

⁴⁴ This was the first volume of a planned longer work called *Lectures on the Elements of Comparative Anatomy* (London: Churchill, 1864). The review is collected in ECR (197-205).

discussion of Huxley's contribution to the debate about whether the skull consists of modified vertebrae, James actually uses Huxley's work primarily as a point of departure for discussing the nature and goals of science within the context of Darwinian biology. Consider, for example, the following passage in which James criticizes the great French anatomist Georges Cuvier:

Now we are sure that biological Science, eternally grateful as she must be to Cuvier, will not consent to stop at these limits. Her function is not merely to note Resemblance, but to find Unity. Below the *fact* of resemblance she will seek till she lays bare the *ground* of resemblance; she will regard classification as her starting point rather than her goal; and far from spurning the "System," she will proclaim that the creation of a perfect system is the very end of her existence. If Cuvier had lived two centuries earlier he would have been satisfied with knowing the coincidences that Kepler had discovered in the planetary orbits, and would have said, as Leibnitz actually did say, that Newton was impious to try to find their cause.⁴⁵

James's criticism of Cuvier—which is likely a veiled criticism of Cuvier's student, Harvard's Agassiz—is that his approach to zoology lacks an evolutionary dimension. For Cuvier as for Agassiz, comparative anatomy allows us to limn the ideal structures of the organic world that are mirrored eternally in the mind of a beneficent creator. According to James, in contrast, science has the legitimate aspiration of going beyond such systematizing of resemblances and differences in order to seek the natural *ground* of these relationships. Darwin, of course, provides just such a ground with his theory of natural selection, which postulates a historical process (selection on heritable variation) in order to explain patterns of similarities and differences among organisms. For this reason, it is plausible that Darwinism for James inspired or at

⁴⁵ ECR, 202.

least encouraged his habit of viewing forms as derivative and provisional, a lesson that James took seriously in the arenas of introspective psychology and metaphysics, as well as in biology.⁴⁶

1.2.3. Fallibilism

Thirdly, Darwin's theory seems to have been instrumental in establishing James's fallibilism. James is in his own way a stalwart empiricist and inductivist: Beliefs come to us from experience, and further experience may always force us to change our beliefs. In "The Will to Believe," for example, James calls this the "empiricist" way of believing in truth, as opposed to the "absolutist" supposition that one can infallibly know when one has attained truth (or at least truths of certain kinds).⁴⁷ There is, according to James, no bell that tolls in one's mind to signify that truth has been attained.⁴⁸ Although this might just sound like a commitment to ordinary scientific method, when reading James one must take "correction by experience" in the broadest possible terms. On James's view, it is not only traditionally "empirical" theories such as statements of natural laws that are open to

⁴⁶ See John Dewey's "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy" (1909), which argues that Darwinism is not just scientifically but *philosophically* radical in its displacement of static forms with historically emergent ones.

⁴⁷ WB, 465.

⁴⁸ In fact, James is skeptical of the very idea of truth as a static resting place, preferring instead to think of truth as a satisfactory sort of working relation that one enters into. See P and MT.

revision based on experience, but rather all beliefs whatsoever, based on an open list of criteria that go beyond (but include) the standard empiricist desiderata of prediction and control. One may even learn from experience—empirically, as it were—that the methods of natural science are in some way limiting or pernicious and that it is rational to believe in spiritualistic interpretations of reality. According to James, “it means a real change of heart, a break with absolutistic hopes, when one takes up this inductive view of the conditions of belief.”⁴⁹

As historian Paul Croce argues,⁵⁰ Darwinian biology provided James with an early lesson in fallibilism. Here it is important to recognize that scientists by no means universally accepted Darwin’s theory upon the publication of the *Origin* in 1859 and that by the turn of the twentieth century natural selection was in fact increasingly under fire for its perceived shortcomings.⁵¹ Firstly, although evolution by natural selection requires the regular appearance of fine-grained, heritable variation within populations, Darwin had only the most speculative of theories of variation and heredity and thus seemed to harbor a dubious promissory note at the heart of his theory. Secondly, Darwin’s theory was among the earliest scientific theories to rely in a major way on probabilistic evidence, a fact that caused many to doubt its scientific status. Darwin’s theory held only that, given enough of (the right kinds of) heritable

⁴⁹ MT, 40.

⁵⁰ This is a central theme of Croce (1995) and Croce (1995a).

⁵¹ For a history that emphasizes this “eclipse of Darwinism,” see Bowler (2003), chap. 7.

variation in populations, one could expect certain evolutionary outcomes with some probability; in short, there is no guarantee that natural selection, if it were operating, would necessarily produce this or that trait, organism, or species.⁵²

Thirdly, natural selection is not subject to replicable experiments in the way that, say, the laws of physics are, and thus it cannot be understood as a generalization gleaned from successive observations in the manner of traditional Baconian *inductionism*. Rather, to use Peirce's terminology, Darwin's argument for natural selection seems to have been closer to an *abductive* one, that is, an inference to the best explanation of a set of extant facts. Darwin posits of a process that, were it to be operating, would tend to produce a pattern found in nature: The process is natural selection; and the pattern that it, along with other processes,⁵³ is supposed to have generated is that of common descent inscribed in the genealogical "tree of life."⁵⁴

⁵² For the emergence of probability theory and statistics in relation to American pragmatism, see Menand (2002), chap. 8.

⁵³ Darwin was a pluralist about evolutionary factors, stating, "Natural Selection has been the most important, but not the exclusive, means of modification" (Darwin 1859/1988, 23). Darwin also postulated sexual selection, where traits evolve as a result of either their attractiveness to mates or their utility in fighting against competitors for mates. (Darwin holds, for example, that the peacock's tail evolved because of the females' preference for mates with that kind of plumage and that the deer's antlers evolved because those deer with more powerful antlers were better able to win out against rivals for the opportunity to mate.) Today, it is common to view sexual selection as just a kind of natural selection. More radically, Darwin accepted the "Lamarckian" inheritance of acquired characteristics, holding that traits can sometimes become hereditary by way of the "use and disuse" of bodily functions during an individual's lifetime (the modern tendency to oppose "Darwinism" to "Lamarckism" notwithstanding). For Darwin's views on heredity, see Winther (2000).

⁵⁴ I am here following Sober (2009), who argues that there is an asymmetry between the roles of (1) the pattern of common descent and (2) natural selection on Darwin's view: Whereas the latter *causes* the former, the former is *evidence* for the latter.

Thus, although in retrospect Darwin's theory therefore appears to be a benchmark in the development of the modern *hypothetico-deductive method*—where one first posits a hypothesis and then tests it by checking for deduced consequences in the world—to many nineteenth-century scientists this would have looked suspiciously like putting the theoretical cart in front of the empirical horse.⁵⁵

James acknowledges the incomplete, probabilistic, and “guess-like” character of Darwin's theory in his two reviews of Darwin's *Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868). James thus responds skeptically to Darwin in his first review as follows:

The one strong impression that affects the reader, after laying down these volumes, is that of the endless complication of the phenomena in question, and the (perhaps hopeless) subtlety and occultness of the immediate causes. At the first glance, the only “law” under which the greater mass of the facts the author has brought together can be grouped seems to be that of Caprice,—caprice in inheriting, caprice in transmitting, caprice everywhere, in turn.⁵⁶

Here James is reacting to Darwin's theory of “pangenesis,” an account of heredity according to which all of an organism's cells throw off tiny organic units called

⁵⁵ In addition to Peirce, William Whewell and William Stanley Jevons are important theorists in the early development of the hypothetico-deductive method. On the importance of Darwin's theory for hypothetico-deductive method, see Ghiselin (1969) and Ayala (2009). Finally, as Sober (2009) points out, *hypothetico-deductive* is not exactly the right term for Darwin's argument given the probabilistic character of his theory.

⁵⁶ ECR, p. 234. James's reference to “immediate causes” refers to Darwin's distinction between external causes of variation (which impinge upon the organism) and the internal (“immediate”) physiological responses to these external impingements. It is the latter kind of cause that James finds inscrutable. As Winther (2000) argues, Darwin is unlike today's neo-Darwinism (or neo-Weismannism) in that he holds that external impingements on the organism are necessary for variation to occur.

“gemmules” at various stages of development, which are collected into the reproductive organs so that they can be passed on to offspring during reproduction; once transmitted to the offspring, these units help to direct the developmental processes of its various corresponding cells at the appropriate stages in *its* development. What strikes James about this theory is how utterly speculative it is, such that one might as well ascribe heredity by appealing to “caprice.”

In his second review, however, James adds the following note of cautious optimism regarding Darwin’s evolutionary biology as a whole:

Perhaps from the very nature of the case, and the enormous spaces of time in question, it may never be any more possible to give a physically strict proof of [Darwin’s theory], complete in every link, than it now is to give a logically binding disproof of it. This may or may not be a misfortune; at any rate it removes the matter from the jurisdiction of critics who are not zoölogists, but mere reasoners (and who have already written nonsense enough about it), and leaves it to the learned tact of experts, which alone is able to weigh delicate facts against each other, and to decide many possibilities make a probability, and how many small probabilities make an almost certainty.⁵⁷

James recognizes that the inference to natural selection as the best explanation for the evolution appears plausible only if there is reason to believe that variations are capable of arising in enough number, with enough variety, and with small enough “steps” in between them in order to allow extant forms to evolve in a cumulative fashion in the geological time allotted (which was itself a matter of debate during the nineteenth century). Here James cites uncertainties about of variation—whether there are enough variational “possibilities” to make it a “probability” that natural selection

⁵⁷ ECR, 239.

does the required work—as reason for refraining to claim certainty for Darwin’s theory. James can only say that, among living things, “the more idiosyncrasies are found, the more probabilities grow in [natural selection’s] favor.”⁵⁸ This statement puts James in the same camp as Harvard’s Asa Gray and Jeffries Wyman, all of them holding that natural selection is a plausible hypothesis but not an indubitable truth.⁵⁹

Thus, it is reasonable to claim, as Paul Croce does, that James’s education in Darwinism suggested to him the uncertainty of *all* beliefs.⁶⁰ James believed in natural selection without certainty, but rather than this being a marginal or degenerate case of “believing in,” it became, for James, a paradigmatic one. To believe for James is to believe before all of the evidence is in, because all of the evidence is never in; believing is akin to placing one’s bets.

Another way in which Darwinism may have encouraged James’s fallibilism is that it may have taught him a lesson about the indeterminacy of values, including the value (including the truth-value) of beliefs. According to Charlene Haddock Seigfried,

while both James and Darwin celebrate the process by which diversity is rewarded in biological evolution, Darwin emphasizes the fact that

⁵⁸ ECR, p. 234.

⁵⁹ Croce (1995), chap. 5. Notably, it was not until the “modern synthesis” of natural selection with Mendelian genetic theory and statistical population genetics in the 1930s and 1940s that scientists widely agreed that natural selection could have done the requisite evolutionary work in the allotted time.

⁶⁰ Croce (1995a). See also Croce (1995), which makes James’s education the centerpiece of a broader narrative of the downfall of certainty in both science and religion in the nineteenth century.

differentiations of all kind, even seemingly nonfunctional ones like the many beautiful colors of flowers, contribute to survival, while *James emphasizes the corollary that this adaptive value is never known beforehand*, and too narrow an interpretation of means to ends would lead to the devaluing of seemingly gratuitous characteristics which have no adaptive value in the present situation but may turn out to be the very characteristics needed for survival in a changed habitat.⁶¹

The biological point attributed to James here is the idea that the adaptive value of any given trait is of necessity indeterminate. This is because, given that evolution occurs over time in heterogeneous, changing environments, any extant morphological, cognitive, or behavioral trait could always gain new and different uses (or become useless). Thus, even if it were possible to determine what function (or series of functions) a trait has played in the evolutionary past, one would still not know what the same trait might be good for in the future. A commonly adduced example of a trait gaining a new function, or “exaptation,”⁶² is the feathers of birds, which are now supposed to have evolved for thermal regulation before later being co-opted (“exapted”) for flight.

James is not concerned primarily with the adaptive value of organic structures, but with the value of beliefs and practices. The analogy is this: Just as the same organic structure may take on new functions in a new environment, thus altering its contribution to Darwinian fitness, the same belief may take on new values in a new environment, thus altering its value for the believer. Here it is crucial not to mix these

⁶¹ Seigfried (1984), 267. Emphasis added.

⁶² This term was coined by Gould and Vrba (1982).

points in a way that suggests that James is only interested in the contribution of beliefs to our literal Darwinian fitness. This is the most caricatured form of pragmatism, a position that no one holds. Rather, the point is just that a belief or practice may come to satisfy any number of demands that crop up within a dynamic cultural and natural world. There is no in-principle limit on what can be valued, and survival and reproduction as such need not hold a special place.⁶³

1.2.4. Summary

I have thus far mapped out the first three areas of James's philosophy that seem to have been initiated or at least encouraged by his exposure to Darwinian biology:

1. Free-willism
2. Anti-Platonism
3. Fallibilism

Although more could be said about the above three lines of Darwinian influence on James, both in isolation and in relation to one another, my strategy for the remainder of this chapter will be to explore the fourth area in depth and then to use this discussion to further illuminate the other three.

1.3. The Varieties of Selectionism

⁶³ That survival is just one (optional) value among others is one of the key points of RS.

The fourth area of James's Darwinian influence is his generalized selectionism, that is, the theoretical model that he abstracts from Darwin's theory of natural selection and then employs in a variety of non-biological domains. Although James employed the term "selection" in reference to Darwin, as well as in reference to his generalization of Darwinian, he did not use the term "selectionism." Rather, this is a term that I borrow from the current literature in the history and philosophy of science because I believe that it is useful for characterizing James's view. Thus, it will be useful to begin by giving a brief sense of what is typically meant in the current philosophical literature by this term.

Although "selectionism" in evolutionary biology typically refers to Darwin's theory of natural selection (such that an explanation of a trait in terms of the latter theory is a "selectionist" one), in the philosophy of science the term has taken on a broader usage to indicate a general model defined by a set of features shared by natural selection and other theories.⁶⁴ This model explains systemic patterns in terms of the interaction of *variants* (things of the same kind that differ) with an *environment* that is external to the system in question. This definition generates the following rough schematic definition, which I believe fits (without wholly specifying) the features of James's selectionism:

⁶⁴ See Amundson (1989), Darden and Cain (1989), Hull (1990), Hull (2001), Hull (2001a), Cziko (1997), Nelson (2007), Aldrich et al (2008), and Godfrey-Smith (2009).

[A selectionist explanation] explains [a systemic pattern] in terms of the differential interaction of [variants] with [an environment].

Throughout the present work, I am using the term “selectionism” in the latter sense, to refer to a general model that any number of particular theories, including natural selection, may instantiate. As a result, a selectionist theory for the purposes of the present study need not be a part of evolutionary biology, nor is Darwin’s theory of natural selection assumed to be the best or most paradigmatic selectionist theory (even if it the most famous and influential one). A selectionist theory is simply one that exhibits a certain abstract structure, and one may even reject Darwin’s theory while embracing selectionist explanations in other domains.

The best extant account of James’s selectionism is Jonathan Schull’s “William James and the Broader Implications of a Multilevel Selectionism” (1996). Schull singles out several important features of evolving systems on James’s view:⁶⁵

1. Variation is unexplained and yet important for understanding evolution
2. Evolution involves interaction between organisms and the environment that is not linearly causal
3. Selectionism may apply outside of evolutionary biology proper

Similarly, I emphasize the following three features of James generalized selectionism, which overlap partially with Schull’s and are consonant with his general approach:

1. Non-directedness of variation: variation that is not produced in direct response to environmental structures (undergirds Schull’s first point)
2. Niche construction: reciprocal causal influence between variants and environments (Schull’s second point)
3. Hierarchical construction: selectionist systems may “sit atop” one another, such that variants may graduate from one level to another

⁶⁵ Schull (1996), 245.

It is important to note that, although Schull's analysis provides a useful starting point for the purposes of the present chapter, he approaches James from a cybernetic and information-theoretic perspective rather than from the perspective of a James scholar or historian of philosophy, and that in particular he does not use his analysis in order to organize the various facets of James's philosophical appropriation of Darwinism (and not with an eye toward James's ethics of character) as I do here. For these reasons, I take the following discussion, combined with Chapter 2 of the present study, to provide the most comprehensive and systematic account of James's selectionism available.⁶⁶

In my view, James applies selectionist explanations in each of the following five areas of his thought:

1. Biology
2. Social theory
3. Psychology
4. Epistemology
5. Ethics

These areas of James's thought overlap, and some of them even contain multiple selectionist systems nested within each other. Nevertheless, these systems can be

⁶⁶ Schull focuses on more cybernetic idea of nested levels of super-consciousness of which finite individual human consciousnesses may take part. Two other essays that emphasize James's selectionism in the context of the philosophy of science are Schull (1992), which is a less developed version of Schull (1996), and Richards (1987). Scholars of James's philosophy and/or psychology who discuss the *selectivity* of the mind, nervous system, and/or society, without developing the concept of a *generalized selectionism* to the extent that I do include Wiener (1949), Roth (1969), Suckiel (1982), Seigfried (1984), Woodward (1992), Gale (1999), Pawelski (2007), Crippen (2010), and Crippen (2011). See Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 of the present study.

distinguished from each other by specifying what they seek to explain and what variant-environment interaction is being posited to explain it.

1.3.1. Biology

Even though I have emphasized that not all selectionist theories are biological theories, James does seem to have learned to think in selectionist terms primarily through thinking about Darwin's theory of natural selection. Thus, the best place to begin analyzing James's selectionism is through a reading of his interpretation of Darwinian biology.

The most important feature of Darwin's theory according to James is the idea that there are distinct "cycles of operation" in nature. In "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment" (1880), James explains this idea as follows:

There are, in short, *different cycles of operation* in nature; different departments, so to speak, relatively independent of one another, so that what goes on at any moment in one may be compatible with almost any condition of things at the same time in the next. The mould on the biscuit in the store-room of a man-of-war vegetates in absolute indifference to the nationality of the flag, the direction of the voyage, the weather, and the human dramas that may go on on board; and a mycologist may study it in complete abstraction from all these larger details.⁶⁷

Although clearly not everything in the universe is directly relevant for explaining everything else, difficulties can arise in determining exactly which "cycles" are

⁶⁷ GM, 166.

relevant to one another and how. James believes that just such a difficulty had obstructed evolutionary theory prior to Darwin:

Pre-darwinian philosophers had also tried to establish the doctrine of descent with modification; but they all committed the blunder of clumping the two cycles of causation into one. [...] The environment, in short, was supposed by these writers to mould the animal by a kind of direct pressure, very much as a seal presses the wax into harmony with itself. [...] Now these changes, of which many more examples might be adduced, are at present distinguished by the special name of *adaptive* changes. Their peculiarity is that that feature in the environment to which the animal's nature grows adjusted, itself produces the adjustment.⁶⁸

Here James has in mind evolutionary theories that took their cue from the early evolutionary biology of French zoologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829), who had posited that species evolved by way of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. According to James, not viewing evolution in this way was precisely Darwin's greatest conceptual achievement:

It was the triumphant originality of Darwin to see this, and to act accordingly. Separating the causes of production under the title of "tendencies to spontaneous variation," and relegating them to a physiological cycle which he forthwith agreed to ignore altogether, he confined his attention to the causes of preservation, and under the names of natural selection and sexual selection studied them exclusively as functions of the cycle of the environment.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ GM, 168. James uses the term "adaptation" for adjustments occurring during *development*. This conflicts with standard neo-Darwinian usage, where an adaptation is typically understood to be a result of natural selection working on populations and not individuals.

⁶⁹ GM, 167. As James admits (167n2), Darwin did not "ignore" the physiological cycle of variation. Rather, Darwin treats these subjects in his *Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868), a work that James had reviewed twice. James's point is only that no particular theory of variation or heredity is *implied* by natural selection.

This introduces the first important general characteristic of James's selectionism, which I call the *non-directedness of variation*.⁷⁰ Variation is non-directed in that it is not generally produced in a way that biases it toward having a certain use in the environment. Thus, Darwinism for James means first and foremost the idea that variation is not *produced* but merely *selected* by the environment; the environment can ratify or veto what is offered to it, but it cannot, so to speak, draft the legislation.⁷¹

The importance of the non-directedness of variation for James's understanding of evolution is evident in his criticisms of his elder British contemporary Herbert Spencer (1820-1903).⁷² Here I focus on the final chapter of *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), because it is here that James his uses arguments against Spencer in order to make his clearest statements of support for natural selection.⁷³ James begins this chapter by rejecting two traditional positions regarding the structure of the mind: first, the austere empiricist position that mental structure is

⁷⁰ I take this locution from Amundson (1989) because it avoids some of the connotations of terms like "random" and "accidental." Variation need not be literally random to avoid being directed in the relevant sense by the environment.

⁷¹ See Levins and Lewontin's (1985) distinction between transformational and variational (selectionist) mechanisms (85-89).

⁷² Although today Spencer is largely forgotten (if occasionally abused for sport), he was at the time a top-selling author; he devised his own neo-Lamarckian evolutionary theory independently of (and prior to) the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (see Spencer's 1857 *Progress: Its Law and Cause*); and he coined the phrase "survival of the fittest." For an impressive recent account of Spencer's life and works, see Francis (2007).

⁷³ See also RS.

built up entirely by sensations being impressed upon it from without; and second, the “apriorist” view that the mind has an innate structure but that this structure is transcendental and therefore beyond scientific scrutiny.⁷⁴ James is unhappy with either alternative: Whereas the empiricist *tabula rasa* gives the individual no resources for even beginning to make sense out of the world, the positing of non-empirical conditions for the possibility of experience suits neither James’s scientific psychology nor his philosophical empiricism.⁷⁵ Instead, James wants a naturalized apriorism, that is, an explanation of the natural (rather than transcendental) grounds of mental structure. This leads James to pursue the problem of mental structure through evolutionary biology.

Here James contrasts two types of evolutionary process by which mental structure may have evolved, which he calls the “way of ‘adaptation’” and the “way of ‘accidental variation,’” respectively:

First, the so-called way of ‘adaptation,’ in which the environment may itself modify its inhabitant by exercising, hardening, and habituating him to certain sequences, and these habits may, it is often maintained, become hereditary.

Second, the way of ‘accidental variation,’ as Mr. Darwin termed it, in which certain young are born with peculiarities that help them and their

⁷⁴ PP, 1215.

⁷⁵ As James would later claim, such a view ignores the factual contexts of cognition, so that “the whole hocus-pocus of *erkenntnisstheorie* begins, and goes on unrestrained by further concrete considerations” (MT, 81). This comment is a typical expression of James’s distaste for German transcendental philosophy, such as that practiced by various schools of neo-Kantianism in his time.

progeny survive. That variations of this sort tend to become hereditary, no one doubts.⁷⁶

Whereas the first option is the way of the Lamarckian inheritance of acquired characteristics, the second option is the way of Darwinian selection on “accidental” (non-directed) variations. Notice that, although James appeals to common consensus in holding that Darwin’s accidental variations are heritable,⁷⁷ he is more skeptical about the inheritance of acquired characteristics. The main question of the chapter is then whether natural selection and the inheritance of acquired characteristics are *both* factors in evolution, as Darwin himself believed, or whether the latter factor should be jettisoned.⁷⁸

It is natural for James to turn to Spencer in this context, since he was the first important philosopher to overhaul psychology and epistemology from something like a modern evolutionary point-of-view. Spencer’s Lamarckian psychology-cum-epistemology, which James refers to as “evolutionary empiricism,” functions

⁷⁶ PP, 1224. Again, James’s use of the term “adaptation” here might be confusing to today’s reader, given that in neo-Darwinian parlance this term tends to be reserved for population-level rather than individual changes.

⁷⁷ James’s presumption in favor of natural selection is evidenced by the fact that, despite his thorough criticisms of Spencer, James cites texts by Darwin only three times, including only one long quotation from Darwin, to which he adds, “The evidence for Mr. Darwin’s view is too complex to be given in this place. To my mind it is quite convincing” (PP, 1275).

⁷⁸ That James still considered Lamarckism an open possibility when he was writing the *Principles* is shown by a letter James wrote to *Forest and Stream* in 1888 (ECR, 127-128), in which James asks the readers to write him personally if they have experienced the phenomenon of a hunting dog getting excited the first time it sees a gun. James had heard of this phenomenon and believed that it could be evidence for the inheritance of an acquired behavioral response.

according to what Spencer calls the “law of intelligence,” which states that the “cohesion between psychical states is proportionate to the frequency with which the relation between the answering external phenomena has been repeated in experience.”⁷⁹ This view supplements traditional nineteenth-century associationist psychology with an explicitly evolutionary dimension: For Spencer, as for the traditional associationist, the mind gets increasingly better at forging mental associations and thus mapping the patterns of the external world, and yet for Spencer the mind comes pre-packaged with innate associations forged during the lives one’s progenitors, just as one’s own acquired associations may be passed on to one’s offspring.

Although James admits that Spencer’s evolutionary empiricism represents an improvement on the *tabula rasa* of classical empiricism, he argues that Spencer merely defers the problem into the mists of the evolutionary past. Our ancestors could not have begun perceiving objects—still less perceiving space and time relations in the first place—simply by being surrounded by regular features of the world until these features became ingrained. To avoid this problem, Spencer can only resort to positing that organisms have an inherent tendency toward “correspondence” with the world (including cognitive correspondence), and yet, as James had already argued in an earlier essay,⁸⁰ this “principle of correspondence” is nothing more than an obscure

⁷⁹ GM, 184. See also Spencer (1872).

⁸⁰ RS.

metaphysical posit. James thus parodies Spencer and his fellow “Spencerite”

psychologists as follows:

Most psychologists nowadays believe that the objects first, in some natural way, engendered a brain from out of their midst, and then imprinted these variations cognitive affections upon it. But how? The ordinary evolutionist answer to this question is exceedingly simple-minded. [...] Any ordinary Spencerite will tell you that just as the experience of blue objects wrought into our mind the color blue, and hard objects got it to feel hardness, so the presence of large objects and small objects in the world gave it the notion of size, moving objects made it aware of motion, and objective successions taught it time. [...] This notion of the outer world inevitably building up a sort of mental duplicate of itself if we only give it time, is so easy and natural in its vagueness that one hardly knows how to start to criticize it.⁸¹

What is needed here is exactly what Darwinism provides but Spencer’s neo-Lamarckism lacks: non-directed variation, that is, variation that is not impressed upon individuals from without, like a seal upon wax, but which rather appears as a stroke of evolutionary luck.

Although this is enough for James to think that Lamarckian accounts of the evolution of cognition must at least be *supplemented* by natural selection, James in fact closes the final chapter of the *Principles* with an outright rejection of the inheritance of acquired characteristics and thus with an embrace of the view that natural selection is the only major evolutionary mechanism.⁸² Here James acknowledges Spencer’s argument that the organic world is too highly structured to

⁸¹ PP, 1226-1227.

⁸² “I must therefore end this chapter on the genesis of our mental structure by reaffirming my conviction that the so-called Experience-philosophy has failed to prove its point” (PP, 1289).

be the result of mere chance and selection,⁸³ and yet he claims that Spencer underestimates the power of selection and that the inheritance of acquired characteristics is in any event empirically dubious. This stance makes James appear rather ahead of his time, especially given that he was emboldened to take this position in particular by the then-recent criticisms of Lamarckism advanced by his German contemporary August Weismann,⁸⁴ who has been retrospectively lionized as inaugurating the properly *neo*-Darwinian viewpoint that purifies Darwinism of any residual Lamarckian elements.⁸⁵

⁸³ PP, 1279. James is here discussing Spencer's *The Factors of Organic Evolution*.

⁸⁴ In addition to providing further evidence in favor of James's conviction that natural selection can explain virtually any trait that Lamarckism purports to explain, Weismann had also recently conducted laboratory experiments that cast doubt upon the possibility of Lamarckian inheritance. The most famous of the latter experiments involved removing the tails from successive generations of mice and observing that the offspring continued to grow tails nonetheless. James refrains from endorsing Weismann's own positive view of heredity and variation, referring the reader to Weismann's *Über die Vererbung* (1883) and *Kontinuität des Keimplasmas als Grundlage einer Theorie der Vererbung* (1885).

⁸⁵ That is, today Weismann is remembered as the chief nineteenth-century proponent of the now-standard *transmissional* view of variation and heredity: the view that variations are caused by processes internal to the germinal materials, which are kept physically segregated from the rest of the developing body such that the inheritance of acquired characteristics is impossible. Specifically, Weismann argues that the hereditary germ-plasm exists in germinal cells, which are sequestered from the somatic cells that comprise the rest of the body. Although today's neo-Weismannians tend to believe that they are merely updating this story by replacing germ-plasm with DNA ("molecular Weismannism"), Winther (2001) demonstrates that Weismann was not a neo-Weismannian in this strict sense. Rather, Weismann (along with Darwin) holds that changes in environmental conditions are necessary for introducing variations into the germinal materials. Thus, even though Weismann argues that it is impossible for an organism to acquire a trait and then pass on this selfsame trait ("Lamarckism"), he does not hold that variations in the germ-plasm are generated by processes internal to themselves.

A final note about *The Principles of Psychology* reveals that, despite his preference for natural selection over the inheritance of acquired characteristics, his enthusiasm was tempered by a healthy skepticism about speculative evolutionary narratives. James thus concludes the final chapter of the *Principles* on the following note of humility:

The causes of our nervous structure are doubtless natural, and connected, like all our other peculiarities, with those of our nervous structure. Our interests, our tendencies of attention, our motor impulses, the aesthetic, moral, and theoretic combinations we delight in, the extent of our powers of apprehending schemes of relation, just like the elementary relations themselves, time, space, difference and similarity, and the elementary kinds of feeling, *have all grown up in ways of which at present we can give no account*. Even in the clearest parts of Psychology our insight is insignificant enough. And the more sincerely one seeks to trace the actual course of *psychogenesis*, the steps by which as a race we may have come by the peculiar mental attributes which we possess, the more clearly one perceives ‘the slowly gathering twilight close in utter night.’⁸⁶

This passage shows that James is far from sanguine about the idea of finding evolutionary explanations for all aspects of human mental life, as in the more ambitious versions of what we now call “evolutionary psychology” and “sociobiology.” Indeed, as he had written a decade earlier, James is open to the possibility that some traits have no adaptive significance to speak of:

Evolutionists should not forget that we all have five fingers not because four or six would not do just as well, but merely because the first vertebrate above the fishes *happened* to have that number. He owed his prodigious success in founding a line of descent to some entirely other quality—we know not

⁸⁶ PP, p. 1280. Emphasis added. The final eight words are an uncited quotation from Book VII of Wordsworth’s *The Excursion*.

what—but the inessential five fingers were taken in tow and preserved to the present day.⁸⁷

This emphasis on the contingent nature of evolution, along with the belief that not all extant traits must have been positively selected for, prefigures some twentieth-century criticisms of the more simplistic and blinkered versions of neo-Darwinism.⁸⁸

1.3.2. Social Theory

It did not take long for James to extend a selectionist mode of reasoning into non-biological domains. The easiest place to find such an extension is in James's 1880 essay "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment,"⁸⁹ mainly because he announces the parallel to Darwinism in the very first sentence:

A remarkable parallel, which I think has never been noticed, obtains between the facts of social evolution on the one hand, and of zoölogical evolution as expounded by Mr. Darwin on the other.⁹⁰

This parallel, James eventually announces, is as follows:

The causes of production of great men lie in a sphere wholly inaccessible to the social philosopher. He must simply accept geniuses as data, just as Darwin accepts his spontaneous variations. For him, as for Darwin, the only problem is, these data being given, How does the environment affect them, and how do

⁸⁷ GM, 178-179.

⁸⁸ The most classic such criticism is Gould and Lewontin (1979).

⁸⁹ The title of this essay was shortened to "Great Men and Their Environment" when it was collected in *The Will to Believe* (1896). A French version was also published as "Les grand hommes, les grandes pensées et le milieu" in *Critique Philosophique* in 1881.

⁹⁰ GM, 163.

they affect the environment? Now I affirm that the relation of the visible environment to the great man is in the main exactly what it is to the “variation” in the Darwinian philosophy. It chiefly adopts or rejects, preserves or destroys, in short *selects* him.⁹¹

Just as Darwin may treat variations as data that he does not purport to explain *qua* evolutionary biologist, the sociologist may treat the traits of individuals as data that they do not purport to explain (or at least *fully* explain) *qua* sociologist. In other words, one should consider the extent to which social variation, as represented by idiosyncratic individuals, is non-directed with respect to the environment, whether the environment is characterized in socio-cultural or physical-geographical terms.⁹²

Although James does not deny that people are largely a product of their social and material circumstances, he is anxious to allow for “accidental” variations in people that are not directed by external circumstances.

According to James, such non-directedness of social variation implies that societal change or “social evolution” must be viewed as a result of both variation and selection, as in the case of Darwinian biology:

Thus social evolution is the resultant of two wholly distinct factors—the individual, deriving his peculiar gifts from the play of physiological and infra-social forces, but bearing all the power of initiative and origination in his

⁹¹ GM, 170. James’s repeated mentions of “geniuses” and “great men” should not distract from the fact that his discussion is meant to apply to individuals in general, if in varying degrees. See also “The Importance of Individuals” in WB.

⁹² The following rebuke of Spencer’s disciple Grant Allen represents James’s position regarding the putatively determinative influence of physical geography on national mental types: “No geographical environment can produce a given type of mind. It can only foster and further certain types fortuitously produced, and thwart and frustrate others. Once again, its function is simply selective, and determines what shall actually be only by destroying what is positively incompatible” (GM, 178).

hands; and, second, the social environment, with its power of adopting or rejecting both him and his gifts. Both factors are essential to change. The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community.⁹³

Here as in his discussions of Darwin, James is using the term “selection” in a deflationary sense: To select, whether in the social or the biological organic realm, is merely to “preserve or destroy,” to ratify or veto, something that has already been produced. In order to understand James’s conception of evolutionary processes, however, it is crucial to recognize that for James the environment’s “preserving” or “destroying” of variations is not a process in which the environment itself is independent or impervious to change. Rather, as James’s above question implies, both the biologist and the sociologist must ask the following two-part question: “How does the environment affect [the variations], and how do they affect the environment?” This question implies that the structure of the environment doing the selecting is influenced by the very variants that it selects. In other words, selection for James does not mean the fitting of a passive individual (or population) to an autonomous environment but rather a process of reciprocal construction in which variants and environments come to be *fitted to one another*. Here James is explicit on this point:

Whenever [the environment] adopts and preserves the great man, it becomes modified by his influence in an entirely original and peculiar way. He acts as a ferment, and changes its constitution, just as the advent of a new zoölogical species changes the faunal and floral equilibrium of the region in which it appears.⁹⁴

⁹³ GM, 174.

⁹⁴ GM, 625.

This understanding of feedback between variation and environment, which, adapting a term from contemporary biology, I will refer to as “niche construction,” is the second key characteristic of James’s conception of selection.⁹⁵ Although the times may make the person, the person, too, makes the times.

This essay also begins to demonstrate the third characteristic of James’s selectionism, which is its *hierarchical construction*, that is, its application at multiple levels of analysis. This can be seen from a closer analysis of James’s metaphorical reasoning. In particular, note that in James’s social evolutionism the individual person in a society is not analogous to the individual organism in Darwin’s theory, but rather to the *variation* that may appear in an organism: “Societies of men are just like individuals, in that both at any given moment offer ambiguous potentialities of development.”⁹⁶ James is thus doing something more complex than it might seem at first pass: portraying society as an individual and social evolution as that individual’s *development*. James thus likens societal change primarily to what biologists now call ontogeny (individual development) rather than phylogeny (population-level evolution).⁹⁷ James’s point is that, just as a biological population evolves due (in part)

⁹⁵ See Laland et al (2003) and Odling-Smee et al (2003). Such discussions are influenced by Levins and Lewontin (1985).

⁹⁶ GM, 171.

⁹⁷ Although this is not what today’s reader might expect from a theory of “social evolution,” it should be remembered that prior to the twentieth century the term “evolution” was not strictly preserved for describing population-level changes as it is in today’s neo-Darwinism.

to the influence of non-directed variations that irrupt in organisms, a society or a nation, conceived metaphorically as an individual person, develops in a way that is influenced by non-directed variations (idiosyncratic individuals) that irrupt within it. Development is like evolution in that it is fueled by non-directed changes, and the “development” of a society, too, is like evolution in this way.

Notice that there is more than a mere analogy between the biological and social domains here. It is not just that James believes that biological evolution and social evolution are in some way similar, but also that the sources of variation for each are ultimately the same: Society is like a developing individual that is subject to inscrutable, non-directed quirks; these quirks are idiosyncratic individuals, whose own quirkiness owes to inscrutable, non-directed quirks of their own physiology; and this means that developmental possibilities of any society, just like the development possibilities of any individual, cannot be fixed in advance or determined from without. Thus, the depths of physiology provide the non-directed variations that fuel both biological and social evolution, but the latter occupies a higher level of analysis because it involves the positing of a “social organism” composed of individuals that are themselves developing organisms.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ James’s notes for this essay make this hierarchical structure clear: “To the social evolutionist advent of great man is a datum which he accepts from Physiology as Darwin accepts spontaneous variations. Difference is interposition of social organism” (WB, 437). For more on James’s social evolutionism, including how it differs from social Darwinism and sociobiology, see Chapter 2. See also McGranahan (2011).

1.3.3. Psychology

The hierarchical nature of James's selectionism comes out even more strongly in his psychology.⁹⁹ As discussed above, James argues in *The Principles of Psychology* for a Darwinian (and non-Lamarckian) conception of the evolution of mental structure. Such "evolutionary psychology" involves a literal application of Darwin's theory of natural selection to the mind, whereas here I am concerned with James's psychological selectionism, that is, with his selectionist theories of the functioning of the individual mind. These positions are logically independent, as one may believe that the mind evolved in a selectionist fashion within believing that the individual mind involves selectionist processes and *vice-versa*.¹⁰⁰

According to James, "Selection is the very keel on which our mental ship is built."¹⁰¹ This is because, on James's view,

consciousness is at all times a *selecting agency*. Whether we take it in the lowest sphere of sense, or in the highest of intellection, we find it always doing one thing, choosing one out of several of the materials so presented to its notice, emphasizing and accentuating that and suppressing as far as possible all the rest.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ I offer a more detailed reconstruction of James's psychological selectionism that focuses on questions of willing and agency in terms of selectionism and the theory of the "reflex arc" in Chapter 3.

¹⁰⁰ According to Schull (1996), James was the first to develop a combination of these two positions. Whereas Spencer's individual psychology involved selection processes, his population-level evolutionary story (as described above) was more a Lamarckian than a selectionist one.

¹⁰¹ PP, 640.

¹⁰² PP, 142.

James is here alluding to the cascade of psychological selectionist systems that he adduces in his famous chapter “The Stream of Thought.” This cascade begins at the level of sensation:

To begin at bottom, what are our very senses themselves but organs of selection? Out of the infinite chaos of movements, of which physics teaches us the world consists, each sense-organ picks out those which fall within certain limits of velocity. To these it responds, but ignores the rest completely as if they did not exist.¹⁰³

Sensation is thus at the bottom of the sensorimotor hierarchy, straddling the external world and the nervous system. Sensation exhibits non-directed variation, since the properties that determine whether a part of the world induces a sensory response (physico-chemical structure, velocity, etc.) are not caused by the sensory receptors themselves, which merely select (accept or reject) the stimuli they are given.

From sensation James passes on to the perception of objects as such:

Attention, on the other hand, out of all the sensations yielded, picks out certain ones worthy of its notice and suppresses all the rest. [...] Helmholtz says that we notice only those sensations which are signs to us of *things*. But what are things? Nothing, as we shall abundantly see, but the special groups of sensible qualities, which happen practically or aesthetically to interest us, to which we therefore give substantive names.¹⁰⁴

The mind uses selective attention in order to fashion tractable objects of perception from a sea of (already-selected) sensation. Again, selective attention does not produce the sensations to which it attends but rather only picks out and foregrounds those that

¹⁰³ PP, 273-274.

¹⁰⁴ PP, 274.

will signify objects. James then posits a further selective process in which the mind determines what is *essential* to an object:

The mind selects again. It chooses certain of the sensations to represent the thing most *truly*, and considers the rest as its appearances, modified by the conditions of the moment. [...] The reader knows no object which he does not represent to himself by preference as in some typical attitude, of some normal size, at some characteristic distance, of some standard tint, etc., etc.¹⁰⁵

In order to perceive a circular red table *as such*, for example, one must abstract from the table's heterogeneous brightness and shading, taking a specific shade of red to be more truly its color than others, while also taking its shape when viewed directly from above (or below) to be more truly its shape than the shape it appears to have from all other angles. Only after processes like this does one even begin to perceive the world of permanent and stable-seeming objects in regard to which one is able to reason and act.¹⁰⁶

This cascade of selectionist processing can be envisaged, James suggests, as a series of filters:

Looking back, then, over this review, we see that the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities. [...] The highest and most elaborated mental products are filtered from the data chosen by the faculty next beneath, out of the mass offered by the faculty below that, which mass in turn was sifted from a still larger amount of yet simpler material, and so on. The mind,

¹⁰⁵ PP, 274-275.

¹⁰⁶ James actually enumerates three more kinds of mental selection, in regard to how we act in the world: *reasoning*, which requires selectively analyzing phenomena reasoned about; *aesthetic* selection, which requires selective elimination of artistic elements; and *ethical* selection, which requires selecting which of one's interests to pursue and thus to reinforce in one's character (PP, 276-277). I take up James's ethics below and then again in Chapter 3.

in short, works on the data it receives very much as the sculptor works on his block of stone.¹⁰⁷

Here James emphasizes the negative aspect of selection, such that the perceived world is constructed through a series of eliminations that cut a swath through the *plenum* or fullness of reality. It is important to note, however, that these filters themselves are subject to modification and do not represent a “one-way street” from sensation through cognition to action. Rather, as I describe in more detail in Chapter 3, one may willfully generate habits that inform further thinking and behaving. Thus, it is not that one first perceives and then thinks and then acts, but rather that all of these phases always occur in an already-perceived and already-cognized world, such that one’s entrenched habits and current interests feed back into, and thus co-construct, one’s experience.

There is according to James another psychological selectionist system “sitting atop” the cascade of systems just described, which is that of trial-and-error learning. Since James believes that the function of the triadic “reflex arc” of sensation-cognition-action is to produce actions,¹⁰⁸ he views the entire preceding cascade of filters as having the function of generating mental variants that may discharge in behavioral variants that can be tried out against the world. Thus, whereas at the bottom of the sensor-motor hierarchy sensation straddles mind and world by

¹⁰⁷ PP, 277.

¹⁰⁸ See RA. See also Dewey’s (1896) functionalist interpretation of the reflex arc, which is nascent in James. For James and Dewey in the history of the reflex arc concept, see Phillips (1971). See also Chapter 3 of the present study.

introducing variants from the latter into the selective environment of the former, at the top of this hierarchy trial-and-error learning straddles mind and world by introducing variants from the mind out into the selective environment of the world. Here James explains trial-and-error by making explicit parallels to both biological and social evolution, thus supporting the present contention that each of these systems should be viewed as instances of the same abstract model:

the new conceptions, emotions, and active tendencies which evolve are originally produced in the shape of random images, fancies, accidental out-births of spontaneous variation in the functional activity of the excessively instable human brain, which the outer environment simply confirms or refutes, adopts or rejects, preserves or destroys—*selects*, in short, just as it selects morphological and social variations due to molecular accidents of an analogous sort.¹⁰⁹

On James's view, it is precisely the "instable" character of the human nervous system that makes it rich in non-directed mental variation, while also necessitating the will's function of intervening in order to weight certain possibilities over others.

This understanding of trial-and-error learning also informs James's epistemology, both in an individual and a communal sense, to which I turn now.

1.3.4. Epistemology

¹⁰⁹ GM, 640-641. Emphasis added. In the context of the greater passage, it is clear that James is using the term "evolve" in an ontogenetic sense rather than a phylogenetic one, to refer to mental variations that occur during individual development and which need not be heritable.

The term “evolutionary epistemology” refers to two logical independent views in current philosophy: firstly, a brand of naturalized epistemology that holds that epistemology should be done in light of our psychology and that psychology should be understood in light of evolutionary biology; and secondly, the view that the growth of knowledge should itself be described as an “evolutionary” process in some sense.¹¹⁰ Although one need not construe knowledge-growth as “evolutionary” in order to believe that evolutionary psychology is relevant to epistemology, and although one need not believe that evolutionary psychology is relevant to epistemology to believe that knowledge grows in an “evolutionary” manner, James in fact accepted some version of both positions. Since I have already discussed James’s evolutionary approach to psychology (under Biology) above, I will now focus on his view that knowledge-growth is its own “evolutionary” process.

James portrays his own epistemology as an alternative to Spencer’s version of a correspondence theory of truth, that is, the view that truth means cognitive correspondence with an independent reality. Indeed, already in his first substantive original essay, James judges Spencer’s position on this matter to be hopeless:

Spencer’s formula has crumbled into utter worthlessness in our hands, and we have nothing to replace it by except our several individual hypotheses, convictions, and beliefs. Far from being vouched for by the past, these are verified only by the future. [...] They have to keep house together, and the weakest goes to the wall. The survivors constitute the right way of thinking.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ The key figures in the latter tradition in the twentieth century are Popper (1959) and Campbell (1988). See also Halweg and Hooker (1989) for a critical survey of the field.

¹¹¹ RS, 20.

If, as James holds, the world that we experience is a selectively impoverished version of already-selected sensations, and if the interests of consciousness play an ineliminable role in determining how we orient ourselves within this world, then it is not clear how either our mental representations or linguistic descriptions could be understood as objective transcripts of reality. Thus, absent the possibility of checking for such correspondence, James concludes that the criterion of knowledge is simply a belief's ability to *survive*.

One area where James explicitly applies this model is that of scientific discovery. Here James parodies the notion that a brain could conceive of an idealization such as a natural law merely by being exposed to regularities in the world. What is required is not the passive mirroring or “correspondence” of the mind but rather an active contribution from the knower that turns out to be fruitful:

The conceiving of the law is a spontaneous variation in the strictest sense of the term. It flashes out of one brain, and no other, because the instability of that brain is such as to tip and upset itself in just that particular direction. But the important thing to notice is that the good flashes and the bad flashes, the triumphant hypotheses and absurd conceits, are on an exact equality in respect of their origin.¹¹²

Thus, mental variation for James is not directed by the environment but rather represent physiological-cum-mental “guesses” whose value is a matter, not of their origin, but of their results. A belief for James is verified by being preserved within a simultaneously natural and socio-cultural environment. Notably, the testing ground of

¹¹² GM, 186. James attributes this insight to W. S. Jevons's *Principles of Science*. See also PP, 1232.

scientific hypotheses includes not just the physical world but also the social one of scientific peers and journals.

The scientific hypothesis arouses in me a fever of desire for verification. I read, write, experiment, consult experts. Everything corroborates my notion, which being then published in a book spreads from review to review and from mouth to mouth, till at least there is no doubt I am enshrined in the Pantheon of the great diviners of nature's ways. The environment *preserves* the conception which it was unable to *produce* in any brain less idiosyncratic than my own.¹¹³

This verification process also involves a kind of epistemological niche-construction for James, since the environment against which beliefs are tested is constituted in part by further beliefs, such that the addition of a new belief serves to change the structure of that world. In James's words, although a true idea must in a sense "conform to reality," "The truth which the conforming experience embodies may be a positive addition to the previous reality, and later judgments may have to conform to *it*."¹¹⁴

James does not restrict this model to the case of scientific growth, but rather freely applies it to truth in general, including moral and religious beliefs. This is the meaning of James's infamous claim that an idea is true if and only if it is *useful*, such that "the truth of a state of mind means this function of *a leading that is worth while*."¹¹⁵ Although it is easy to parody this claim as implying that a person may believe whatever makes one feel better, James's point is just that the value of a belief

¹¹³ GM, 186.

¹¹⁴ MT, 60.

¹¹⁵ P, 98.

is a function of its always-still-accruing consequences, which can be judged in myriad ways, including (but not limited to) traditional criteria such as scientific prediction and control and coherence with extant beliefs. Truth for James is just what works, and what works is determined by seeing how our spontaneous, non-directed ideas fare in a world that these same ideas may in some measure help to construct.

1.3.5. Ethics

In my view, James posits two distinct systems of selectionist ethics: firstly, a theory of historical ethical change in which ideals are the variants and societies are the environments; and secondly, an ethics of character, deriving from his views on habit, the will, and the self, in which potential future characters are the variants and the current character is the environment. It is the latter theory that, in subsequent chapters, I argue forms the crux of James's pragmatism.

James puts forth his theory of historical ethical change in his essay "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (1891), which is his only work dedicated explicitly to ethical theory. Here James claims that the goodness of an ethical ideal can only be measured by how well it satisfies the "demands" of sentient beings in the long run of history, where these demands can be for literally anything imaginable. The extreme open-endedness of this position is intentional and is in fact the very point of the essay. In James's words,

The main purpose of this paper is to show that there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance. We all help to

determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race's moral life. In other words, there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and his say. In the one case as in the other, however, the hypotheses which we now make while waiting, and the acts to which they prompt us, are among the indispensable conditions which determine what that "say" shall be.¹¹⁶

Ethical ideals are thus treated in the same fashion as other beliefs for James:

Originally generated by idiosyncratic individual minds, they can only be judged in terms of their (many and changeable) consequences over time, where they must be understood as co-constructing the very environment in which they exist. If James adds something new here, it is his belief that ideals promulgated in a strenuous mood will prevail in history, because of that mood's determination to subordinate unworthy ends to worthy ones.

The deepest life, practically, in the moral life of man is the difference between the easy-going and the strenuous mood. When in the easy-going mood the shrinking from present ill is our ruling consideration. The strenuous mood, on the contrary, makes us quite indifferent to present ill, if only the greater ideal be attained.¹¹⁷

There is no better selective environment than a strenuous mood, or a society full of individuals with strenuous moods, if only because this mood, by its very nature, tends to speed up the historical process of forming a hierarchical structure of ideals that enshrines the better-proven ones above the relatively worse ones.¹¹⁸ Although this

¹¹⁶ MP, 141.

¹¹⁷ MP, 159-160.

¹¹⁸ MP, 161-162. James argues that we ought to believe in the possibility of finalizing this structure, if only as a regulative ideal of thought. In fact, James concludes that we also should believe in a God in whose mind that ideal hierarchy already exists.

structure may end up biased toward the satisfaction of the demands of strenuous (having been forged largely by strenuous types), this is appropriate for James since, as I explain further in the second half of the present study, his own deepest bias about values is that an active and energetic attitude is inherently better than a relatively passive one.

James's characters ethics treats this same problem of hierarchically subordinating ideals to one another, but within the individual instead of within history. The basic idea of James's character ethics is that in choosing among possible actions one also chooses to reinforce certain habits of thinking and behaving and thereby entrenches a certain kind of character. Choosing an action is thus always, at least in some small way, an act of choosing what one is. This is, if you like, an *existentialist* aspect of James.¹¹⁹ Here the variants are potential selves represented by ideas of actions, and the selective environment is consciousness or the will. James dramatizes this process in the *Principles* as follows:

I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest. [...] This is as strong an example as there is of that selective industry of the mind on which I insisted some pages back [citation to "The Stream of Thought"]. Our thought, incessantly deciding, among many things of a kind, which ones for it shall be realities, here chooses one of many possible selves or characters, and forthwith reckons it no shame to fail in any of those not adopted expressly as its own.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Barrett (1958) may be right that James is the closest thing to an American existentialist. I return to the idea of James as a kind of existentialist in Chapter 3.

¹²⁰ PP, 295-296. See also GM, 171.

That James also privileges the strenuous mood in the context of his character ethics is shown in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by the praise that he lavishes on the “saintly” character type, in part because of that type’s strenuously self-severe attitude:

The saintly person becomes exceedingly sensitive to inner inconsistency or discord, and mixture and confusion grow intolerable. All the mind’s objects and occupations must be ordered with reference to the special spiritual excitement which is now its keynote.¹²¹

The point here is not that one ought to have a particular character, since the ideal character is always relative to the environment one finds oneself in. However, one at least ought to exercise vigorous energy in self-transforming oneself according to some coherent vision.

In short, James celebrates the ability of the strenuous mood, enacted through conscious willing, to work in two different directions: *downward* to organize the cognitive and affective impulses that constitute one’s character; and *upward* and *outward* to organize the system of ideals embedded in society. In both cases, strenuousness is portrayed as an unassailable good, although the question of the particular values that one ought to support (apart from strenuousness itself) is left intentionally open.

1.3.6. Summary and Table

¹²¹ VRE, 234.

James employs selectionist explanations regularly and in a variety of domains. Evidence for this claim includes the fact that, although James does not use the exact term “selectionism” (which it would be anachronistic to expect), he does use terms like “select” and “selection,” often with explicit reference to the Darwinian idea that the environment can only select, rather than produce, variation.

A bare-bones definition of selectionism is that a selectionist explanation explains a systemic pattern in terms of the interaction of variants with an environment. This definition generates the schematic definition of selectionism given above:

[A selectionist explanation] explains [a systemic pattern] in terms of the differential interaction of [variants] with [an environment].

Armed with this definition and with the above analyses of James’s selectionism across different domains, I am now in a place to tabulate James’s selectionist theories so that they can be considered side-by-side.

Table 1. James’s Selectionist Systems

Name	Systemic Pattern	Variants	Environment
Natural selection	Biological evolution; adaptations	Individual organisms	Environment or niche
Individual selection in society	Development of individual in society	Individuals	Physical/social environment
Social selection	“Social evolution” (modeled on individual development as above)	Societies or nations	Physical/social environment, including other societies/nations
Internal psychological selection	Various levels of psychological processing	Psychological variants at various levels	Hierarchically nested levels of selective retention and emphasis
Selectionist learning	Individual trial-and-error learning	Ideas-cum-actions	External world; consciousness
Epistemological selection	Communal knowledge growth; truth itself, defined by such growth	Ideas	Empirical evidence; logic; other extant beliefs; indefinitely many further criteria of “satisfaction”
Historical ethical selection	Historical ethical change	Ethical ideals	Other ideals; individuals subordinating some ideals to others
Character selection	Ethical character development	Possible selves as represented by ideas and impulses	The will

This table demonstrates how each of James's selectionist theories fits the schematic definition. It is at least as important, however, to recognize the three further features that James emphasizes in the systems under consideration:

1. The non-directedness of variation: variation that is not produced in response to environmental structures or exigencies, such that variation and selection are relatively distinct processes
2. Niche construction: causal feedback between variants and the environments that select them, such that "selection" is not merely the fitting of variants to the environment but rather the mutual fitting of variants and environment to one another
3. Hierarchical construction: selectionist systems sitting atop one another, such that a variant selected at one level may graduate to another level

Thus, when I refer to James as a kind of selectionist, I do not mean merely that he explains various patterns in terms of the interaction of variants with environments, but also that he viewed these systems as involving specific kinds of relationship among their elements; and also that he understood these systems as coexisting, interacting, and in certain cases constituting one another.

I will now leverage this analysis of James's selectionism in demonstrating how his generalized selectionism is the key to understanding the other areas of his philosophical Darwinism discussed above.

1.4. Selectionism as the Key to James's Philosophical Darwinism

Having characterized James's selectionism in some detail, I am now in a position to argue that selectionism is the most central element of his James's

philosophical appropriation of Darwinism. The other three areas of Darwinian influence in James that have been considered, again, are as follows:

1. Free-willism
2. Anti-Platonism
3. Fallibilism

To be clear, the point here is not that it would have been impossible for James to hold positions like these without employing selectionist explanations as he did; it is also not that James *cared* more about selectionism than he cared, for example, about free will. Instead, the point is that James's actual way of holding these positions cannot be fathomed without first understanding his selectionism. Any interpretation of James's thought that does not explicate the logic of selectionist explanation is therefore missing a crucial aspect of James's position, both in relation to his philosophical appropriation of Darwinism in particular (as discussed in the present chapter) and in relation to his philosophy as a whole (discussed throughout the present study). This is because James's selectionism is, as I have claimed in the Introduction, the *structure* of his vision, that is, the logical apparatus most important for understanding how his worldview hangs together as whole, to the extent that it does.

1.4.1. Free-Willism Revisited

As mentioned above, one justification that James gives for believing in free will is his claim that the mere *appearance* of free choice would not exist, because such an inefficacious "function" would have not evolved. Huxley's

epiphenomenalism, for example, does not make evolutionary sense. Instead, free choice must be real, that is, it must serve a real function that is useful to the organism. This argument assumes a form of adaptationism, inferring from the existence of a trait that (1) it is meaningful for evolutionary purposes to individuate it *as a trait*; and, relatedly, (2) that this trait must have been positively selected for in the past. This is already an example of how one cannot fully understand James's position on free will without first understanding his selectionism, simply because it invokes the selectionist process of biological evolution.

More interestingly, however, James also holds that consciousness has evolved so as to itself function in a selectionist fashion. This shows that James believes that one selectionist system (natural selection) may generate another selectionist system (or hierarchical series of selectionist systems) over time; the selectionism of phylogeny has churned out organisms that function by employing selectionist processes in ontogeny.

In particular, James holds that the function of the will is to select among possibilities for thinking and acting. The following passage shows that both the freedom and limitations of the will on James's view must be understood in terms of the logic of selectionist explanation:

The soul *presents* nothing herself; *creates nothing*; is at the mercy of material forces for all *possibilities*; but amongst these possibilities she *selects*; and by reinforcing one and checking others, she figures not as an 'epiphenomenon,' but as something from which the play gets moral support. I shall therefore never hesitate to invoke the efficacy of the consciousness comment, where no

strictly mechanical reason appears why a current escaping from a cell should take one path rather than another.¹²²

That the term “selects” is here derived from Darwinism is shown by the fact that James explicitly contrasts selection with creation, which is precisely the contrast he makes when contrasting Darwinism with prior evolutionary theories such as Lamarckism. In this case, this concept of selection expresses James’s idea that the freedom of the will lies in its ability to select but not produce ideas and thus among actions. This is all to say that mental variation is non-directed with respect to the willing environment.¹²³

As it happens, this combination of freedom and limitation—what Robert Doyle refers to as James’s “two-stage” model of free-will—may provide just the check on traditional libertarian conceptions of free will needed in order to negotiate between the tired impasse of (1) absurdly undetermined will and (2) pre-determinism that does not capture our sense that we are in some way the authors of our actions. James’s view is interesting in that it divides the labor: From the inscrutable randomness of variation comes chance, and from willful attention, channeled by existing interests and habits, comes determination.¹²⁴ Determinism is rejected as false, but chance is reigned in by not being allowed to determine behavior directly.

¹²² PP, 1186. James’s use of the term “soul” for consciousness here is metaphorical, as he excludes spiritualistic entities from his “positivistic” psychology (Preface, 6).

¹²³ In Chapter 3, I nonetheless argue, against Pawelski (2007), that it is sensible to refer to the Jamesian will as “creative,” if one has any interest in retaining the concept of creativity at all.

¹²⁴ Doyle (2010). I treat James’s conception of the will in more detail in Chapter 3.

Thus, one grasps neither James's justification for free will nor the type of free will that he believes in without first grasping, in a relatively sophisticated way, the structure of his generalized selectionism.

1.4.2. Anti-Platonism Revisited

James's anti-Platonism, or his skepticism about static or eternal forms in general, must also be understood in terms of his selectionism. This is true whether one considers James's views on mind or world.

Firstly, in the *Principles*, James exhibits a strong form of nominalism on which the mind fashions objects from the uncarved *plenum* of reality. The mind achieves this task by way of elimination and subordination of elements, that is, through selection at multiple levels of mental environment. That James considers form to be an achievement of the mind's selective powers rather than something pre-existing waiting to be discovered is shown, for example, by his metaphor that conceptualizing the world is like sculpting a statue:

The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense a statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it, and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. Just so the world of each of us, howsoever different our several view of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations, which gave the mere *matter* to the thought of all of us indifferently. We may, if we like, by our reasonings unwind things back to that black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swirling atoms which science calls the only real world. But all the while the world *we* feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff. Other sculptors, other

statues from the same stone! Other minds, other worlds from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos! My world is but one in a million alike embedded, alike real to those who may abstract them. How different must be the worlds in the consciousness of ant, cuttle-fish, and crab!¹²⁵

This passage again demonstrates the two scales at which selectionist processes explain mental life for James: firstly, in the evolution of heritable mental structure by natural selection (generated in our “ancestors,” and differentiating our species from “ant, cuttle-fish, and crab”);¹²⁶ and secondly, in the selectionist processes of sensation, perception, and cognition that operate throughout individual development. The selectionist processes of development serve to reduce the richness of immediate experience even further than our inherited mental structures already do, thus allowing us better to navigate the specific worlds that we individually travel. Here one can already see James’s pragmatist insistence on multiple potentially useful ways of construing things, which denies that any of our abstractions are uniquely accurate transcripts of extant reality.

Secondly, it is also possible to argue that on James’s view *reality itself* functions in a selectionist fashion. To understand how this is so requires recognizing James’s acceptance of the reality of chance. James’s “The Dilemma of Determinism” (1884), for example, is devoted to arguing for this position, in part because James was

¹²⁵ PP, 277. James repeats this sculpting metaphor in P, 119.

¹²⁶ It is also possible that the reference to the selective work of our ancestors in this passage is meant to refer to culturally passed-on adaptations rather than physiologically inherited ones. James is not always clear in distinguishing between cultural and physiological heritage, and in his later writings on pragmatism (as opposed to psychology) he tends to talk more in terms of the former. But communal knowledge-growth, too, is a selectionist process for James, as I have discussed.

interested in defending free will and rejected compatibilist accounts that concede the causal pre-determination of all actions. As Philip Wiener has argued, this embrace of chance can be construed as a part of a greater evolutionary metaphysics, especially given that James described his own position as an adaptation of Peirce's doctrine of *tychism*, that is, the view that chance and novelty are real features of an evolving cosmos.¹²⁷ Thus, it is not enough to claim that James posited the various selectionist systems, fueled by non-directed variation, that I have tabulated above. In addition, one must see how these systems are fueled by the chanciness of reality in general, where variation is not only capable of being *non-directed* with respect to this or that environment but rather, what is more radical, *uncaused*. Such true randomness does not cause reality to degenerate into chaos, however, since selection processes also tend to generate order from the variation presented. The result is a world of dynamically interacting novelty and structure, where all structure is provisional and emerges through processes operating in time.¹²⁸

If this is correct, then James views reality itself as growing by metaphysical fits-and-starts, such that all macro-level selectionist processes may have their non-directedness explained (at least in part) by the fact that at bottom they are manifestations of a reality that contains true randomness and novelty. Indeed, it

¹²⁷ Wiener (1949), 101.

¹²⁸ This way of reading James is supported by a letter to Henri Bergson in which James claims that he and Bergson are both defending "'Tychism' and a really growing world," stating that his way of doing this has been that of "affirming the spontaneous addition of discrete elements of being (or their subtraction)" (LWJ, June 13, 1907). On how such a Jamesian worldview may be consonant with quantum mechanics, see Stapp (2007).

would seem that one less to be drawn from examining the characteristics of biological evolution, social evolution, individual and communal learning, ethical change in history, and character-formation for James is that functionally integrated organisms, once they exist, provide a particularly good environment for metaphysical novelty to fuel selectionist systems that become scaffolded upon one another in an indefinitely long series of partially overlapping layers.

Thus, James's anti-Platonism, too, must be understood in selectionist terms. Selectionism underlies James's views on the construction of form by the individual mind, while also providing a structural backbone for his general tychistic metaphysics, which he often expresses in terms that are more poetic than logical.¹²⁹

1.4.3. Fallibilism Revisited

Above I showed how James's fallibilism was inspired by Darwinsim: He accepted natural selection despite the latter theory's incompleteness and probabilistic character, and despite the seemingly abductive or hypothetico-deductive quality of Darwin's argument for it; and he might have taken the indeterminate value of adaptations as providing a broader lesson about the indeterminate value of beliefs and

¹²⁹ For example, James approvingly quotes mystic B. P. Blood giving what must be one of the few *gustatory* metaphors for knowledge ever proffered: "Not unfortunately the universe is wild—game-flavored as a hawk's wing" (WB, 6.).

practices. Now I am a place to show how the selectionist quality of Darwin's theory in particular influenced James's way of being a fallibilist.

Truth for James emerges through a process of communal knowledge-acquisition, fueled by myriad processes of individual trial-and-error learning. Because variation among ideas is non-directed, ideas do not wear their veracity on their sleeve but rather must be judged true in terms of their consequences. James makes this point about scientific knowledge, for example, in the following passage in the *Principles*:

Every scientific conception is in the first instance a 'spontaneous variation' in someone's brain. For one that proves useful and applicable there are a thousand that perish through their worthlessness. Their genesis is strictly akin to that of the flashes of poetry and sallies of wit to which the instable brain-paths equally give rise. But whereas the poetry and wit (like the science of the ancients) are their own 'excuse for being,' and have to run the gauntlet of no further test, the 'scientific' conceptions must prove their worth by being 'verified.' This test, however, is the cause of their *preservation*, not that of their production; and one might as well account for the origin of Artemus Ward's jokes by the 'cohesion' of subjects with predicates in proportion to the 'persistence' of 'outer relations' to which they 'correspond' as to treat the genesis of scientific conceptions in the same ponderously unreal way.¹³⁰

It is once again clear that James has his Darwin-inspired model of selectionism in mind, as he again invokes the distinction between "spontaneous" production and mere preservation, that is, between non-directed variation and selection. One can also see again how closely bound up James's critiques of mind-world "correspondence" are with his selectionist approach to learning. Learning for James is not a passive relation of cognitive mirroring or mental transcription but rather is akin to repeatedly casting

¹³⁰ PP, 1232. "Artemus Ward" was the pen-name of American humorist Charles Farrar Browne (1834-1867).

forth grappling hooks to find holds in the world that allow one to pull oneself forward. A healthy dose of fallibilism is recommended, given that, although non-directed variation allows us to be fertile in novel guesses, it is also wasteful, inefficient, and may take an indefinitely long amount of time while one waits to see which hooks will bear the weight after all.

Recall also that the relationship between ideas and the world for James is characterized by feedback, or niche construction. Although ideas are selected by the world, in the sense of being preserved when useful, ideas also change the very world that selects them. To put the point in purely physical terms, one could say that ideas change the world because they precipitate actions that alter one's material surroundings. This does not fully capture James's meaning, however, because James also believes that "the world" with which ideas interacts consists of other extant ideas. As quoted above, James holds that the "The truth which the conforming experience embodies may be a positive addition to the previous reality, and later judgments may have to conform to *it*."¹³¹ This means that truth for James is not like a static scorecard standing apart from the world and representing it, but rather is part and parcel of the dynamic world in which one lives. Knowledge-growth on this model is captured by the following metaphor, which James provides in *Pragmatism*:

The case [of truth] is like a snowball's growth, due as it is to the distribution of the snow on the one hand, and to the successive pushes of the boys on the other, with these factors co-determining each other incessantly.¹³²

¹³¹ MT, 60.

¹³² P, 108.

The snowball (the accrued mass of accepted truths) is assumed to maintain some kind of traction with reality (the distribution of snow on the ground), and yet it has its shape, size, and direction co-determined by the pushes (idea-variants) of the boys (thinkers). Given that truth is a co-construction of complex, changeable knowers and a heterogeneous, changeable world, this process cannot be assumed to have any natural end and thus goes on “incessantly.” The way of construing things makes fallibilism all the more sensible, since a belief in final certainties would assume a static sort of truth that could not even exist.

Thus, James’s fallibilism cannot be understood in isolation from his selectionism, in particular because the latter model’s features of non-directed variation and niche construction encourage a futural orientation to James’s thinking. Truth is vouchsafed, to the extent that it will be vouchsafed, by the future, and not by the pedigree of anyone’s ideas, which in any case traces back to the inscrutable mysterious of physiology and, ultimately, tychistic reality. As James explains his attitude toward knowledge, alluding to the New Testament, “By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots.”¹³³

1.5. Conclusion

¹³³ VRE, 25.

William James was immersed in Darwinian biology during his education and early career. Although Darwinism has been said to influence James's views on free will, on the rejection of static form, and on fallibilism, it has not been sufficiently recognized how all three of these areas rely on a fourth area of Darwinian influence on James, namely, the general model of selectionism that he abstracted from natural selection and then applied in various domains. This model's features of non-directed variation and niche construction in particular are important for understanding the specific ways in which James defended and construed free will and advised against claims to certain knowledge.

Although James's selectionism is the key to his philosophical appropriation of Darwinism in that it underlies each of his other Darwin-inspired positions, this is not to say that James cared more about the logic selectionism than about his substantive positions on matters such as free will, but only that one cannot appreciate the ways in which James's other Darwin-inspired positions work without first understanding his selectionism. Selectionism is the *structure* of James's vision, that is, the logic that James employs consistently throughout his works in order to theorize about the individual and its relationship to the world. To ignore James's selectionism is therefore to ignore the structure, not only of the three views outlined here, but, as I will continue to argue, of his work as a whole.

In the next chapter, I examine James's selectionism vis-à-vis some other positions with which it might be confused, such as sociobiology, social Darwinism, and meme theory, in order to show more clearly the distinctiveness of his position

and to get a sense of what of value he might have to add to current discussions of evolutionary theory. This will conclude my initial detailed elucidation of the selectionist (and more broadly evolutionary) character of James's worldview, before moving on to focus on his conception of the individual in particular in Chapter 3.

2. James's Evolutionary Worldview in Focus¹³⁴

2.1. Introduction

In the last chapter, I explored four areas of James's thought that, in one way or another, bear the influence of Darwinian biology: (1) Free-willism; (2) Anti-Platonism; (3) Fallibilism; and (4) Generalized Selectionism. Surveying these positions, I argued that the fourth area, generalized selectionism—James's abstraction of a general model from Darwin's theory of natural selection and his subsequent application of that model in non-biological domain—is the logical key to James's philosophical appropriation of Darwinism in that it provides the structure underlying the other three positions. This model leads James to explain a variety of systemic patterns in terms of the interaction of variants with an environment, such that his overall worldview is structured by multiple levels of systems that are analogous to, though distinct from and not reducible to, biological natural selection. In particular, I claimed that James employs selectionist explanations in the domains of (1) Biology, (2) Social theory, (3) Psychology, (4) Ethics, (5) Epistemology. By demonstrating that several of James's most central philosophical commitments are underwritten by

¹³⁴ For an earlier and more condensed version of the argument of this chapter, see McGranahan (2011).

the selectionist structure of his worldview, this chapter provided an important first step in explicating the Darwinian structure of James's thought as whole.

In the present chapter, I attempt a more precise characterization of James's evolutionary worldview by making greater use of the conceptual toolkit afforded by current work in the history and philosophy of science. This allows me to demonstrate the distinctiveness of James's evolutionism, thereby further elucidating the structure of James's worldview and allowing for a clearer view of the contributions a Jamesian position might make to current debates about evolutionary theory. In order to do this, it is not enough merely to exhibit the relationships among the different threads of Darwinian influence in James's work, as Chapter 1, but rather one must also situate James's position vis-à-vis certain familiar and often contentious discourses surrounding the relationship between biology and other areas of knowledge such as social and political theory. Without such contextualizing efforts, James's position will be susceptible to careless and anachronistic interpretations that assimilate it to one or another familiar "-ism" or "-ology" rather than understanding it on its own terms. The point here is to head off interpretations of James that would first pigeonhole and then hastily dismiss (or accept!) his position as a result of an unfair conflation.

This chapter consists of two main sections. In the first section, I distinguish James's evolutionism from several other positions: Firstly, I show how James's Darwin-inspired social theory is different from social Darwinism, demonstrating that James has no interest in importing a brutal "struggle for existence" into the social sphere; secondly, I distinguish James's position from sociobiology, showing that

James is not attempting to explain social behaviors in terms of their contribution to Darwinian fitness but rather is only proliferating a certain kind of “Darwinian” (i.e. selectionist) explanation at multiple, independent levels of analysis; and thirdly, I situate James within the philosophy of science literature on selectionism, comparing his position, for example, to the theory of memes. In the second section, I draw upon the first three sections in order to explain the purpose of James’s overall, multi-layered evolutionary worldview, making some suggestions about how a Jamesian position might bear on current thinking in the philosophy of science. This discussion prepares the ground for the next chapter, in which I focus more closely on James’s conception of the individual, demonstrating how the selectionist *structure* of James’s vision informs his conception of the self-fashioning individual that, as I will argue, forms the *center* of his vision.

2.2. The Distinctiveness of James’s View

James’s evolutionary worldview is distinctive. In particular, it should not be confused with a number of theories or research programs whose assumptions James does not actually share. In this section, I compare and contrast James’s evolutionary worldview with three positions in particular:

1. Social Darwinism
2. Sociobiology
3. Generalized selectionism

I will demonstrate, on the one hand, that James was neither a social Darwinist nor a sociobiologist in anything like the common senses of those terms; and that his way of generalizing selectionism should be kept distinct from those that employ a “replicator” framework, for example, Richard Dawkins’s theory of memes.

2.2.1. Social Darwinism

Among the first things that come to mind when one thinks of the relationship between biology and social theory is something fearful called “social Darwinism.” Whether James counts as a social Darwinist is (obviously) a matter of definition. Here I distinguish between three definitions of social Darwinism, claiming that James would count as a social Darwinist on the first two definitions but not on the third and most familiar one. However, since social Darwinism is generally equated with the third view, I conclude that it would be misleading and unfair to refer to James as a “social Darwinist.”

Firstly, if social Darwinism is simplistically defined as “any social theory inspired by Darwinism,” then James is indeed a social Darwinist. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, James explicitly draws on Darwin as the inspiration for his social theory, basing his early essay “Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment” (1880) on the idea that “A remarkable parallel . . . obtains between the facts of social evolution on the one hand, and of zoölogical evolution as expounded

by Mr. Darwin on the other.”¹³⁵ This parallel involves most importantly what I have called the “non-directedness of variation”: Just as Darwin holds that adaptations are not caused by the very environmental exigencies with which they help an organism cope, James holds that the socially relevant traits of an individual are not wholly a function of social (or physical-geographical) environmental conditions. This allows James to argue that individuals make an independent contribution to their surrounding conditions, such that one may remake the times rather than merely being made by them. James’s social theory is in this sense “Darwinist,” or perhaps “Darwinian.”

Secondly, Mike Hawkins proposes that social Darwinism should be understood as a worldview constituted by a set of “interlinked ideas about time, nature, human nature and social reality,”¹³⁶ including the ideas that temporality and development are real, pervasive, and significant features of the world. Social Darwinism in this sense has no necessary connection to Darwin’s theory, even if its prevalence is largely a result of the rise of nineteenth-century evolutionary theories such as Darwin’s and Herbert Spencer’s (in addition to historicist philosophies such as Hegel’s). On this view, social Darwinism serves as a conceptual foundation for a variety of more specific positions, ranging from sanguine optimism about the progress of history to a reactionary fear of society’s imminent degeneration, without entailing any ethical or political position in particular. Once one acknowledges the

¹³⁵ GM, 163.

¹³⁶ Hawkins (1997), 17.

reality and importance of change, there is still the question of one's attitude towards this change.¹³⁷

On this definition, too, I would argue that James is a social Darwinist.¹³⁸ In fact, the entire present study can be viewed as an elaboration of James's social Darwinism, in Hawkins's sense of the term, insofar as its point is to demonstrate how James understands the world through an examination of the dynamics of systems operating in time, as opposed to viewing such phenomena as mind, nature, and society as static entities subject to timeless descriptions. Indeed, regardless of my specific arguments about the relative importance of various strands of evolutionary thinking in James's work, any practiced reader of James should already be aware that it is a central point of James's pragmatism, pluralism, and radical empiricism that the world, including truth itself, is always *in the making* and can only be understood as such.

Nevertheless, these first two senses of "social Darwinism" do not get to the heart of what is generally meant by the term. Social Darwinism, as typically understood, is roughly the view that some form of social organization is justified by the fact that competition is, as the biologists have shown, only "natural." This view may be pitched at the individual level, such that a given society ought to promote

¹³⁷ Hawkins is especially interested in the two-faced or "janiform" quality of social Darwinism, such that nature can be seen alternatively as a model for human behavior or as a threatening force that needs to be counteracted.

¹³⁸ Hawkins (1997) includes James in his list of social Darwinists as well (120).

competitive conditions among its citizen, or it may be pitched at the level of the society or nation, such that political or military strength justifies the subjugation of one group of people by another. The key move of social Darwinism in this sense is the exploitation of a slippage between a normative and a (purportedly) descriptive sense of “nature,” such that humans are in danger of failing to act according to nature and therefore must follow certain prescriptions gleaned from evolutionary theory in order to remain or become natural: Supposing that nature is good, and supposing that nature is essentially a struggle for existence, it is concluded that a society that promotes such a struggle is a good one.

To be clear, this kind of social Darwinism has not emerged merely a result of the adoption of Darwinian views by social theorists, but rather through a complex dialectic between biology and social theory. It is through such a dialectic, rather than through biology alone, that modern evolutionary thinking has emerged. Indeed, if we follow Richard Nelson’s view that the hallmark of evolution is just the idea that “prevailing structures were the result of somewhat myopic processes that had been operating over long periods of time,”¹³⁹ then Enlightenment theories of social evolution—such as David Hume’s view that institutions are the result of a series of accumulated short-term adjustments, or Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” of the market that achieves a beneficial effect by way of the myriad short-sighted efforts of

¹³⁹ Nelson (2006), 76.

individuals¹⁴⁰—actually predate the modern biological evolutionism that emerged in the nineteenth century with figures like Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, and August Weismann.

One way to trace the evolutionary dialectic from social theory to biology and then back again is by examining Darwin's debt to classical political economist Thomas Malthus. Darwin's conception of natural selection in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) is famously inspired by Malthus's grim analysis of population pressures in his *Essay on the Principles of Population* (1798). Whereas Malthus had argued that human populations tend to grow exponentially and are therefore naturally subject to check by famine and poverty due to limited resources, Darwin generalized this principle in order to characterize the "struggle for existence" in which all living things are engaged. Darwin describes his debt to Malthus as follows:

Hence, as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of a distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life. It is the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms; for in this case there can be no artificial increase of food, and no prudential restraint from marriage. Although some species may be now increasing, more or less rapidly, in numbers, all cannot do so, for the world would not hold them.

There is no exception to the rule that every organic being naturally increases at so high a rate, that, if not destroyed the earth would soon be covered by progeny of a single pair.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ I take these apt examples from Nelson (2006).

¹⁴¹ Darwin (1998), 91.

Notice that, unlike Malthus, Darwin is not interested in making a negative point about the limits of social reform, but rather a positive one about the driving force of organic evolution: namely, that exigencies such as scarcity of resources, intra- and inter-species competition, and climate create the background against which some heritable traits are favored at the expense of others; in other words, that the struggle for existence generates the pressured situation in which heritable differences in fitness come to matter. Darwin himself is not guilty of social Darwinism simply for having borrowed ideas from a social theorist. Rather, Darwinism only becomes *social* Darwinism when Malthusian-cum-Darwinian ideas about struggle are allowed to loop back into social theory after having gained an illicit normative valence, such that struggle is viewed as not only real or omnipresent but also *good* or *requisite*.

The figure most infamous for holding a truly social Darwinist position is Darwin's contemporary and fellow countryman, as well as James's favorite foil, Herbert Spencer.¹⁴² Although the label "social Darwinist" is actually a rather awkward one for Spencer—given that he developed his own evolutionary theory based on *Lamarckian* principles prior to the publication of Darwin's *Origin*¹⁴³—it is also apt in that Spencer (not Darwin) originated the phrase "survival of the fittest," while also doing more than anyone else in his time to ensure that this phrase was

¹⁴² That is, ever since twentieth-century historians popularized the term "social Darwinism," Spencer's nineteenth-century writings have retrospectively been considered to be paradigmatic of social Darwinism. The most influential work here is Hofstadter (1944).

¹⁴³ See Spencer's "Progress: Its Law and Cause" (1857).

taken in a normative sense rather than a merely a descriptive one. In particular, based on his teleological systematic philosophy in which biological and social evolution are bound together in accordance with the law of Progress, Spencer advocated for laissez-faire capitalism and a minimal state. Spencer is in this sense a highly influential social Darwinist, at least if one goes with the common sense of this term.¹⁴⁴

James was decidedly not a social Darwinist in a traditional or Spencerian sense of the term. Whereas Spencer derives his political position from a metaphysical tendency supposedly exhibited in nature, thus conveniently founding his politics on characteristics he posits in the world, the very point of James's social and ethical evolutionism is that ethical ideals necessarily represent provisional answers to open questions. The following remark, which James gives as a rebuke of Spencer, illustrates this point:

Different ideals [...] appear only as so many brute affirmations left to fight it out upon the chess-board among themselves. They are, at best, postulates, each of which must depend on the general consensus of experience as a whole to bear out its validity. The formula which proves to have the most massive destiny will be the true one. But this is a point which can only be solved *ambulando*, and not by any *a priori* definition.¹⁴⁵

Thus, although James believes that it is through a certain “struggle” that the best ideals emerge, this is altogether different from claiming that struggle *as such* should

¹⁴⁴ To do justice to Spencer's ethical and political vision would require an analysis of his *Data of Ethics* (1879). Although in this book Spencer predicts a utopia of pure gentleness and altruism, this does not change the fact that he believes that the path to such a utopia is paved by a certain hardness toward the less fit among us. For James's negative reaction to Spencer's utopia, see DD and Chapter 4 of the present work. For more on Spencer, see Francis's (2007) impressive biography.

¹⁴⁵ RS, 904.

be adopted as an ideal. The struggle among ideals—which could just as well be described in less violent terms, perhaps as a sort of “winnowing”—may end up favoring a society in which exploitation and domination are not tolerated at all. James’s worldview is thus evolutionary, but in an entirely different sense than Spencer’s.

To be fair, none of this is to deny that James believes that there is a certain *practical upshot* to the fact that societal change has an evolutionary quality. Namely, according to James, “the lesson of the analysis that we have made [...] forms an appeal of the most stimulating sort to the energy of the individual.”¹⁴⁶ In other words, James is claiming that his selectionist understanding of the movement of history (described in Chapter 1), as against a Spencerian one that reduces individuals to passive clay, will tend to embolden individuals to be more efficacious than they might otherwise be. This is just the characteristically Jamesian point, expressed, for example, in “The Will to Believe,” that if one believes that one can effect change, one will be more likely actually to do so. This may be an appeal to the individual in a sense, but it is not necessarily a call to any particular *individualistic* (e.g. libertarian) political theory. Again, one could be emboldened by James’s views to muster one’s energies in support of a variety of ends, including collectivist ones.

James is thus a social Darwinist in the sense of having a social theory influenced by Darwin, and also in the sense of believing in the reality and importance

¹⁴⁶ GM, 183.

of time and change in nature and in society, but *not* in the most pernicious, familiar, and Spencerian sense of the term, which involves gleanings a substantive ethical or political position directly from (putative) facts about nature or natural processes. For this reason, it would be misleading and unfair to refer to James as a “social Darwinist.”

2.2.2. *Sociobiology*

Given James’s enthusiasm for Darwinism, one might also be tempted to think of James’s evolutionism as somehow prefiguring twentieth-century sociobiology. Sociobiology has come in a variety of flavors and has also spawned a related field known as evolutionary psychology. My point here is not to catalog all of these views, but merely to show that sociobiology as typically understood is not central to James’s evolutionary worldview.

Spearheaded in the 1970s by Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson, sociobiology is an interdisciplinary effort of various sciences to provide “the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behavior.”¹⁴⁷ Because sociobiology views social behaviors as just one more type of trait that comprises an animal’s phenotype, it explains such traits using the same methods that neo-Darwinian biologists use to explain any trait, postulating genes that code for types of social behavior in

¹⁴⁷ Wilson (1980), 4.

conjunction with speculative narratives about the utility of these traits in primeval environments. Sociobiology is thus literally Darwinian in that it aims to extend the scope of what can be explained in terms of Darwin's biological theory. This differentiates sociobiology from social Darwinism, which is an overtly normative ethical or political position inspired (in part) by evolutionary biology.

Although sociobiology may study the behavior of any species, it has garnered the most attention when applied to humans. Human sociobiology has been highly controversial for several reasons: firstly, because of the danger of naturalizing and thus vindicating questionable attitudes and behaviors such as sexism and violence; secondly, because of its reductionism that neutralizes cultural factors by explaining them away at the biological level; and thirdly, because it often enacts its reductionism in an overt attempt at what I would call "evolutionary imperialism," that is, the swallowing of one discipline by another by way of an appeal to evolutionary theory. As Wilson himself puts it, referring to the interdisciplinary "modern synthesis" that crystallized the structure of neo-Darwinian biology in the 1930s and 1940s, "It may not be too much to say that sociology and the other social sciences, as well as the humanities, are the last branches of biology waiting to be included in the Modern Synthesis."¹⁴⁸

The battles between sociobiologists and their critics have been marked to some extent by the bandying about of unhelpful caricatures: Sociobiologists are

¹⁴⁸ Wilson (1980), 4.

portrayed as genetic determinists who believe that there is a one-to-one mapping between particular genes and particular social behaviors, such that genes cause behaviors regardless of circumstances; and anti-sociobiologists are portrayed as believing that the human mind is an infinitely plastic “blank slate” impressed by cultural forces that are wholly independent of biology. In fact, it is widely recognized on all sides, at least in principle, that phenotype emerges over time as a result of a series of interactions between organism and environment, such that at best the genotype codes for a *norm of reaction*, or a range of phenotypes across different environments. The real question then is that of how and whether to take into account certain kinds of environmental conditions when explaining human behavior in genetic terms, a question that is made pressing by the concern that attributing too much power to genes will have a way of downplaying human malleability in a way that supports socially conservative ends.

It is important to note that, although critics of sociobiology are often disturbed by the ethical and political implications of sociobiological hypotheses, it is not generally claimed that sociobiology should be abandoned simply because we do not like what it reveals about us. Given sufficient evidence, of course, we should accept what sociobiology tells us about ourselves, on pain of the most fatuous willful ignorance. Everything turns, however, on the question of what could constitute “sufficient evidence.” The problem, in other words, is that it is difficult if not impossible to decide what factors are relevant to explaining human behavior, let alone to weight their relative importance. In other words, as Philip Kitcher has urged, “The

dispute about human sociobiology is a dispute about evidence”;¹⁴⁹ that is, it is a question of how well-founded sociobiological claims are, keeping in mind that one should demand an especially high standard of evidence when much is at stake. Here one may extend critiques of adaptationism in general to the adaptationism of sociobiology: If one adaptationist hypothesis falls out of favor, is it simply replaced by another one, *ad infinitum*? What about other factors, such as developmental constraints on evolution?¹⁵⁰ More radically, if one ceases to view genetic information as an in-born code that is merely tweaked by environmental factors, then it is unclear how a crisp distinction may be drawn between the genetic and the environmental (including the cultural) in the first place.¹⁵¹

James’s evolutionism should not be characterized as principally a kind of sociobiology. Firstly, while James holds that humans have evolved by natural selection, he is in fact skeptical about specific adaptationist hypotheses. This is why he closes the final chapter of the *Principles* with the following cautionary note:

And the more sincerely one seeks to trace the actual course of *psychogenesis*, the steps by which as a race we may have come by the peculiar mental attributes which we possess, the more clearly one perceives ‘the slowly gathering twilight close in utter night.’¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Kitcher (1985), 9. Emphasis removed.

¹⁵⁰ Gould and Lewontin (1979). see

¹⁵¹ For a classic critique of genetic information, see Oyama (1985/2000); see also Oyama (2000). I return to this critique briefly below.

¹⁵² PP, 1280. Emphasis added. The final eight words are an uncited quotation from Book VII of Wordsworth’s *The Excursion*.

Indeed, by the end of the final chapter of the *Principles*, which is an extended assessment of evolutionary biology in relation to psychology, James's considered view on evolution is merely that humans evolved; that Lamarckism is dubious and natural selection plausible; and that it is difficult to give interesting specifics about how particular traits have evolved. While clearly *evolutionist* in some sense, this view hardly merits being called a sociobiological one.

Secondly, James's evolutionism is multi-layered or hierarchical in a way that does not lend itself to the sociobiological program. Here it is worth being reminded of the analysis of the last chapter, which demonstrated that the place in which James most clearly relates Darwin to social theory, "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment" (1880), is not a work of literal Darwinian biology (i.e. proto-sociobiology) but rather an attempt to take a style of reasoning from Darwin and apply it to the social realm.¹⁵³ In doing so, James does not place the social under the rubric of the biological, but rather finds a new way of describing the relatively independent movement of the social. This is why James announces in the first sentence of the essay that he has found a *parallel* to Darwin's theory, which is not the same thing as finding an *instance* of that theory.¹⁵⁴ In short, James does not use Darwinian ideas to expand the empire of biology, but rather to characterize other domains in a novel way: the social as a system with its own dynamics, with its own

¹⁵³ See Chapter 1 of the present work.

¹⁵⁴ GM, 163.

evolutionary character; or, evolutionary *cross-fertilization* rather than evolutionary imperialism.

To be clear, this is not to deny that James ever engages in Darwinian explanations of human social behaviors. James argues, for example, in *The Principles of Psychology* that humans' basic cognitive and behavioral capacities have evolved by natural selection,¹⁵⁵ and he claims at one point in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that the disdain that we sometimes feel for the meek is probably “a negative result of the biologically useful instinct of welcoming leadership, and glorifying the chief of the tribe.”¹⁵⁶ My point here is only to show, firstly, that a close examination reveals that such claims are tempered by other features of James's thought, which prevent them from being indicative of a broader sociobiological orientation; and secondly, that, in any event, sociobiology is not what James is generally getting at when he uses selectionist explanations, which are generally outside of the realm of evolutionary biology altogether.

2.2.3. Generalized Selectionism

Although James's evolutionism does not convert the Darwinian struggle for existence into a normative principle (social Darwinism) and is not principally an

¹⁵⁵ See especially Chapter XXIV and Chapter XXVIII.

¹⁵⁶ VRE, 295. This comment comes in the context of defending the meek against Nietzsche. For more on James's reading of Nietzsche, see Chapter 4.

attempt to explain social behaviors in terms of their Darwinian fitness (sociobiology), there is nevertheless a sense in which it aims to extend the reach of Darwinism into new domains. Namely, as already described in Chapter 1, James gleans from Darwinism a model of *generalized selectionism* that he then employs outside of evolutionary biology, so as to explain systemic patterns in such domains as social theory, psychology, epistemology, and ethics in terms of the interaction of variants with an environment. Building on my prior analyses, I will now say more about how James's evolutionary worldview relates to broader considerations about the generalization of selectionism in the philosophy of science, thus further elucidating James's position and providing a better sense of what James might have to offer the current evolutionary scene.

2.2.3.1. Proliferation and Generalization

The concept of a generalized selectionism has generated considerable interest in recent philosophy of science.¹⁵⁷ Darwin's theory of natural selection, it is thought, is just one instance of a general model that could be employed in any number of domains. Here I am not referring only to debates among philosophers of biology about the levels/units of selection, that is, about what is selected in natural selection.

¹⁵⁷ See Lewontin (1970), Dawkins (1976), Hull (1980), Sober (1984), Amundson (1989), Darden and Cain (1989), Edelman (1987), Hull (1990), Hull (2001), Hull et al (2001), Cziko (1997), Aldrich et al (2008), and Godfrey-Smith (2009).

Such debates have surely involved the generalization of Darwinian principles, with theorists typically providing some formulation of what constitutes natural selection and then testing different levels of the biological hierarchy to see whether entities at these levels are in fact subject to selection. Are individual organisms selected? How about genes, or species? Is any one of these levels the only true level of selection?¹⁵⁸ This is only part of the story of selectionism, however, since it is possible to employ selectionist explanations in explaining an indefinite number of patterns of interests, including, but not limited to, biological evolution. In fact, because much of what I find interesting in James is about the ways in which selectionist systems function within individual *development* (and thus only by extension in evolution), the traditional levels of selection controversy is not the central concern of the present study, except insofar as some of the models and representations this controversy has generated are useful for characterizing selectionism more broadly.

As I see it, the wager of the selectionist generalizer is twofold. The first part of this wager I call the *proliferation proposal*. This is the idea that selectionist explanations ought to be employed, even in radical and experimental ways, in explaining patterns in many different kinds of systems. The proliferation of selectionist theories outside of evolutionary biology goes back at least to Darwin

¹⁵⁸ Classic sources here include Lewontin (1970), Dawkins (1976), Hull (1980), and Sober (1984).

himself, who suggested that languages have evolved in selectionist manner.¹⁵⁹ Notable cases of (arguably) selectionist theories that emerged during the twentieth century include operant behaviorism in psychology and clonal selection theory in immunology: Whereas Darwin's theory accounts for adaptations at the phylogenetic (evolutionary) level by invoking the differential survival and reproduction of organisms with different heritable traits, these theories account for "adaptation" at the ontogenetic (developmental) level by invoking selection processes that bias behavioral responses and antibody production, respectively.¹⁶⁰ Other recent selectionist theories include Richard Dawkins's theory of memes, which posits a unit of culture or "meme" that figures in selectionist explanations of cultural change;¹⁶¹ Donald Campbell's evolutionary epistemology, which portrays all knowledge-growth as a selectionist process of trial-and-error;¹⁶² and Gerald Edelman's "neural Darwinism," which accounts for neurophysiological development by invoking the selective reinforcement (and degeneration) of different neural pathways.¹⁶³

These theories differ from one another and from natural selection in a variety of ways, but whether they count as selectionist theories depends, not on their

¹⁵⁹ For historical accounts see Campbell (1974) and Hodgson (2005). Darwin himself argues in the *Origin* that languages have evolved in a selectionist fashion.

¹⁶⁰ For a comparison of these three theories, see Hull et al (2001) and Hull (2001).

¹⁶¹ Dawkins (1976); Blackmore (2000); Aunger (2001).

¹⁶² Campbell (1974). This essay appears in a volume on Karl Popper, whose falsificationist philosophy of science is also selectionist in character.

¹⁶³ Edelman (1987).

resemblance to natural selection or any other theory in particular, but on how one defines selectionism in general. This is because generalization is not the same thing as *analogy*. To analogize from Darwinism would mean taking Darwinism as the “home” domain from which to find analogous “target” domains—that is, to measure theories based on how similar they are to natural selection. This may be in fact how many selectionist theories are first developed: Some process is thought to be similar in certain ways to natural selection, which is after all the best known selectionist theory and thus provides a useful intellectual starting place. However, this contingent historical fact about Darwinism does not mean that biological natural selection is a logically privileged or paradigmatic selectionist explanation. On the contrary, in order to understand the scope of selectionism, selectionism should be considered as an ideal model rather than (perhaps unconsciously) allowing one of its instances to stand proxy for it. Indeed, this is why I employ the term “generalized selectionism” as opposed to related terms in the literature that include honorific references to the historical Darwin, such as “Universal Darwinism” and “Generalized Darwinism.”¹⁶⁴

The question of how to define such an ideal model of selectionism introduces the second part of the selectionist wager, which I call the *generalization proposal*. This is the belief that that a high-level characterization of what all selectionist accounts share in common will buy us a powerful-because-general comprehension of

¹⁶⁴ Indeed, one might even consistently reject natural selection while embracing selectionist theories in other domains. For “Generalized Darwinism,” see Aldrich (2008). For “Universal Darwinism,” see Dawkins (1983) and Nelson (2007). See also “Darwinian Populations” in Godfrey-Smith (2009).

the structure and dynamics of the natural world. One group of selectionist enthusiasts explains what they call the “promise of a generalized Darwinism” as follows:

As the triumph of Darwinism in biology demonstrates, it is possible to derive a powerful over-arching theoretical framework in which theorists can develop auxiliary, domain-specific explanations. This is the promise of a generalized Darwinism. Although biologists and social scientists have pointed to other important mechanisms, such as self-organization and path-dependence, none of these offers a *general* over-arching explanatory framework for beginning to understand the evolution of these systems.¹⁶⁵

Notice here that the proliferation and generalization proposals are mutually reinforcing: Different theories are only *selectionist* theories insofar as they share some general characteristics that make them selectionist; and a generalized account of selectionism is only *powerfully general* insofar as it covers a wide variety of actually existing processes. Thus, it makes sense for a theorist to pursue both proposals at once.

In my view, James explicitly pursues proliferation while implicitly pursuing generalization. (Indeed, it is the very implicitness of his generalization that leaves us the work of reconstructing it for him.) Before turning back to James, however, it will first be valuable (1) to examine more closely the kind of explanation selectionism is, and (2) to consider how one might evaluate the strength of a given selectionist explanation.

¹⁶⁵ Aldrich et al (2008), 578.

At a very general level, the purpose of a selectionist explanation is to account for a *pattern* by positing a *process* that gives rise to that pattern.¹⁶⁶ In many cases, the pattern in question is one of “adaptation” or “fit” in either evolution or individual development. Thus, one useful way to characterize selectionism is by way of a contrast with other models that have been used to account for the same sorts of patterns. Here I distinguish between four such models:¹⁶⁷

1. Selectionism
2. Instructionism
3. Internal drive
4. Providentialism

Whereas selectionism accounts for patterns in terms of the interaction of variants with an environment, instructionism accounts for patterns in terms of the imposition of structure onto a system from without, and internal drive explains an outcome in terms of mechanisms internal to a unit. By contrast, providentialism amounts to the denial that a causal-etiological explanation of a pattern is required at all.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ One could also go further and say that a selectionist explanation posits a *mechanism* whose behavior generates the pattern in question. This way of putting things is contentious, however, given that mechanisms in the philosophy of science are typically deterministic, that is, guaranteed to produce a certain outcome given the right initial conditions, whereas selectionist processes may be stochastic, that is, likely to achieve a result only with some level of probability. For a skeptical view of natural selection as a mechanism, see Skipper and Millstein (2005). For a more sympathetic view, see Craver (2002) and Barros (2008).

¹⁶⁷ I take the latter term from Winther and Oyama (unpublished), which also inspires the three-part distinction I am drawing at present.

¹⁶⁸ I borrow this term from Cziko (1997), although in Cziko’s usage it includes what I have called internal-drive explanations (e.g. Chomskian nativism about linguistic rules). In contrast, I am reserving the term for the denial of the need for any scientific account whatever (e.g. creationism as an account of organic form).

The easiest (because most familiar) place to begin contrasting these models is biological evolution. As James emphasizes in “Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment,” Darwin’s great innovation in the *Origin of Species* was not the idea that species change over time or have a common ancestor, but rather the positing of a selectionist explanation where there had been only instructionist (“Lamarckian”) ones. That is, natural selection explains evolution, not as the achievement of individuals incorporating heritable “solutions” to environmental “problems,” but rather as the outcome of the differential survival and reproduction of individuals with different heritable traits.¹⁶⁹ Thus, the Darwinian-selectionist position, unlike the Lamarckian-instructionist one, does not explain evolution in terms of the parallel and cumulative development of individuals, but rather invokes selection among variants that are (in an idealized fashion) regarded as static. As a result, whereas it might make sense on a Lamarckian view to say that the population evolves by virtue of the fact that each of the individuals in that population evolves, on the Darwinian (and especially the neo-Darwinian) view there is a strict separation between development and evolution. Selectionism, unlike instructionism, is in this sense “variational” rather than “transformational” or “developmental.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ This is not to say that Darwin abjured all instructionist explanations of evolution; see Winther (2000).

¹⁷⁰ Levins and Lewontin (1985), 85-88. See also Sober’s (1984) related discussion, which employs the example of a group of students in a class who all read at a third-grade level (149). One could explain this fact developmentally, by describing the lives of each of individual child, or variationally, by explaining that only children who read at a third-grade level got into the class. The former explanation involves the aggregation of the stories of each

Both instructionist and selectionist explanations of evolution compete with internal-drive explanations, which emphasize functions internal to the organism rather than external instructive or selective processes. Among internal-drive explanations I would distinguish between two sub-types: *structuralism* and *salationism*. While all internal-drive explanations explain patterns in terms of mechanisms internal to the unit under consideration, structuralist explanations do this by positing general internal constraints on evolution; and saltationist explanations do this by giving the unit great power to create new forms.

Structuralist explanations themselves come in various stripes. Some structuralist explanations are so non-historical that they border on what I am calling “providentialism,” or the view that one need not explain organic form in scientific terms at all (as in creationism). Orthogenesis, for example, is the structuralist view that organisms have an inherent tendency to evolve in a particular direction, even if this causes them to become maladapted; the saber-tooth cat’s awkwardly long teeth are putatively a case in point. Such a view is now widely regarded as dubious because of its essentialist and teleological view of species. A less mysterious structuralist position is one that emphasizes universal laws of self-organization that govern matter and thus organisms, such as Stuart Kauffman’s,¹⁷¹ which claims that such regularities, and not merely selection by the environment, must be given a great deal

individual child, whereas the latter explanation does not and in fact treats the children as static.

¹⁷¹ Kauffman (1995).

of the credit for explaining the course of evolution. Other structuralist views may underscore contingency rather than universality, emphasizing the power of constraints that have resulted from the contingent entrenchment of certain basic “body plans” (often referred to as “Bauplans” or “*Baupläne*” in reference to the heavily structuralist Continental tradition of morphology). It may be a merely contingent fact that a variety of body plans emerged hundreds of millions of years ago, but once in place these plans began to place severe constraints on further evolution. This is because a mutation that alters an organism’s development cannot be successful if it is inconsistent with the successful functioning of the extant functionally integrated system. Birds (or proto-birds) evolved may have successfully evolved wings, but a four-limbed non-winged species like a horse does not have this as a possibility, since the right structural building blocks are not in place.¹⁷²

In contrast to structuralist positions such as orthogenesis, self-organization accounts, and Bauplan accounts, saltationist accounts are not about deep constraints that provide directionality or conservatism to evolution. On the contrary, saltationism is about *how radically we can be surprised*. In particular, saltationism posits large-scale mutations that may produce new forms in a relatively short time. This was the original meaning of the term “mutation,” where a “mutant” is radically different from

¹⁷² Amundson (1994) shows that Bauplan-type developmental constraints should be considered differently in the context of developmental biology and evolutionary biology. Whereas evolutionary biology is concerned with how development constrains heritable variation, developmental biology is interested in the development of organic form as such. Thus, one ought to be careful not to use an evolutionary conception of constraint when thinking about development, which is of independent interest. I have in this example been referring to developmental constraints in the context of evolution.

other members of its species. Nevertheless, saltationism does share with the above structuralist views the feature of emphasizing factors internal to the organism, as opposed to external selective or instructive pressures. For this reason, all of these internal-drive explanations (both structuralist and saltationist) have been viewed as enemies of Darwinism, given that each in its own way takes some measure of explanatory power away from the process of selection upon gradual, cumulative mutations that is favored by Darwinism (and especially by neo-Darwinism).

Instructionist, selectionist, and internal-drive explanations of evolution are all compatible with one another in that any combination of these factors may be operative at once (even if the operation of one factor may proportionally weaken the others). There is nothing inconsistent in believing, for example, that evolutionary change is mostly due to the inheritance of acquired characteristics, that natural selection helps to weed out certain unfit forms along the way, and that all of this is constrained in some general way by universal regularities governing the organization of matter. In contrast, the providentialist position on the origins of organic form—which still fares quite well among the general public—is inconsistent with any instructionist, selectionist, or internal-drive view of evolution. This is for the simple reason that, even if providentialism admits that individuals develop into mature forms according to certain principles, it nevertheless denies that there is an evolutionary (phylogenetic) explanation for how such forms have emerged. Providentialism is thus a refusal of explanation rather than a kind of explanation.

Although the biological example is useful because it is here that these concepts have been worked out in most detail, it is also useful to stretch one's mind with examples from other domains. There are several such examples. In the psychology of learning, for example, selectionist behaviorists who emphasize serial rounds of trial-and-error battle with internal-drive cognitivists who believe that much is explained by internal structure, where both camps are skeptical of naively empiricist instructionist explanations where learning consists in the direct imprinting of knowledge onto the mind from without.¹⁷³ Gerald Edelman's "neural Darwinism" also accounts for neurophysiological development, not just in terms of the development of neural pathways by way of innate genetic programs (internal drive), but also in terms of the differential reinforcement and degeneration of these pathways throughout development (selectionism).¹⁷⁴ A dynamic of competition among these models thus has a way of reappearing in a variety of domains.¹⁷⁵

One good example of a transition between instructionist and selectionist views outside of evolutionary biology comes from attempts to explain the functioning of the vertebrate immune system. The immune system destroys invading bodies (pathogens)

¹⁷³ One should not be confused by the fact that some cognitivist-structuralist thinkers use the term "selection" to refer to the tweaking of internal mechanisms by external factors. Such views are not very "selectionist" as I have been using the term, as they give little explanatory power to the selective environment. For one such structuralist view, see Piatelli-Palmerini (1989).

¹⁷⁴ Edelman (1987).

¹⁷⁵ This dynamic might itself be explained in selectionist terms, depending on one's theory of conceptual change in science. For a defense of such a view, see Hull (1990).

by binding specialized cells (antibodies) to specific sites on these bodies (antigens). Before the middle of the twentieth century, researchers typically believed that the immune system targets specific pathogens by creating a mould or template of their antigens and then using this template to create the appropriate antibodies for binding them. This is an instructionist process because it induces useful variation in the system by way of the transfer of structure onto the system from outside. According to the newer “clonal selection theory,” however, the immune system actually operates according to the following selectionist processes: firstly, a rich stock of antibody-variants that is developed early in life is winnowed down so as to eliminate those that would attack somatic cells rather than invading pathogens; and secondly, a process of “affinity maturation” that favors the reproduction of extant antibody types that react successfully with recently detected antigens. The shift from instructionism to selectionism in immunology in this way mirrors the above-mentioned shift in evolutionary biology: Just as natural selection explains adaptations in species in terms of the differential survival and reproduction of organisms with different traits, today’s immunology explains “adaptation” in the immune system in terms of the differential survival and reproduction of antibodies of different types.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ Examples such as these sometimes lead selectionist enthusiasts to suggest that selectionist explanations always represent an improvement over instructionist and internal-drive alternatives. Cziko (1997) seems to adhere to something like this teleological view, whereas Amundson (1989) is more measured about the promise of selectionism. For more on the immunological example in particular, see Cziko (1997), Hull (2001), and Hull et al (2001).

2.2.3.2. Externalism and Internalism

One further distinction that will be helpful in characterizing selectionism and other models is Peter Godfrey-Smith's distinction between externalism and internalism.¹⁷⁷ Whereas an externalist explanation accounts for change in the traits of an organic system in terms of the impingement of external forces on that system, an internalist explanation accounts for such change in terms of activities internal to that system. Internal-drive explanations are in this sense internalist: They explain various features of individual development, for example, in terms of structures and dynamics that are, as it were, *already inside* the organism. Selectionist and instructionist explanations, on the other hand, require an externalist element, since both models give power to an external environment to shape to some individual or population.

Although selectionist and instructionist explanation are thus necessarily in some measure externalist, just how externalist a given explanation is depends on the case. That is, some explanations are more externalist than others. At an extreme is *asymmetric externalism*, or the explanation of the properties of a system in terms of environmental properties while denying that the system has any reciprocal effect on those same environmental properties; here the environment changes the system but is assumed to be either static or governed by its own internal dynamic.¹⁷⁸ Asymmetric

¹⁷⁷ Godfrey-Smith (1998). This distinction is not to be confused with the distinction between internalism and externalism in the philosophy of mind.

¹⁷⁸ Godfrey-Smith (1998), 132.

externalism thus denies what I have called “niche construction,” which is the view that variants have an effect on the very environments that select them.

For reasons discussed in Chapter 1, a good example of an asymmetric externalist in both psychology and biology is Herbert Spencer. According to Spencer’s evolutionary empiricism, the mind is imprinted by sensations from the world in a purely “outside-in” fashion; and according to Spencer’s neo-Lamarckian evolutionary biology, on which evolution consists in the adjustment of inner relations to outer relations, such acquired mental adjustments are heritable. That is, individual psychological development and biological evolution are related in a cumulative and transformational way for Spencer, because he believes that innate mental structure for Spencer is a result of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Therefore, even if Spencer was in certain regards an important originator of the modern ecological conception of organism-environment interaction,¹⁷⁹ the environment seems to have all of the say in this relationship, as Spencer understands it.¹⁸⁰

2.2.3.3. Recipes and Replicators

¹⁷⁹ Pearce (2010).

¹⁸⁰ To be clear, although Spencer was a highly externalist instructionist about psychology and biology, this implies neither (1) that all Lamarckian views are highly externalist nor (2) that all selectionist views are relatively internalist. On the contrary, one often finds the reverse in the history of biology: Some formulations of Lamarckism have been highly internalist in that they have stressed the creative and willful evolution of individuals, whereas natural selection is often construed in highly externalist terms as a blind mechanical force that winnows passive and hapless populations. Lamarckian views that emphasize willful evolution are perhaps better described as internal-drive views than as instructionist views.

Having given a sense of how to think about selectionism vis-à-vis some competing models, I can now say more about how one might provide a general characterization of selectionism. Here there are two major approaches: the *recipe* approach, and the *replicator* analysis.¹⁸¹ Although these approaches have their source in the literature on Darwinism and on the levels of selection debate in particular, they can also be conceived as ways of thinking about selectionism more generally.

The recipe approach holds that there is a set of conditions that, if they are satisfied, will result in evolution by natural selection. For example, in an influential paper Richard Lewontin adduces the following three Darwinian principles, claiming that, “While they hold, a population will undergo evolutionary change”:¹⁸²

1. Phenotypic variation
2. Differential fitness
3. Heritable fitness

This is a “recipe” in that it gives the conditions for when one can expect evolution to occur: If organisms vary in their behavior, morphology, or physiology in a manner that causes differences in their capacity to survive and reproduce, and if offspring tend to resemble parents more than they resemble the general population, then you get evolution by natural selection. Several features of this account deserve note. Firstly, Lewontin includes no overt “struggle for existence” in his formula; natural selection

¹⁸¹ I take this basic distinction from Godfrey-Smith (2009).

¹⁸² Lewontin (1970), 1.

proceeds even when it is only intrinsic features of organisms (e.g. differences in reproductive rates) that produce differential fitness.¹⁸³ Secondly, although heritable fitness is a requirement for natural selection, Lewontin does not specify a *mechanism* of inheritance. Any way of causing a correlation between parents and offspring, including, for example, the former teaching the latter, can be a factor here. Finally, the conditional character of this formula demonstrates that the theory of natural selection should not be viewed (as it sometimes is) as tautologous and thus pseudoscientific: For, only when the conditions are met should one expect evolutionary change (*ceteris paribus*); and the meeting of the conditions is an empirical question.¹⁸⁴

Zooming outward from the biological case, one can take these principles to define selectionism in general: Entities of the same kind in a population must exhibit variation (which is the point of calling them “variants”); these differences must be such that they cause these entities to suffer different fates by way of their interaction with an environment; and there must be a correlation between the variants that are “selected” at a given time and the properties of the system as a whole at a later time. This recipe should hold in all genuine cases of selectionism: For the operant behaviorist, behaviors must (1) differ from one another and thereby (2) have different

¹⁸³ Lewontin claims that two bacterial strains reproducing at different rates in different dishes due to inherent differences should still count as natural selection. For a defense of reserving the concept of natural selection only for cases in which environmental pressures generate a more overt struggle for existence, however, see Lennox and Wilson (1994).

¹⁸⁴ See also Sober (1984) and Amundson (1989).

capacities for being reproduced in a given situation, such that (3) certain behaviors are entrenched at the expense of others (by way of mechanisms of reinforcement); for the immunologist, different antibodies must (1) differ from another and thereby (2) have different capacities for fitting different antigens, such that (3) the antibodies most successful in binding antigens become relatively more numerous (by way of mechanisms of differential antibody reproduction); and so on.

Although the recipe approach seems to capture at least the basic idea of selectionism, many current generalizers of selectionism are not content with such an approach and prefer to supplement it with a replicator analysis.¹⁸⁵ This view features *replicators*, which are entities capable of having copies of themselves made with high fidelity across many generations, as well as *vehicles* or *interactors*, which are entities that interact with the environment such that their associated replicators replicate differentially.¹⁸⁶ Paradigmatic replicators on this view are generally thought to be genes, which are defined functionally in evolutionary terms (rather than as determinate lengths of DNA), whereas paradigmatic interactors are thought to be the organisms that genes build. Indeed, the term “replicator” was coined by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) as an essential part of his influential “gene’s-eye-view” of evolution, on which genes are always (or nearly always) the proper units

¹⁸⁵ Dawkins (1976); Hull (1980); Hull (2001); Hull et al (2001); Hodgson (2005); Hodgson (2006); Aldrich et al (2008); Nelson (2007). For critical appraisals, see Godfrey-Smith (2000) and Nannay (2011).

¹⁸⁶ Dawkins (1976) uses the term “vehicle” instead of interactor. The (not exactly equivalent) term “interactor” owes to Hull (1980).

of selection because only they among the entities in the biological hierarchy are replicators. Unlike, for example, organisms or groups, which are sadly ephemeral, genes, or at least copies thereof, can live on indefinitely. Evolution for Dawkins is the story of invisible, quasi-immortal entities that construct elaborate vehicles for their own “benefit.”¹⁸⁷

A number of theorists have generalized the replicator analysis by taking it beyond evolutionary biology. The best-known example is probably that of meme theory, or memetics, which uses a replicator analysis to explain socio-cultural change.¹⁸⁸ Dawkins introduced the term “meme” in the same text where he introduced his idea of replicators, and just as he believes that biological evolution is best understood in terms of natural selection acting on genes, he also believes that cultural change is best understood in terms of a selectionist process operating on discrete units of culture, or memes, examples of which include “tunes, ideas, catch-

¹⁸⁷ Some consensus has emerged in the decades following the publication of *The Selfish Gene* that questions about units of selection are actually ambiguous and can be parsed into several distinct questions: (1) What is *replicated* in evolution? (2) What *interacts* with the environment so as to cause the differential replication by which evolution is measured? (3) What (if anything) is *benefiting* from this process? (4) What *manifests the adaptations* resulting from this process? Given this framework, when Dawkins argues that the gene is the sole “unit of selection” he means, strictly speaking, that only genes are replicated (1), and that therefore only they benefit from evolution (3). (Indeed, it is their role as beneficiary of evolution that gives genes their status of “selfishness.”) Dawkins can happily admit that it is not genes but organisms (“vehicles”) that interact with the environment (2), and manifest adaptations (4). For the disambiguation of these four questions, see especially Hull (1980) and Lloyd (2001).

¹⁸⁸ For a more recent work on memetics, see Blackmore (2000). Other socio-cultural examples of a replicator analysis include Hodgson (2005), Hodgson (2006), Aldrich et al (2008), Nelson (2007).

phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches.”¹⁸⁹ According to Dawkins, now that we have, through our biological evolution, attained the general ability to imitate one another, we have now set the stage for an analogous system of cultural evolution that takes place in and through us, where the “struggle for existence” consists of a competition for space in people’s brains. Note that memetic selection is supposed to be analogous to biological natural selection rather than being an instance of it, and memes may even spread despite *decreasing* Darwinian fitness; in an extreme case, one could imagine a cultural vogue for self-destructive behaviors, including suicide.

Memetics faces some serious challenges if it is to be taken seriously as a science, including but not limited to a cultural theorists’ lingering suspicion of social applications of biological ideas *per se* based on memories of both sociobiology and social Darwinism. What if it is not sensible to treat culture as a set of discrete, competing elements such as memes, because culture has ineliminable collective or system-level quality that cannot be grasped by a reductive analysis? What if memetics is just an explanatory scheme foisted upon the social sciences by biologists and philosophers of science based on the *a priori* assumption that such a model must work, rather than one that is motivated by induction from actually observed patterns in the socio-cultural world? Whether memetics constitutes a viable research program is still a matter of dispute, with notably few converts in the social sciences or cultural

¹⁸⁹ Dawkins (1976), 192.

studies. Dawkins himself admits problems with the meme/gene analogy and has not developed a theory of memetics at length, leaving this project to later researchers.¹⁹⁰

Where does James stand with respect to the recipe approach and the replicator analysis? A brief comparison of James's social evolutionism with Dawkins's memetics may help to clarify James's position. On the one hand, these positions are similar in that neither is a literal application of biological natural selection (unlike sociobiology), in that neither is a normative position (unlike social Darwinism), and in that both are attempts to explain socio-cultural change in a selectionist fashion, modeled on Darwin's theory of natural selection. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that James, writing before the re-discovery of Gregor Mendel's research that popularized the idea of *particulate* inheritance, would have conceived of evolution in terms of the inheritance and recombination of discrete genetic units that maintain their integrity across generations. Instead, the germinal materials for James, as for Darwin, would most likely have been viewed a continuously blending *stuff* rather than a set of discrete *things*. James therefore did not conceive of evolution, whether biological or social, in terms of changes in the frequencies of potentially

¹⁹⁰ Dawkins (1976), 195-197. Firstly, is not clear how to individuate a meme. Are two very similar ideas really *two* ideas or *one*? Secondly, memes seem to combine freely, exhibiting blending inheritance rather than the particulate inheritance now assumed by biologists. Thirdly, unlike genes, memes do not seem to have *alleles*, that is, they do not compete with specific other memes for existence at a particular locus the way that genes sometimes do. Perhaps these last two points are not fatal to memetics, since it is the quality of memetics as a selectionist explanation in general, rather than its similarity to natural selection in particular, which matters. For critical takes on social or cultural evolution, see Sober (1992) and Fracchia and Lewontin (1999). For more hopeful views, see Dennett (1999), Aunger (2001), Dennett (2005), Hodgson (2005), Hodgson (2006), and Aldrich et al (2008).

immortal genetic replicators. Indeed, evolution for James, as for John Dewey after him, stood as a kind of scientific vindication of viewing the world as an ineluctable flux containing no permanent (“immortal”) forms at all.¹⁹¹ This means that the replicator framework, as opposed to the Lewontin-style “recipe” framework, makes little sense for approaching James’s generalized selectionism. As an aside, it is also worth noting that the point of James’s social evolutionism in particular is to ascribe agency to the individual as such, which is a far cry from Dawkins’s positing of parasitic memes that vie against homunculoid genes for control over human lives.¹⁹²

2.2.3.4. Criteria for Selectionism

Before turning to question of James’s possible role in current debates, I would like to address the question of what makes a selectionist explanation a strong one. The point of this is to address the worry that, with enough artistry, it may be possible to cast any pattern in selectionist terms. The geographical distribution of postcards in the world (a systemic pattern) changes by virtue of the fact that the world’s travelers (selective environment) differentially sort individual postcards (variants) by

¹⁹¹ Dewey (1909). This is just “social Darwinism” in Mike Hawkins’s sense above, namely, a metaphysics that takes seriously temporality, history, and the fluxive quality of existence.

¹⁹² Memetics is actually more similar to another theory of James’s than it is to his socio-historical theory: his theory of truth, which views knowledge-growth in terms of the differential success of variant-ideas in the world (where the world consists in part of extant truths). See Chapter 1 of the present study.

purchasing and mailing some of them more than others. Does this really count as a selectionist explanation? The proper response here is that the interesting question is not “Can I possibly construe this domain in selectionist terms?” but rather “How strong a selectionist explanation is this?” That is, we require a set of criteria by which to judge the strength of selectionist explanations. Ron Amundson has provided just such a set of criteria, which I will draw upon here.¹⁹³

According to Amundson, the strength or “force” of a selectionist explanation is a function of the extent to which each of these conditions is met. These criteria, which are singly necessary and jointly sufficient, are (paraphrased) as follows:

1. Richness of variation: wide variation, continually produced, with small differences between varying structures
2. Non-directedness of variation: variation that is not produced in a manner that biases it toward having a certain use
3. Non-purposive sorting mechanism: an selective environment (“mechanism”) that does not interact with variants so as to serve some purpose or goal

If each of these criteria is met to a high degree, then the selectionist explanation is very strong. If the conditions are met only weakly, or if one condition is missing altogether, then it is relatively weak. The stronger the selectionist explanation, the more it explains, thereby rendering superfluous potential competing explanations, such as instructionalist or internal-drive ones.

Consider, for example, biological natural selection.

¹⁹³ In what follows I draw upon Amundson (1989), 417-419.

1. For natural selection to be a major evolutionary mechanism, variation must arise widely enough, consistently enough across time, and with small enough “steps” between structures to allow selection to do the requisite cumulative evolutionary work in the geological time allotted. Otherwise, it does not fare well as an explanation for the variety and specialization of extant organic forms.
2. Secondly, as already discussed vis-à-vis Lamarckism, natural selection owes its special explanatory power to the idea that mutations are not produced in response to environmental exigencies but rather constitute accidental “guesses” that are merely selected or not by the environment. The more directed these guesses are, the weaker is the account *qua* selectionist explanation, because insofar as variation is directed, this biasing effect rather than the environment’s sorting is doing the requisite evolutionary work.
3. Although evolution results in adaptations that seem intelligent, explaining apparent “intelligent design” without intelligence is precisely natural selection’s key trick. Indeed, Darwin chose the term “natural selection” in order to distinguish it from the *artificial* selection practiced by breeders.¹⁹⁴ This means that the image of God, or of an anthropomorphized Mother Nature, wisely picking out the best organisms (or slaughtering the worst) is a highly misleading one for illustrating natural selection. It also means that purposive human actions may undercut selectionist explanations, if one believes that such actions take credit away from the blind selection of the environment.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ As Darwin explains in the *Origin*, artificial selection can be either *unconscious* or *methodological*. Artificial selection is unconscious when humans alter the characteristics of a population by favorably treating individuals with certain desirable traits, but with “no wish or expectation of permanently altering the breed.” See Darwin (1859/1998), 54.

¹⁹⁵ This point can be problematized if one ceases to take what Dennett (1996) calls “the intentional stance” and views all human activity as natural and thus as part of the environment. On this view, human actions are just as much a part of the environment as the climate, a tree, or a pack of dogs. Incidentally, one can also follow Dennett (1975) in arguing that all intentional characterizations of psychological processes must ultimately be “discharged” into non-intentional selectionist ones (according to what James’s student Thorndike called “the law of effect”). Combine these two positions, and the problem of “intention” in natural selection collapses into a problem about how two selectionist systems (human trial-and-error and natural selection) interface in nature.

The basic spirit of these three criteria may be summed up as follows: A strong selectionist explanation requires a robust and relatively undifferentiated thicket of variation for the selective environment to prune; and this is because the more the pattern in the thicket can be attributed to blind mechanical selection, as opposed to anyone's purposes or anything intrinsic to the processes by which the variation among foliage is generated, the stronger a selectionist explanation you have. To use a term introduced above, this is a decidedly *externalist* characterization of selectionism, since it essentially declares that an explanation is only selectionist insofar as it posits that the environment is causing the pattern in question; the less that internal factors matter, the better.

Given this strongly externalist characterization of selectionism, and given James's bristling against externalist versions of instructionist theories, it will be necessary to explore more deeply James's relationship to selectionism below.

2.2.4. Summary

James's evolutionary worldview should not be confused with a number of theories or research programs whose assumptions James does not actually share. In particular, James is neither a social Darwinist (in a traditional sense) nor a sociobiologist. His relationship to generalized selectionism, on the other hand, is complex. Although he does generalize from Darwin's theory of natural selection, he does not do so in the same manner as those who employ a replicator analysis, and

indeed it would be anachronistic to expect him to do so. I continue to expand upon James's generalized selectionism below.

2.3. James's Evolutionism Revisited

It should be clear by this point that James was not doing several things: (1) asserting a normative ethical or political position based on a brutal struggle for existence (social Darwinism); (2) explaining social behaviors in terms of Darwinian fitness in an attempt to bring the social under the rubric of the biological; and (3) positing replicators that persist indefinitely and thus serve as the focal point of selectionist processes. On the contrary, James's social theory is "evolutionary" precisely in that it treats all societal arrangements as provisional; he postulates that biological and social evolution share an abstract structure but not that the former process is to be reduced to the latter; and he understands evolutionary theory in terms of a fluxive worldview that treats all enduring entities with suspicion.

A more positive reconstruction of James's evolutionism, to complement this largely negative one, was already begun in Chapter 1. There it was claimed that James's selectionist explanations can all be fitted into the following schematic definition of selectionism:

[A selectionist explanation] explains [a systemic pattern] in terms of the differential interaction of [variants] with [an environment].

This definition is merely a rough heuristic, however, as it implies little about how the elements of any given system relate to one another. Thus, I supplemented it with three further features that were discovered in James's model of selectionism:

1. Non-directedness of variation (now seen to be the distinguishing feature of selectionism vis-à-vis *instructionism*)
2. Niche construction, or the view that variants alter the environments that select them
3. Hierarchical construction, or the view that selectionist systems may "sit atop" one another at different levels of analysis

Given these characterizations of James's selectionism, along with the distinctions introduced in the present chapter, what are we to make of James's evolutionism?

2.3.1. Against Asymmetric Externalism: Selectionism, Constructionism, Saltationism

One might begin by asking whether it actually makes sense, in contemporary terms, to refer to James as a selectionist thinker. One reason to think so is that James explicitly borrows the term "selection" from Darwin early in his career in order to show how his social theory is like Darwin's theory of natural selection, and thereafter repeatedly uses the same term to characterize what seem to be analogous systems in other domains. Thus, the model that James reiterates is certainly supposed to include natural selection as an instance. Secondly, James is quite clear that his point in extending a Darwinian mode of explanation into non-biological domains is to emphasize the non-directedness of variation. In James's words, there are "different

cycles of operation” in nature,¹⁹⁶ such that one must be cognizant of the non-directed aspect of processes that generate intelligent-looking patterns of “adaptation” or “fit.” Non-directed variation is still assumed to be the *sine qua non* of selectionism (vis-à-vis instructionism), and so in this way James’s position seems consonant with what today goes under the name “selectionism.” These are two good reasons to refer to James as “selectionist” thinker, as I have chosen to do.

On the other hand, I acknowledge that, if we follow Amundson in holding that a selectionist explanation is forceful insofar as it is externalist, then it seems possibly awkward to characterize James as a selectionist. Whereas selectionism for Amundson, as for most current philosophers, is inseparable from externalism, selectionism for James is actually about fighting against externalism. Again, the entire point of James’s selectionism is that he believes that such explanations give more explanatory weight to the variants in a given system (vis-à-vis some environment) than do certain instructionist explanations. As a result, it might make more sense to claim that James is enthusiastic about *constructivist* explanations than to claim that he is principally a *selectionist*. By constructivist explanations I mean explanations of environmental properties in terms of the activities of the individual, as in niche construction. In other words, rather than enfolding the idea of niche-construction into James’s idea of selection as I have done thus far, it might be clearer to distinguish between (1) James’s belief in the non-directedness of variation (his

¹⁹⁶ GM, 166.

selectionism) and (2) his belief that there is causal feedback between variants and environments (his constructionism). Viewed in this way, James's selectionism may be externalist, but there is *also* a constructivist side to the story, which is really what James is emphasizing.

Another problem with calling James a selectionist, if we continue assuming that selectionism is inherently externalist, is that James has saltationist tendencies. Recall that saltationism is a type of internal-drive explanation and thus rivals externalist theories, including selectionist and instructionist ones. Saltationism does this by positing large jumps in variation, thus allowing for sudden changes in a system and leaving environmental selection with relatively little to explain. In an 1894 review of early geneticist Gregory Bateson's *Materials for the Study of Variation*, for example, James speaks in favorable terms about the latter author's relatively saltationist views in biology:

May not some of the original variations have been more abrupt and discontinuous than Wallace and Darwin have supposed? This is Mr. Bateson's question [...] He of course does not pretend to deny continuous variation, or the accumulation of small steps by selection. What he denies, or doubts, is that such variation and selection can by themselves be responsible for the entire diversity of the animal kingdom as now found. More often than is supposed, he thinks the new variety must have been a sudden 'sport.' [...] The outcome is the exhibition of an immense amount of abrupt variation.¹⁹⁷

James ends his sympathetic review with a note about saltationism in psychology:

As regards psychology, it is clear that the triumph of views like Mr. Bateson's will strengthen the hands of the anti-associationists, and in general of those who have contended for an autogenous origin of certain human faculties, of

¹⁹⁷ ECR, 499.

certain instincts and tastes, for example, or of conscience, the higher reason and the religious sense. The book is a masterly production, and unquestionably inaugurates a new department of research.¹⁹⁸

What James likes about saltationism, in other words, is that it makes individuals appear fertile, spontaneous, or “autogenous.” One finds this in James’s writings on evolution, but one equally finds this in his writings on individual psychology, in which he likens novel ideas to “spontaneous” mutations of the nervous system.¹⁹⁹

What all of this shows is that, although James seems everywhere to be concerned with Spencer’s instructionism—where external pressures “mould the animal by a kind of direct pressure, very much as a seal presses the wax into harmony with itself”²⁰⁰—the heart of James’s worry is not instructionism *per se*, nor internal drive explanations, but rather what was labeled “asymmetric externalism” above: the explanation of the properties of a system in terms of environmental influence, where the environment is assumed to be impervious to the effects of the system. Such a view is challenged in different ways by James’s selectionism, his saltationism, and his (niche-) constructionism: Whereas selectionism makes the causes of variation relatively independent of environmental exigencies, thus allowing variation to introduce unforeseen novelty; saltationism posits a great capacity within the individual capacity for generating such novelty (whether that novelty be heritable or

¹⁹⁸ ECR, 500. For James as a saltationist, see also Godfrey-Smith (1998), 91-93.

¹⁹⁹ This may be more than analogy, as James could literally believe that particular ideas are spontaneous mutations (if non-heritable ones) that occur during ontogeny.

²⁰⁰ GM, 168.

not); and constructionism claims that variants may change the very environments that select them. The common theme here is the denial that the environment has one-sided control over the various features of developing individuals. In short, the point of James's evolutionism is to defend individual agency by rethinking the structure and dynamics of the individual, including its relation to the surrounding world.

2.3.2. *James's Current Allies: Dialectical Biology, Developmental Systems Theory*

Therefore, if James is to be of use in current evolutionary theory, he should be aligned with those who want to problematize simplistic externalist pictures of evolution and development, and especially with those who want to maintain a place for the individual organism as such. Two such views are *dialectical biology* and *developmental systems theory*.

Dialectical biology, championed by Richard Lewontin and co-author Richard Levins, emphasizes the co-evolution of organisms and their environments: Because any given organism is both a product of its environment and a cause of changes in that environment, the environmental factors that shape a population of organisms over generations are not the properties of an autonomous external domain but are themselves (at least in part) the result of the activities of the organisms in question. According to the dialectical biologist, the evolution of a species is not like the ever-

more-accurate molding of a key (the organism) to fit into a lock (the environment).²⁰¹

Rather, organism and environment continually redirect one another in an endless dynamic feedback process, such that lock and key can only ever track one another imperfectly and temporarily.

To accept a dialectical understanding of organism-environment interaction is to problematize the idea that evolution consists in species becoming adapted to environments, which portrays organisms as passive in evolution. Lewontin thus suggests that the metaphor of adaptation should be replaced by the metaphor of *construction*, in a dual sense of the word: Organisms construct their environments factually in that they physically alter their environments (e.g. by consuming resources and building homes), and they construct their environments conceptually in that it is only with reference to what is salient to the organism in question that it is possible to specify an organism's environment or niche in the first place.²⁰² It is precisely this factual and conceptual interpenetration of organism and environment that makes this conception of biology *dialectical*: As opposed to the mechanistic and reductionist program that begins by isolating discrete units of analysis and then modeling their interactions, dialectical biology assumes that units can only be understood in terms of the relations in which they participate. The dialectical biologist thus eschews the

²⁰¹ Levins and Lewontin (1985), 98.

²⁰² Dialectical biology thus influenced later niche construction theory, from which I have taken the term "niche construction" that I have applied to James's position. See Odling-Smee et al (2003) and Laland et al (2003).

temptation to privilege some “basement” level of analysis, arguing instead for a multi-leveled view where individuals count as one legitimate locus of causal agency among others.

Whereas Lewontin has been arguing for something like dialectical biology since the 1970s, the birth of developmental systems theory can be dated more precisely to the publication of Susan Oyama’s *The Ontogeny of Information* in 1985. While developmental systems theory is basically consonant with dialectical biology, it has also produced an intensive critique of certain problematic concepts, especially that of *information*. Everywhere in biology is the idea that genetic information has special agency in the development of organisms. Even where it is admitted that genetic plans can be modulated by effects from outside (whether from the external world or from functions of the body itself), it is still insisted, or at least tacitly believed, that development is caused first and foremost by genes and that other factors are only interference or at best “raw material” or “background conditions.” Oyama understands this assumption as one more manifestation of a long Western tradition of believing that matter is inherently inert and thus can only have form imposed upon it by an active and perhaps God-like force. In this case it is genes that, through their special, quasi-homunculoid property of containing “information,” are believed to confer form upon mere matter.²⁰³ Thus, rather than being viewed as just one cause of development among others—the cultural and natural external world, the

²⁰³ See the Introduction to Oyama (2000).

successive stages of the developing body itself, the individual as such, etc.—genes are assumed to wield a special, metaphysically privileged causal power.

As both Lewontin and Oyama point out, this way of thinking about genes sounds suspiciously like the putatively long-discarded idea of *preformationism*—the notion that a tiny person exists folded up inside either the sperm or the egg, and therefore needs only to get *larger*—dressed up for the information age. To claim that genes contain information (or “rules,” “blueprints,” etc.) is to suggest with the preformationists that there is a person somehow “already there” in the genes. Taking a cue from Oyama, however, one could hold that the only reasonable understanding of biological information is that of significant differences becoming manifest at various stages in development. Information does not pre-exist its expression, but itself has a developmental history, or ontogeny. Oyama believes that to implement this understanding of information in biology would constitute the needed “stake-in-the-heart move,” where “the heart is the notion that some influences are more equal than others, that form—or its modern agent, information—exists before the interactions in which it appears.”²⁰⁴

One effect of taking a developmental systems approach is that it provides an extended view of heredity. Heredity for Darwin meant not some mechanism of inheritance in particular but simply the fact that offspring tend to have more in common with their parents than with the general population. Similarly,

²⁰⁴ Oyama (2000), p. 31.

developmental systems theory does not limit the idea of heredity to mechanisms of genetic transmission but rather includes all genetic and non-genetic factors that contribute to the phenomenon of offspring being like their parents. Once one democratizes the causes of development by knocking genes off of their informational pedestal, one is not tempted to think of “inheritance” as referring, in the fashion of neo-Darwinism (or neo-Weismannism), only to that which is “transmitted in the genes.” Rather, genes appear as just one developmental resource among many that become available repeatedly across life cycles, whether in the genes, in the womb, or in the world. One’s inheritance includes, for example,

chromosomes, nutrients, ambient temperatures, childcare [...] chromatin marks that regulate gene expression, cytoplasmic chemical gradients and gut- and other endosymbionts [...] [and] the local physical environment, altered by past generations of the same species and other species as well as the organism’s own activities.²⁰⁵

One way to put this point is to say that *genes do not hold our potential*, such that it is up to our life histories to see how or whether that potential is unlocked—at least, not any more than the wider cultural and natural world, with all of its inherited structures, holds our potential, such that our genes merely tweak what is given *there*. Both explanations are misleadingly one-sided, although the former way of thinking is now entrenched to the point of being common sense.

It is easy to see how James’s evolutionism resonates with such positions as dialectical biology and developmental systems theory. As I have shown, James rails

²⁰⁵ Oyama, Griffiths, and Gray (2001), pp. 3-4.

against the idea that organisms adapt passively to environments, although for James this idea was associated more with neo-Lamarckism than it was with Darwinism.

James is also sympathetic with a certain “dialectical” understanding of world, which refuses to define atomistic elements in isolation from one another. James discusses this view in Hegel, for example, as follows:

Take any concrete finite thing and try to hold it fast. You cannot, for so held, it proves not to be concrete at all, but an arbitrary extract or abstract which you have made from the remainder of empirical reality. The rest of things invades and overflows both it and you together, and defeats your rash attempt. Any partial view whatever of the world tears the part out of its relations, leaves out some truth concerning it, is untrue of it, falsifies it. [...] Taken so far, and taken in the rough, Hegel is not only harmless, but accurate. There *is* a dialectic movement in things, if such it please you to call it.”²⁰⁶

James also displays a strong tendency, which is part and parcel of what I called his “anti-Platonism” in Chapter 1, to rethink supposedly static concepts in terms of their actual functions and histories. Indeed, perhaps James’s most radical position is his view that truth is made rather than discovered, that verification is in fact the process of truth’s being made. Thus, just as the only respectable biological conception of information for Oyama is one where information exists only in and through its expression (or its “ontogeny”), the only respectable conception of truth for James is one where truth exists only in and through the working of beliefs in the world.

Finally, one thing James’s work could add positively to discourses about evolutionary theory is his critique of “vicious abstractionism” or “vicious

²⁰⁶ PU, 45. What James rejects in Hegel is his rationalism and his monism.

intellectualism.” James defines vicious abstractionism in his essay “Abstractionism and ‘Relativismus’” (1909), for example, as follows:

Let me give the name of ‘vicious abstractionism’ to a way of using concepts which may be thus described: We conceive a concrete situation by singling out some salient or important feature in it, and classing it under that; then instead of adding to its previous characters all the positive consequences which the new way of conceiving it may bring, we proceed to use our concept privatively; reducing the originally rich phenomenon to the naked suggestions of that name abstractly taken, treating it as a case of ‘nothing but’ that concept, and acting as if all the other characters from our of which the concept is abstracted were expunged.²⁰⁷

James’s problem is not with concepts as such, which are useful because they allow us to “hop, skip and jump over the surface of life at a vastly rapider rate than if we merely waded through the thickness of particulars as accident rained them down upon our heads.”²⁰⁸ To commit vicious abstractionism, however, is to go beyond this sound positive function of concepts in order to use them “privatively,” that is, in a way that posits a lack or privation in the world for the sake of a false simplicity. This practice, which James considers to be “one of the great original sins of the rationalistic mind,”²⁰⁹ treats concepts as exhaustive of, or even a replacement for, the reality that they purport to explain.

Similarly, in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1907), James defines “vicious intellectualism” as “The treating of a name as excluding from the fact named what the

²⁰⁷ MT, 135-136.

²⁰⁸ MT, 134.

²⁰⁹ MT, 136.

name's definition fails positively to include."²¹⁰ James traces this practice back to the Greeks as follows:

Intellectualism in the vicious sense began when Socrates and Plato taught that what a thing really is, is told us by its *definition*. Ever since Socrates we have been taught that reality consists of essences, not of appearances, and that the essences of things are known whenever we know their definitions. So first we identify the thing with a concept and then we identify the concept with a definition, and only then, inasmuch as the thing *is* whatever the definition expresses, are we sure of apprehending the real essence of it or the full truth about it.²¹¹

James's point is that we need not conceive of a particular act of categorization as excluding the possibility of other categorizations. This judgment on James's part reflects his view that concepts are practical tools for navigating the world rather than epistemological adequations to reality or metaphysical constituents of reality.

Armed with a critique of vicious abstractionism, evolutionary theorists may proliferate models that are viewed as complementary rather than competing, and they may more usefully integrate models from various fields. Rasmus Grønfeldt Winther's warnings against "pernicious reification," which derive in part from James's critiques of vicious abstractionism, provide a good example of this kind of thinking in current philosophy of science. As Winther puts it, "The imploration is to stop the dichotomous thinking and pernicious reification of single models, and instead search for divisions of labor, complementarities, and legitimate redescriptions among

²¹⁰ PU, 32.

²¹¹ PU, 99.

the various extant models.”²¹² The point here, which James understood very well, is that one must resist any given theory’s natural tendency to entrench itself and thus to resist alternative formulations. This allows one to shine lights on a subject from as many different angles as possible, thus enriching our total comprehension of the indefinitely rich and complex world in which we live.²¹³

2.4. Conclusion

James’s evolutionary worldview is distinctive and has little in common with several of the positions that come most readily to mind when one thinks about the extension of Darwinian explanation beyond biology: James is neither a social Darwinist who defends the “survival of the fittest” in the social sphere nor a sociobiologist who wants to bring the social literally under the rubric of the Darwinian biology, and his generalization of selectionism does not invoke a framework quasi-immortal replicators as in, for example, Richard Dawkins’s theory of memes.

In the end, James’s evolutionism is principally an attack on asymmetric externalist explanations of human development, which is to say that it is meant as a

²¹² Winther (forthcoming), 1. Here Winther is actually discussing the study of consciousness, although he writes in similar terms about evolutionary and development biology, as well. See also Winther (2006), Winther (2011), and Kaplan and Winther (forthcoming).

²¹³ I take this lighting metaphor from Winther (2011).

defense of the agency of individuals. James makes this attack through his selectionist separation of the causes of variation from the environment's power of selection; through his (niche-)constructionism, which posits that variants and environment reciprocally influence one another; and through his saltationism, which posits that organic mutations, including ones in the nervous system that underlie human cognitive idiosyncrasy throughout development, may proceed in larger jumps rather than in small steps. James's worldview is therefore relatable to certain schools in current biology and the philosophy of science that critique both dichotomous thinking and the idea of passive adaptation, such as Richard Lewontin's dialectical biology and Susan Oyama's developmental systems theory. James's conception of vicious abstractionism may also be useful for theorists who embrace pluralism about scientific models.

In the next chapter, I elaborate further on James's conception of the individual, arguing that James's early thought on physiology, combined with his selectionist construal of the nervous system in *The Principles of Psychology*, show that the individual for James is a nexus selectionist system crowned by a selective will. In particular, I argue that this conception of the individual generates a sort of character ethics that remains at the heart of James's philosophy from the *Principles* (1890) through *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) through his mature pragmatism of *Pragmatism* (1907) and *The Meaning of Truth* (1909). This diachronic continuity lends further credence to the present studies attempt to reconstruct a

synchronic, unified James worldview, with the self-fashioning individual at its center and selectionism as its structure.

3. Physiology, Psychology, Pragmatism: The Individual at the Center of James's Vision

3.1. Introduction

In the first two chapters of the present study, I explicated the structure of James's evolutionary worldview. In Chapter 1, I did this by demonstrating how several strands of Darwinian influence in James's works must be understood in light of the general model of *selectionism* that James gleaned from Darwin's theory of natural selection and then employed in various non-biological domains. Thus, it was argued that one cannot understand the sense in which James believed in free will, or rejected static and eternal forms, or was a fallibilist, without first understanding how he came to explain such disparate systemic patterns as "social evolution," perceptual and cognitive processing, individual and communal knowledge-growth, and ethical character development in terms of a process of interaction between variants and an environment. Specifically, Jamesian free-will was shown both to be a product of natural selection and itself a selectionist system; James's rejection of static forms both in mental life and, ultimately, in reality itself, is dependent upon his selectionist construal of perceptual and cognitive processes and of the indeterministic (or "tychistic") nature of reality more broadly; and James's fallibilism stems from his selectionist or "trial-and-error" conception of learning (that is bound up closely with his critiques of Herbert Spencer's conception of cognition as passive correspondence), as well as from his conception that truth itself is not static but rather

is a part of our environment that we construct, much like a species that has a hand in constructing its own environment or niche.

In Chapter 2, I tried to discourage the pigeonholing and subsequent hasty dismissal (or acceptance) of James's evolutionism by distinguishing it from some familiar evolutionary discourses or research programs. Here it was shown that James's evolutionism is unlike social Darwinism in that it does not recommend importing a Malthusian-cum-Darwinian "struggle for existence" into the socio-political sphere; that it is unlike sociobiology in that it is not an attempt to bring the social under the rubric of the biological by explaining social behaviors in terms of Darwinian fitness; and that it is unlike generalizations of selectionism that invoke replicators, that is, quasi-immortal entities such as genes or memes that serve as the focal point and measuring stick of evolutionary processes. Rather, I argued that James's purpose in proliferating selectionist explanations is to construe the individual as a locus of agency, both in relation to its own development and in relation to the natural and cultural world that it inhabits. I concluded Chapter 2 by suggesting that James's evolutionism has contemporary allies in Richard Lewontin's dialectical biology and Susan Oyama's developmental systems theory, because of the former's rejection of passive organism-environment adaptation and the latter's critiques of genetic "information" as in-born, quasi-Platonic potential. I also suggested that James's critique of "vicious abstractionism," or the reification of one set of abstractions at the expense of other potentially fruitful ways of construing reality, may be a useful tool for today's more pluralistically minded evolutionary theorists, in

part because it encourages viewing alternative models as complementary rather than as competitive.

In the present chapter, I move closer to the center of James's vision, although still discussing this center via an explication of its structure. That is, I look to what I consider to be the heart of James's philosophical project—the individual and its self-fashioning activities—while continuing to demonstrate that the logical key for understanding James's philosophy is his model of generalized selectionism. Here I interpret some of James's later philosophical writings against the background of his early physiological and psychological views on the constitution and dynamics of the individual, arguing that his mature philosophy does not turn, for example, on his doctrine of the will-to-believe, or on his pragmatic theories of meaning and or truth *per se*, but rather that these positions must be understood in relation to his understanding of ideas as potential avenues of self-transformation. Thus, I conclude that James's philosophy of pragmatism is principally a sort of character ethics, at least insofar as it centers on questions of individual self-cultivation. This reading denies a common picture of James as either (1) not having said much about ethics or (2) merely having proffered an *ethics of belief* that is disconnected from his psychological writings.

One way in which I express the fact that James's philosophy centers upon his conception of the individual is by referring to him as a kind of *philosophical anthropologist*. Although I am not the first to describe James as doing philosophical anthropology, such descriptions have come only sporadically over the decades and

have meant different things depending on the context.²¹⁴ In particular, whereas some have drawn parallels between James and the specific tradition of twentieth-century German philosophy called “philosophical anthropology” (*philosophische Anthropologie*), the chief proponents of which included Max Scheler, Helmuth Pleßner, Arnold Gehlen, and Ernst Cassirer, others have used term more generically in order to indicate merely that James’s philosophy is centered on questions of the structure and dynamics of the individual. Here I focus on the latter sense, asking how to classify James’s philosophical anthropology vis-à-vis various ways of construing human nature. I also return briefly to both senses at the close of Chapter 4.

This way of framing of James’s project may seem to produce a flurry of labels—selectionism, pragmatism, character ethics, philosophical anthropology, etc.—but again the basic goal here is to locate the center of James’s vision in his conception of the self-fashioning individual and the structure of that vision in the selectionist mode of explanation that he gleaned from Darwinian evolutionary theory. To say that this makes James one or another type of philosophical anthropologist, or

²¹⁴ The earliest description of James as doing philosophical anthropology I have found is Edie (1965), reprinted as Chapter IV of Edie (1987), which rails against the “myth of pragmatism” that emphasizes James’s instrumentalism and pragmatism and ignores his resonances with European philosophy. Next are DeArmey (1978) and DeArmey (1987), which describe James’s philosophical anthropology as a unification of phenomenological and scientific investigations. More recently, Pihlström has a string of publications that draw upon both Kant and James in attempting to formulate a viable transcendental philosophical anthropology (where the “transcendental” is cultural rather than an *a priori* cognitive structure): Pihlström (1998), chap. 5-6; Pihlström (2003); Pihlström (2007). Finally, Franzese (2008) reads James as a philosophical anthropologist whose thought centers on a conception of the human being as the “indeterminate animal,” while also connecting him to the German tradition of *philosophische Anthropologie*.

to say that James's pragmatism is a form of character ethics, is then just a way of giving more substance and nuance to this core claim about the center and structure of James's vision.

The present chapter consists of two main sections. In the first section, I borrow a taxonomy of four types of philosophical anthropology from Finnish scholar Heikki Kannisto, suggesting that James's philosophy can be viewed as a mixture of (tempered versions of) all of four types: essentialism, naturalism, existentialism, and culturalism. I focus in particular on the existentialist aspect of James's philosophical anthropology that emerges from his psychological writings on reflex action, attention, will, and habit. In the second section, I argue that James's early conception of the individual remains in the background of his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), *Pragmatism* (1907), and *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), demonstrating continuity from James's early physiological and psychological writings through his mature pragmatism, as well as (*pace* Richard Gale) a synchronic unity despite (and even because of) the tension between activity and passivity in James's work. Here I conclude that, because James's pragmatism understands meaning in terms of the practical effects of ideas, and because the most important practical effect of an idea is not its discharge as overt action *per se* but rather its feeding back so as to alter the individual's very constitution, pragmatism for James is principally a form of character ethics.

This discussion concludes my explication of the center and structure of James's vision, which I situate in the final chapter vis-à-vis seminal Continental thinkers Nietzsche, Husserl, and Hegel.

3.2. James's Philosophical Anthropology

In this section, I explicate the conception of the individual that I believe lies at the center of his philosophical vision. I begin with a taxonomy of philosophical anthropology that I borrow from Finnish scholar Heikki Kannisto, which provides a framework for understanding James's conception of the individual. I then provide a selectionist interpretation of James's conception of the reflex arc, which I combine with a reading of the views on will, habit, and freedom that he develops in *The Principles of Psychology* in order to read James's philosophical anthropology as a combination of all four of Kannisto's categories; I focus on the sense in which James's philosophical anthropology is *existentialist*. This prefigures my related claim in the following section that James's pragmatism is a sort of character ethics, that is, an ethics focused on questions of self-cultivation or self-fashioning.

3.2.1. Taxonomy of Philosophical Anthropology: Four Types

Although the term “philosophical anthropology” may bring to mind the above-mentioned German school—or perhaps more likely Kant’s question “What is man?”²¹⁵ and his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798)—philosophical anthropology can also be understood as any inquiry that seeks to specify general features of human beings, of what human beings do, or of how they exist in the world. To do philosophical anthropology in this sense one need only assume that the world includes human beings, that it makes sense to speak about human nature (for some value of “nature”), and that there is philosophical interest in approaching human beings from a highly general perspective. In particular, philosophical anthropology need not involve the positing of a static or eternal essence of humanity, any more than any other “study of X” need automatically be committed to an essentialist metaphysics.²¹⁶ Critiques of traditional conceptions of human nature may even count as philosophical anthropology, in the same sense that questioning the grounds of philosophy is an ancient philosophical practice.

In order to make a discussion of this potentially broad field of positions tractable in a way that will be useful for thinking about James below, I will now

²¹⁵ Except in quotations, I will generally use the terms “individual,” “human,” and “human being” instead of “man” when referring to humans in general. In the present case, I am simply following the traditional way of translating Kant’s question “*Was ist der Mensch?*”

²¹⁶ On this point, see Schacht (1990) and Pihlström (2003).

provide a taxonomy of philosophical anthropology first adduced by Finnish scholar Heikki Kannisto.²¹⁷ This taxonomy distinguishes among four types of philosophical anthropology based on the differing conceptions of human nature subscribed to in each case:

1. Essentialism
2. Naturalism
3. Existentialism
4. Culturalism

I will now describe each of these positions briefly in turn.

Essentialist philosophical anthropology is generally the first thing that comes to mind upon hearing the term “philosophical anthropology.” This position is defined by its positing of a timeless metaphysical essence of humanity, which is supposed to be the *sine qua non* of human beings as well as what differentiates humans from all other beings. Most traditional philosophical reflection on human nature falls into this category, including Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of the human being as rational animal, as well as Judeo-Christian, as well as much of Eastern, religious thought. An important feature of essentialism is that it seeks an essence that is not only eternal but also *normative*, that is, definitive of an ideal that humans ought to realize. Unlike a non-human being like a rock, which fulfills its rock-essence simply by existing, one fulfills one’s human essence by degrees, to the extent, for example, that one manages to be rational. Only on the basis of such a normative conception of

²¹⁷ Here I rely on Pihlström’s (2003) explication of Kannisto (1984), as Kannisto’s text is available only in Finnish.

human nature does it make sense to judge someone's thoughts or behavior to be "unnatural," since "nature" here is a normative rather than a merely descriptive concept.

Essentialism of the kind just described is highly suspicious to the practitioner of naturalist philosophical anthropology, for whom investigating human nature means considering humans merely as natural objects among others. On the view of the naturalist philosophical anthropologist, "nature" does not refer to some metaphysical essence that human ought to fulfill but only to the sum total aggregate of factually describable parts of the material world. Nature in this sense is not inherently normative, and the naturalist philosophical anthropologist may not view it as her business to make normative claims at all (even if in practice this is notoriously difficult to avoid). Thus, the study of human nature is here only the synthesis of the findings of all of the empirical sciences that relate to human beings, providing a maximal factual description of humanity. The sociobiological program of E. O. Wilson, for example, attempts to explain human nature in Darwinian terms as part of a broader project of "consilience" that absorbs traditionally humanistic areas of study into the (ideally) unified and reductive explanatory structure of empirical science.²¹⁸

In contrast to both essentialism and naturalism, existentialism holds, in the spirit of Jean-Paul Sartre's slogan "existence precedes essence," that humans have no given nature, whether this be taken to mean a metaphysical essence or a natural mode

²¹⁸ See Wilson (1980) and Chapter 2 of the present study.

of being that importantly shape and constrains one's mode of being. Rather, for the existentialist, humans must construct themselves through radically free action.

Normativity enters the picture for the existentialist only through the single imperative that one must undertake the absurd but necessary task of freely creating one's own meaning and self.²¹⁹

Culturalist philosophical anthropology rejects the essentialist's positing of normative essences, the naturalist's attempt to describe humanity from a purely factual standpoint, as well as the existentialist's subjectivistic understanding of meaning, in favor of the view that humans are embedded in a normative order that derives from socio-cultural forms (which may be described as a Husserlian "lifeworld," or Wittgensteinian "language games"). Culturalism thus agrees with existentialism that meaning and normativity are made rather than found, although the culturalist views culture and/or language, rather than the individual, as the site of this making. Culturalism's main philosophical opponent today is naturalism, against which culturalism insists that we cannot naturalize ourselves fully, since this would require, *per impossible*, stepping outside of the normative cultural order from which science derives in order to thematize ourselves merely as objects among objects. Culturalism insists that there is no neutral standpoint from which to apprehend "just

²¹⁹ One should recall that this is meant as a description of a type of position rather than an attribution of a position to any actual figure who is traditionally categorized as an existentialist.

the facts” about human nature, and this itself is the key fact about human nature for the culturalist.²²⁰

Although in their pure forms these four positions are understood to be mutually exclusive, moderate versions views may be held in combination. Indeed, according to Sami Pihlström, pragmatist philosophical anthropology, including its Jamesian and Deweyan forms, can be viewed as a synthesis of naturalism, existentialism, and culturalism.²²¹ This seems basically correct: Pragmatism is generally naturalistic in that it views humans as evolved organisms developing in a natural world; this naturalism is tempered by a culturalism that understands science as a communal project the purpose of which is to serve human ends rather than attempting (*per impossible*) to provide an interest-free transcript of reality; and it is perhaps existentialist in that it rejects environmental determinism (whether naturally or culturally construed) in favor of the view that the individual “gets a vote” in constructing both itself and the world it inhabits (although individual efficacy is

²²⁰ Here Kannisto’s culturalism may shade into territory that stretches the meaning of the term “philosophical anthropology.” Philosophical anthropology assumes that it makes sense to talk about structures of human life that are more general and enduring than any particular cultural formation (although it need not hold any *a priori* assumption about the level of human plasticity and may view plasticity itself as an interesting general feature of human beings). Philosophical anthropology therefore ought to exclude radically social-constructivist views that utterly reject the idea of a general human nature, such as, perhaps, Michel Foucault’s position in *The Order of Things* that “man is a recent invention” and that, given certain changes in the structures of knowledge, “one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn at the edge of the sea” (387). See also Foucault’s *Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology*.

²²¹ Pihlström (2003), 271.

stressed in James more than in Dewey). Pragmatism, in short, is a non-reductive naturalism that ascribes constrained agency to individuals acting within the natural-cultural world.

Although this understanding of a pragmatist approach to philosophical anthropology in general seems right, I would argue that James's philosophical anthropology in particular is actually a blend of all four of Kannisto's categories: James is a naturalist in that his philosophical investigations are guided by his studies in physiology and psychology; he is a culturalist in that he believes that inquiry proceeds according to interests that are culturally learned (as well as individually idiosyncratic); he is an existentialist in that he emphasizes the human capacity for self-transformation through free action, which I focus on here; and, although I do not much discuss this until Chapter 4, he is perhaps even an essentialist (in a tempered sense) in that he posits a normative essence of strenuous living that he believes humans ought to realize.²²²

I will now focus in particular on how James's naturalistic studies in physiology and psychology result in philosophical anthropology that is in an important way existentialist, or, as I will also refer to it later, a form of character ethics. Here one must begin by understanding how James's conception of the individual is rooted in physiology.

²²² It is important to note that the positing of essences is considered to be provisional, practical, and fallible in James's psychology, which takes much of the traditional meaning away from the term "essentialism" here. What is maintained, however, is the idea of an essence as normative.

3.2.2. *Reflex Action and Selectionism*

It is not original or radical to contend that the foundation of James's conception of the individual is his adaptation of the nineteenth-century physiological model of "reflex action" or the "reflex arc," on which thinking appears as a middle term interposed between perception and action. Ellen Kappy Suckiel, for example, claims that the reflex arc undergirds James's "teleological" conception of the human being, that is, James's view that humans are "conative, striving, desiring, purposive, idealizing, and goal-oriented" by nature;²²³ and James Pawelski claims that James's physiology, and especially the idea of reflex action, is a "hermeneutic key" for understanding his work as a whole.²²⁴

The particular interest of my reading of the Jamesian reflex arc, however, lies in how it leverages my earlier analyses of selectionist processes so as to cast a particular light on James's broader philosophical anthropology. Specifically, I contend that the reflex arc for James is structured by selectionist systems at every stage, such that the Jamesian individual should be understood as a nexus of such systems mediated by a purposive, selective will. To be clear, the point here is not only that *selective attention* is ubiquitous in James's psychology, as a number of scholars

²²³ Suckiel (1982), 47 and chap. 2.

²²⁴ Pawelski (2007), xix.

have rightly pointed out²²⁵—and as James himself acknowledges in his claim that “Selection is the very keel on which our mental ship is built”²²⁶—but rather the subtler point that *selectionism* in the sense of the present study provides the proper framework for understanding James’s conception of the reflex arc and thus his philosophical anthropology.²²⁷ Thus, although in describing these psychological systems James does not explicitly claim that he is using the term “selection” in a way that is derived from Darwinism (as he does, for example, in his social theory), I nevertheless argue, as I already did more briefly in Chapter 1, that in his psychology he is utilizing his model of generalized selection rather than some thinner or more work-a-day sense of “selection.”

²²⁵ Gale (1999), for example, claims that the “leitmotiv” of James’s philosophy is his view “that the essence of consciousness is to be selectively attentive on the basis of what is interesting or important” (222-223). See, also Suckiel (1982), Richards (1987), Schull (1996), Seigfried (1990), and Crippen (2010). As described in Chapter 1, Schull (1996) comes closest to my picture of James’s selectionism, although he does not use it to provide an interpretation of James’s overall thought as I do here.

²²⁶ PP, 640.

²²⁷ One scholar who seems to deny this reading, rather than simply not making it, is Pawelski (2007). Pawelski emphasizes reflex action, but he makes a point of distinguishing between the “reflex action model” and “selection model.” While Pawelski claims that these models are “closely related” (124) and “very similar” (156), he ultimately believes that the selection model “can be seen as a variant of the reflex action model” (3) rather than that the reflex action model consists of several iterations of the selection model as I argue here. Notably, Pawelski scarcely theorizes the selection model at all, and the only domain in which he claims that James employs it is social theory (chap. 1). This is interesting, given that Pawelski seems to have given a conference paper in 2001 (“William James’s Selective Individualism”) in which he claims to discover widespread use of the selection model in James’s writings. The list of systems he discovers in this paper has minimal overlap with mine, and the discussion is of necessity brief given time/space constraints.

Recall that a selectionist system in the sense of the present study is one that explains some pattern of interest in terms of a process of interaction between variants (things of the same kind that differ) and an environment. This results in the following schematic definition of selectionism, which can be inputted with different values for different selectionist systems:

[A selectionist explanation] explains [a systemic pattern] in terms of the differential interaction of [variants] with [an environment].

I have also argued that selectionist processes for James are characterized by three additional features:

1. Non-directed variation, or variation that is not induced by the environmental structures that will later select variants (as against the *instructionism* of views like Lamarckism)
2. Niche-construction, or the reciprocal causal influence of variants and environment (as against, for example, an environmentally determinist Lamarckism such as Herbert Spencer's, or an environmentally determinist neo-Darwinism that grants explanatory power only to the winnowing action of the environment)
3. Hierarchical construction, or the idea that variants may "graduate" from one level of selectionist system to another for further selection

Recall in particular that in Chapter 2 it was argued that James's motivation for adopting this mode of explanation in various domains is to avoid what Peter Godfrey-Smith has labeled "asymmetric externalism," which is the explanation of the properties of a system wholly in terms of the influence of an external environment, where the environment is assumed to be either static or changing in an autonomous fashion. In particular, James wants to avoid asymmetric externalism in the realm of individual human development. This means that James is using a pattern of

explanation he finds in Darwinian evolutionary theory (which is typically used in explaining species history or *phylogeny*) in order rethink how to explain the course of particular lives (development, or *ontogeny*). Evolutionary theory in this way serves as James's theoretical entry point into defending the (constrained and relative) agency of the individual vis-à-vis external influences—an irony if one associates modern evolutionary theory with the destruction of human morality, freedom, and creativity.

3.2.2.1. Reflex Action 1881: “Reflex Action and Theism”

James most clearly embraces the reflex action model appears in his essay “Reflex Action and Theism” (1881), in which he defines the “doctrine” of reflex action as the view “that the acts we perform are always the result of outward discharges from the nervous centres, and that these discharges are themselves the result of impressions from the external world, carried in along one or another of our sensory nerves.”²²⁸ The following passage in particular is worth quoting at length:

There is no one of those complicated performances in the convolutions of the brain to which our trains of thought correspond, which is not a mere middle term interposed between an incoming sensation that arouses it and an outgoing discharge of some sort, inhibitory if not exciting, to which itself gives rise. The structural unit of the nervous system is in fact a triad, neither of whose elements has any independent existence. The sensory impression exists only for the sake of awakening the central process of reflection, and the central process of reflection exists only for the sake of calling forth the final act. All action is thus *re*-action upon the outer world; and the middle stage of

²²⁸ RA, 91.

consideration or contemplation or thinking is only a place of transit, the bottom of a loop, both of whose ends have their point of application in the outer world.²²⁹

The sensori-motor system for James is thus composed of the triadic structure of sensation-cognition-action, such that each of these phases is defined functionally in relation to the others.²³⁰ This leads James to the view that both perception and cognition are *for* action, in the sense of being defined in terms of their ability to “discharge” in actions. James thus continues as follows:

If [thinking] should ever have no roots in the outer world, if it should ever happen that it led to no active measures, it would fail of its essential function, and would have to be considered either pathological or abortive. The current of life which runs in at our eyes and ears is meant to run out at our hands, feet, or lips. The only use of the thoughts it occasions while inside is to determine its direction to whichever of these organs shall, on the whole, under the circumstances actually present, act in the way most propitious to our welfare.

The willing department of our nature, in short, dominates both the conceiving department and the feeling department; or, in plainer English, *perception and thinking are only there for behavior's sake*.

I am sure I am not wrong in stating this result as one of the fundamental conclusions to which the entire drift of modern physiological investigation sweeps us. If asked what great contribution physiology has made to psychology of late years, I am sure every competent authority will reply that her influence has in no way been so weighty as in the copious illustration, verification, and consolidation of this broad, general point of view.²³¹

For James, the function of cognition is just the marshalling of incoming nervous impulses in the service of the production of actions. It is difficult to underestimate

²²⁹ RA, 92.

²³⁰ John Dewey argues for a functionalist reading of the reflex arc in his classic paper “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology” (1896). James anticipated Dewey’s functionalist analysis, even if he did not push this analysis as far as Dewey would. See Phillips (1971) for a history of the reflex arc concept that centers on James and Dewey.

²³¹ RA, 92. Emphasis added.

how radical this position is in relation to the history of philosophy (if not in relation to certain branches of materialistic nineteenth-century physiological psychology):

Against classical empiricism (and Spencer's empiricism), James holds that thought is not primarily mimetic; and against rationalism, he holds that thought is not primarily speculative or detached. On the contrary, thought is eminently instrumental and practical, that is, a function of the nervous system that has evolved in order to help a certain kind of organism produce useful behaviors.

My chief aim here is to read the cascade of psychological systems that James's posits in *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890 in terms of the triadic structure of the reflex arc that James describes in "Reflex Action and Theism" in 1881, reading James's positing of "selection" at multiple levels of psychological processing as a series of iterations of the theoretical model of selectionism that I have already argued that he gleaned from Darwinism. Here I aim to explain in more detail the *internal* part of the Jamesian reflex arc, that is, the part that occurs within the individual, as opposed to that which occurs between the individual and the surrounding world. Although these internal selectionist systems were mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, they were not explicated in much detail and were compressed under the single title of "internal psychological selection" in Table 1 above.

3.2.2.2. Reflex Action 1890: *The Principles of Psychology*

James begins discussing the reflex arc in his famous “Stream of Thought” chapter of the *Principles* “at bottom,” with sensation:

To begin at bottom, what are our very senses themselves but organs of selection? Out of the infinite chaos of movements, of which physics teaches us the world consists, each sense-organ picks out those which fall within certain limits of velocity. To these it responds, but ignores the rest completely as if they did not exist. It thus accentuates particular movements in a manner for which objectively there seems no valid ground; for, as Lange says, there is no reason whatever to think that the gap in Nature between the highest sound-waves the lowest heat-waves is an abrupt break like that of our sensations; or that the difference between violet and ultra-violet rays has anything like the objective importance subjectively represented by that between light and darkness. Out of what is in itself a swarming *continuum*, devoid of distinction or emphasis, our senses make for us, by attending to this motion and ignoring that, a world full of contrasts, of sharp accents, of abrupt changes, of picturesque light and shade.²³²

Sensation is at the bottom of the sensori-motor hierarchy in that it straddles the external world, which supplies its variants, and the nervous system, beginning with the sense organs. The sense organs, by virtue of their very physico-chemical structure, are strict gatekeepers in that they only pick out highly specific features of the world, thus determining what input is made available to the nervous system at the outset. Notice that the sense organs do not select features of the environment in the sense of physically importing certain of them into the nervous system, but rather that they are stimulated by certain such features into producing different kinds and amounts of nervous energy. The process here is therefore not one of straightforward sorting and incorporation of variants but rather one of the selective *transduction* of

²³² PP, 273-274. The “Lange” to whom James refers seems to be German neo-Kantian and historian of philosophy Friedrich Albert Lange; see also PP, 1134.

certain kinds of energy into another.²³³ This process can be represented using the schematic definition of selectionism introduced in Chapter 1 as follows:

[Sensory selection] explains [sensation] in terms of the differential interaction of [potential stimuli] with [sense organs].

Sensory selectionism involves non-directed variation in that the properties that determine whether a feature of the world induces a sensory response (physical structure, velocity, etc.) are not caused by the sense organs themselves. The sense organs accept or reject, but do not bring about, the stimuli they find (except in the merely semantic sense that only those features of the world that induce responses are retroactively dubbed “stimuli”).

From sensation James passes on to the perception of objects as such:

If the sensations we receive from a given organ have their causes thus picked out for us by the confirmation of the organ’s termination, Attention, on the other hand, out of all the sensations yielded, picks out certain ones worthy of its notice and suppresses all the rest. [...] Helmholtz says that we notice only those sensations which are signs to us of *things*. But what are things? Nothing, as we shall abundantly see, but the special groups of sensible qualities, which happen practically or aesthetically to interest us, to which we therefore give substantive names, and which we exalt to this exclusive status of independence and dignity. But in itself, apart from interest, a particular dust-wreath on a windy day is just as much of an individual thing, and just as much or little deserves an individual name, as my own body does.²³⁴

²³³ This relationship of transduction led James’s contemporary Nietzsche to the skeptical position that all sensation is “metaphor” (*Übertragung*), or a “crossing-over” from one realm to something qualitatively different, such that all cognitive reconstruction of the external world is hopeless from the outset. See Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” (1873/1979).

²³⁴ PP, 274. Here James refers to Hermann von Helmholtz’s *Zeichentheorie*, or theory of signs.

Selective attention fashions tractable objects of perception from a sea of already-selected sensation, thus gerrymandering the sensed world into a collection of substantive, nameable things. This process that can but be represented in the schematic definition of selectionism as follows:

[Objective selection] explains [the perception of objects as such] in terms of the differential interaction of [sensations] with [selective attention].

This process involves non-directed variation in that selective attention does not produce the sensations to which it attends but rather only picks out, structures, and foregrounds those that it takes to signify objects. In this way, attention has a way of suppressing what James calls the transitive “flights” of thought (such as feelings of logical or spatial relation) while emphasizing the substantive “perchings” (such as perceptions of well-defined physical objects). With the selective construction of objects one can also begin to see the hierarchical construction of the reflex arc:

Sensation feeds its selections into perception proper, where selective attention fashions objects.

In this next phase, the mind determines what it will consider to be essential to an object:

And then, among the sensations we get from each separate thing, what happens? The mind selects again. It chooses certain of the sensations to represent the thing most *truly*, and considers the rest as its appearances, modified by the conditions of the moment. [...] The real sound of the cannon is the sensation it makes when the ear is close by. The real color of the brick is the sensation it gives when the eye looks squarely at it from a near point, out of the sunshine and yet not in the gloom; under other circumstances it gives us other color-sensations which are but signs of this—we then see it looks pinker or blacker than it really is. The reader knows no object which he does not represent to himself by preference as in some typical attitude, of some normal size, at some characteristic distance, of some standard tint, etc., etc. But all

these essential characteristics, which together form for us the genuine objectivity of the thing and are contrasted with what we call the subjective sensations it may yield us at a given moment, are mere sensations like the latter. The mind chooses to suit itself, and decides what particular sensation shall be held more real and valid than all the rest.²³⁵

In order to perceive a circular red table as such, for example, one must abstract from the table's heterogeneous brightness and shading, taking a specific shade of red to be more truly its color than others, while also taking its shape when viewed directly from above (or below) to be more truly its shape than the shape it appears to have from all other angles. The result is an understanding of the object as having certain features more "truly" than others. This process can be represented as follows:

[Essential selection] explains [the determination of essences] in terms of the differential interaction of [sensations of objects] with [selective attention].

This process involves non-directed variation in that selective attention does not create the sensations in question but only selectively emphasizes them in order to specify essences; and it further demonstrates the hierarchical structure of James's psychology by showing how essential selection builds upon the prior work of sensory and objective selectionism.

These initial three layers of selection—sensory, objective, and essential—are preconditions for perceiving a world of permanent and stable-seeming objects in the first place. Assuming one has such a world, selection upon perceived elements of this world also governs our activities within it. Here James adds three further systems.

First, James adds a system of reasoning:

²³⁵ PP, 274-275.

If, now, leaving the empirical combination of objects, we ask how the mind proceeds *rationally* to connect them, we find selection again to be omnipotent. In a future chapter we shall see that all Reasoning depends on the ability of the mind to break up the totality of the phenomenon reasoned about, into parts, and to pick out from among these the particular one which, in our given emergency, may lead to the proper conclusion. [...] Reasoning is but another form of the selective activity of the mind.²³⁶

Reasoning involves differentiating among myriad factors, some of which must be emphasized and others ignored in order to reach a level of abstraction at which an inference about a proper plan of action can be made. This process can be represented as follows:

[Rational selection] explains [reasoning] in terms of the differential interaction of [features of situations] with [selective attention].

In the “later chapter” to which James refers in the above passage (titled “Reasoning”), James makes it clear that essential selectionism is an important part of rational selectionism in that the former process is required to anatomize any given situation into the parts in a useful way; James calls the ability to specify essences in a manner that is useful to reasoning about a given situation “sagacity,” which he also describes simply as being “a good observer.”²³⁷

According to James, a similar process occurs in artistic practice:

If we now pass to [the mind’s] aesthetic department, our law is still more obvious. The artist notoriously selects his items, rejecting all tones, colors, shapes, which do not harmonize with each other and with the main purpose of his work. That unity, harmony, ‘convergence of characters,’ as M. Taine calls it, which gives to works of art their superiority over works of nature, wholly

²³⁶ PP, 276. James is here referring to Chapter XXII, “Reasoning,” in which he explains this process further.

²³⁷ PP, 957n7.

due to *elimination*. Any natural subject will do, if the artist has wit enough to pounce upon some one feature of it as characteristic, and suppress all merely accidental items which do not harmonize with this.²³⁸

The artist proceeds, James suggests, not by positively constructing something harmonious, but rather by selectively eliminating all elements that detract from harmony. This process can be represented as follows:

[Aesthetic selection] explains [artistic practice] in terms of the differential interaction of [aesthetic elements] with [selective attention].

The world is indefinitely rich and complex, and thus art proceeds by simplification through elimination.

James then concludes with ethics:

Ascending still higher, we reach the plane of Ethics, where choice reigns notoriously supreme. An act has no ethical quality whatever unless it be chosen out of several all equally possible. To sustain the arguments for the good course and keep them ever before us, to stifle our longing for more flowery ways, to keep the foot unflinchingly on the arduous path, these are characteristic ethical energies. But more than these; for these but deal with the means of compassing interests already felt by the man to be supreme. The ethical energy *par excellence* has to go farther and choose which *interest* out of several, equally coercive, shall become supreme.²³⁹

In short, ethical choices are neither forced nor easy choices, but rather ones where one must select from multiple competing ideas or interests in order to determine one's character. This process can be represented as follows.

[Character selectionism] explains [ethical character development] in terms of the differential interaction of [ideas *qua* potential selves] with [the will].

²³⁸ PP, 276.

²³⁹ PP, 276.

Here I use the term “the will” rather than “selective attention” for the selective environment, because the will is operative here by definition (for reasons that I explain below). James considers this particular selectionist process to be monumentally important, as he goes on immediately to express:

The issue here is of the utmost pregnancy, for it decides a man’s entire career. When he debates, Shall I commit this crime? choose that profession? accept that office, or marry this fortune?—his choice really lies between one of several equally possible future Characters. What he shall *become* is fixed by the conduct of this moment. Schopenhauer, who enforces his determinism by the argument that with a given fixed character only one reaction is possible under given circumstances, forgets that, in these critical ethical moments, what consciously *seems* to be in question is the complexion of the character itself.²⁴⁰

As I have suggested—and as James is suggesting here—James’s conception of character formation has a special place in his philosophy as a whole, which centers on an ethics of character rather than one of deontological or consequentialist rule-following: “The problem with the man is less what act he shall now choose to do, than what being he shall now resolve to become.”²⁴¹

Before saying more about James’s views on character and will, I will make some remarks about how James’s internal selectionist systems hang together as a whole. Here I will begin by providing a table of the above-described internal selectionist systems, which provides separate entries for systems that were compressed together under the heading of “internal psychological selection” in Table

²⁴⁰ PP, 276. Schopenhauer returns as James’s foil in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, as I discuss in Chapter 4.

²⁴¹ PP, 276.

1. The point of calling these systems “internal” is not to make great metaphysical hay out of the distinction between the inside and outside of someone’s body or mind, but only to focus on a certain sequence of operations within the tightly functionally integrated individual, while backgrounding for the moment other selectionist systems, such as social selection or historical ethical selection, that operate on a larger scale, based upon variation that emerges “out of” individuals rather than “within” them.

Table 2. James's Internal Selectionist Systems

Name	Systemic Pattern	Variants	Environment
Sensory selection	Sensation	Potential stimuli	Sense organs
Objective selection	The perception of objects as such	Sensations	Selective attention
Essential selection	The determination of essences	Sensations of objects	Selective attention
Rational selection	Reasoning	Features of situations	Selective attention
Aesthetic selection	Artistic practice	Aesthetic elements	Selective attention
Character selection	Ethical character development	Possible selves as represented by ideas	The will

To see how these systems work together, consider James's metaphor that the mind is like a series of filters. According to James,

The highest and most elaborated mental products are filtered from the data chosen by the faculty next beneath, out of the mass offered by the faculty below that, which mass in turn was sifted from a still larger amount of yet simpler material, and so on.²⁴²

This metaphor captures two of the features that I have claimed characterize James's general model of selectionism. Firstly, it captures the non-directedness of variation, because a filter does not (typically) create the shape of the elements that pass through it but rather only allows certain objects to pass as a result of the forms that they already have; that is, it involves a process of selection rather than one of instruction, because any pattern that emerges on the exit-side of the filter is a result of the changing composition of the population of variants rather than of changes in the individuals themselves.²⁴³ Secondly, it also captures the feature of hierarchical construction, because the image of a series of filters suggests that each filter filters what comes from the filter before it. Sensation filters potential stimuli from the world, some of which graduate to being aspects of objects, belonging to the essences of these objects, and so on. The basic idea here is one of the progressive winnowing, or impoverishment, of sensation. One gains higher powers of reasoning, aesthetic

²⁴² PP, 277.

²⁴³ In Chapter 2, I also referred to this as the distinction between variational and transformational explanations, citing Levins and Lewontin (1985) and Sober (1984).

composition, and ethical deliberation in proportion to one's level of abstractive distance from the *plenum* of reality.

Additionally, although it must be admitted this metaphor does not seem to capture the idea of niche construction—since we do not typically think of a filter as being altered by what passes through it—a sort of niche construction does occur, to varying degrees, at different levels of the Jamesian reflex arc. Thus, although in James's sensory selection the variants (potential stimuli) do little to alter the structure of the environment (sense organs), repeated sensations and perceptions do train the mind to perceive the world differently across time; and indeed it is through repeated associated sensations that one comes to recognize objects as such in the first place, lest one be caught forever in the “blooming, buzzing confusion” that James famously attributes to the newborn infant.²⁴⁴ Psychological variants are not simply sorted by a rigid structure of sensori-motor filters, but rather these structures develop in a manner that is responsive to what is fed into them throughout development.²⁴⁵

Another interesting feature of the above systems is that they do not form a single, linear hierarchy. Rather, although the “lower” three systems are hierarchical

²⁴⁴ PP, 462.

²⁴⁵ The difference in the malleability of the selective environment at different levels of psychological processing makes sense from an evolutionary perspective, given that, in general, if a species evolves a new selectionist system that selects upon the variants produced by an evolutionarily older one, then the newer system may be expected to constrain the independent activities of the older one in order to maintain the integrity of the organism. Peter Godfrey-Smith (2009) calls this the “de-Darwinizing” of one level by another (100-103). For a related account of the layering of levels upon one another over evolutionary time, see Buss (1987).

with respect to the goal of producing a perceived world parsed into discrete objects with essences—such that one must first have sensory selection and then objective selection and then essential selection even to have such a world—the last three systems are partially overlapping and do not have clear boundaries. An ethical decision will involve practical reasoning (which involves determining essential features of situations via the practical skill of “sagacity,” etc.), for example, and an aesthetic decision may be ethical if it involves a willful choice that influence one’s character. Indeed, a given act could qualify as involving all three of these “higher” types of selection or none, depending on the circumstances. Character selection is set apart from aesthetic or rational selection, however, in that it necessarily has the will as its selective environment. That is, although other kinds of selection (e.g. rational or aesthetic) may also count as character selection if the will is operative, no selection counts as character selection without the will; reasoning and artistic practice may be unconscious or not involve willful effort, but character selection is effortful and attentive by definition.

This brings me to a more careful consideration of the will, which is the crux of James’s existentialist philosophical anthropology, or ethics of character, and thus of James’s philosophy as a whole.

3.2.3. The Jamesian Will: Ideo-Motor Action, Freedom, Creativity

To understand James's conception of the will, it is first necessary to recognize his adoption of the conception of ideo-motor action, which is distinct from, but related to, the idea of the reflex arc. Against this background, one can make sense of his central conceptions of freedom and habit. I will also claim that there is a sense in which the Jamesian will should be understood as creative.²⁴⁶

Drawing upon multiple traditions of nineteenth-century physiology,²⁴⁷ James embraces the concept of ideo-motor action, which, according to James, happens “Wherever movement follows *unhesistatingly and immediately* the notion of it in the mind.”²⁴⁸ The basic notion here is that ideas bring with them their own impulsive momentum, such that an idea of an action will always tend to discharge in that action—thus resulting in an ideo-motor action—unless somehow obstructed. Considered in the context of the reflex action model, ideo-motor action is just a specific kind of case of the transition from cognition to action, that is, the kind where ideas-cum-actions simply run their course along established neural pathways that

²⁴⁶ The following reading of habit and freedom in *The Principles of Psychology* is broadly consonant with the reading of Koopman (unpublished), although I situate my reading of the selectionist will in terms of an interpretation of selectionist processes in general. Both are decidedly non-standard readings of James's ethics (about which more below).

²⁴⁷ Stock and Stock (2004) depict James's *Principles of Psychology* as the place where distinct British and German traditions of thinking about ideo-motor action converge.

²⁴⁸ PP, 1130.

have been set in place either by instinct or habit (or, typically, a combination of these).²⁴⁹

Ideo-motor action is important for James as the contrast class for willful action. Indeed, the very function of the will for James is that of intervening where ideomotor action fails:

We have now brought things to a point at which we see that attention with effort is all that any case of volition implies. The essential achievement of the will, in short, when it is most 'voluntary,' is to ATTEND to a difficult object and hold it fast before the mind. The so-doing is the *fiat*; and it is a mere physiological incident that when the object is thus attended to, immediate motor consequences should ensue. [...] Effort of attention is thus the essential phenomenon of the will.²⁵⁰

In other words, the will's function is simply that of holding an idea in the mind, thus preserving it in the face of competing ideas that would lead to contrary actions.

James elaborates on this conception as follows, demonstrating the sense in which the will is an internal selectionist environment, that is, a selector of variants within the mental realm:

In all this one sees how the immediate point of application of the volitional effort lies exclusively within the mental world. The whole drama is a mental drama. The whole difficulty is a mental difficulty, a difficulty with an object of our thought. If I may use the word *idea* without suggesting associationist or Herbartian fables, I will say that it is an idea to which our will applies itself, an idea which if we let it go would slip away, but which we will not let go. Consent to the idea's undivided presence, this is effort's sole achievement. Its only function is to get this feeling of consent into the mind. And for this there

²⁴⁹ Although instincts for James are automatic upon first occurrence, they are immediately subject to alteration and are mutable over time. Thus, any instinct could be viewed as partially habit after its first occurrence for James, and it may not be possible to draw a strict line between the two in practice. See "Instinct" in PP.

²⁵⁰ PP, 1167. Emphasis removed.

is but one way. The idea to be consented to must be kept from flickering and going out. It must be held steadily before the mind until it *fills* the mind. Such filling of the mind by an idea, with its congruous associates, *is* consent to the idea and to the fact which the idea represents. If the idea be that, or include that, of a bodily movement of our own, then we call the consent thus laboriously gained a motor volition. For Nature here ‘backs’ us instantaneously and follows up our inward willingness by outward changes on her part.²⁵¹

The will may therefore be imagined as a bottleneck in which competing ideas become clogged, where the clog is undone by through the effort of attention. Such willful attention may result in the discharge of an overt action or the suppression of a potential action; the stultifying of an act, in other words, is among the “acts” that the will can allow to pass through.

Willful action in this sense is the focal point of ethics for James. This is because, according to James, an act is moral just when it involves the effort of attending to an idea that would not have discharged, in an ideo-motor fashion, otherwise—in other words, by definition, only those acts where the will is operative. James is explicit on this point, claiming that “*To sustain a representation, to think, is, in short, the only moral act,*”²⁵² and that moral action is “action in the line of the greatest resistance.”²⁵³ On this picture of morality, one is only acting morally to the extent that one is willfully attempting to better oneself by acting against what one

²⁵¹ PP, 1169. The notion of an idea that James wants to avoid here is that of an atomic unit that persists over an indefinite amount of time. There are no enduring atomic ideas for James, as against an empiricist view that understands perception and cognition as the aggregation and association of such ideas. See also PP, 1171-1172.

²⁵² PP, 1170.

²⁵³ PP, 1155. Emphasis removed.

judges to be one's inferior-yet-entrenched inclinations in favor of a future self that one judges to be at least potentially better. To do a "good" act without effort is therefore not to act morally for James; this is not to say that it is "immoral" but only that it is non-moral, given that morality necessarily involves the effort of the will.

Habit is the chief enemy of this kind of morality, as well as its chief ally: It is an enemy in that moral acts always involve undermining habitual inclinations, which allow unexamined ideas-cum-actions to pass through all-too-easily; and it is an ally in that habit-formation provides the mechanism by which individuals may reconstitute themselves as moral agents. Habit thus provides the every-present resistance necessary for continued moral improvement, as well as the site of the embodiment of the character that one creates. It is this understanding of habit, for example, that motivates James pedagogical claim that "The great thing, then, in all education, is to *make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy.*"²⁵⁴ The point here is not that one should be molded into a perfect individual at a young age and then remain in a fixed state—an utterly non-moral stance for one to take toward one's adult self on James's view—but only that the project of willful habit re-formation should begin at a young age and should be viewed as the foundation of moral education because it is the foundation of all morality.

²⁵⁴ PP, 126.

Given James's conception of willful selection, the question of free will becomes that of whether the amount of attention focused on a given idea is predetermined or indeterminate. James explains as follows:

[The amount of attention] certainly appears to us indeterminate, and as if, even with an unchanging object, we might make more or less, as we choose. If it be really indeterminate, our future acts are ambiguous or unpredestinate: in common parlance, *our wills are free*. If the amount of effort be not indeterminate, but be related in a fixed manner to the objects themselves, in such wise that whatever object at any time fills our consciousness was from eternity bound to fill it then and there, and compel from us the exact effort, neither more nor less, which we bestow upon it,—then our wills are not free, and all our acts are foreordained. *The question of fact in the free will controversy is thus extremely simple*. It relates solely to the amount of effort or consent which we can at any time put forth. Are the duration and intensity of this effort fixed functions of the object, or are they not?²⁵⁵

James admits that the question of whether the will is free in this sense cannot be answered on purely empirical grounds, since one could always be deceived about one's ability to vary one's attention.²⁵⁶ The freedom of the will for James is therefore a theoretically improvable posit. Although this makes James's position on free will like Kant's in a way, James differs from Kant in that he does not invoke a split between the phenomenal world of experience and the unknowable noumenal realm in which one may posit one's freedom. This means that freedom for James means the positing of a willful *fiat* within the not-fully-deterministic *empirical* world. This option makes sense for James, given the non-transcendental character of his

²⁵⁵ PP, 1175.

²⁵⁶ James admits this even though he has given Darwinian arguments against the likelihood of a pointlessly *free-seeming* will, as described in Chapter 1. Free will, James believes, is likely adaptive.

philosophy and his forceful rejection of the compatibilist or “soft determinist” view that free will is compatible with the predetermination of one’s actions in his 1884 essay “The Dilemma of Determinism,” in which he opts for a metaphysics of “indeterminism” that embraces the reality of chance.

James can therefore be described as holding what Robert Doyle refers to as a “two-stage” model of free will, which captures part of what I have meant by calling it “selectionist.” Doyle describes this model as involving “first ‘free’ random generation of alternative possibilities, followed by ‘willed’ adequately determined decisions consistent with character, values, and desires.”²⁵⁷ As Doyle emphasizes, this model provides an intriguing alternative to the traditional opposing positions of libertarian free will and rigid predeterminism: Whereas the former position buys freedom at the expense of making choice appear arbitrary and thus not truly free; and the latter makes freedom impossible unless one can abide compatibilism; Jamesian free will allows action to be both *determined* (by the will) and *free* in the sense of not predetermined (at the level of the generation of possibilities). As Doyle suggests, this view is perhaps interesting to revisit in the context of modern quantum mechanics, whose indeterminism suggests that the new problem of free will could be that of saving some kind of *determination* in the face of free chance—as opposed to old Newtonian framework, which elicited the libertarian response as a way to salvage

²⁵⁷ Doyle (2010), 1. Indeed, Doyle claims that James was the first to enunciate such a model, which was later adopted by a number of thinkers in the twentieth-century.

some kind of *freedom* in a world of presumed determinism.²⁵⁸ What I would hasten to add to Doyle's analysis here is that free choices for James are not only determined in a way that are "consistent with character," as he suggests, but that they may also be determined so as to *reconstitute* the very character under consideration; that for James one is acting morally *only* insofar as one is doing this; and that the will is not the only part of James's philosophy modeled on a Darwin-inspired structure of variation-and-selection but rather is the crux of a nexus of such systems, extending both into the individual and out into the world, as I have urged throughout the present study.

Another issue of interest regarding the Jamesian will is whether it should be considered to be creative. In a sense, the entire point of James's conception of the will is that it is *not* creative, as can be seen in the following passage:

The psychical side of the [psycho-physical] phenomenon thus seems, somewhat like the applause or hissing at a spectacle, to be an encouraging or adverse *comment* on what the machinery brings forth. The soul *presents* nothing to herself; *creates* nothing; is at the mercy of the material forces for all *possibilities*; but amongst these possibilities she *selects*; and by reinforcing one and checking others, she figures not as an 'epiphenomenon,' but as something from which the play gets moral support.²⁵⁹

Notice that here, as elsewhere in James's writings, "selection" carries with it a deflationary connotation: To select is *merely* to select, rather than to create, that is, it to select upon what I have called non-directed variation. In this sense the will is not

²⁵⁸ On rethinking James in the context of quantum mechanics, see also Stapp (2007).

²⁵⁹ PP, 1186. The term "soul" here stands in place of "will." James does not actually include spiritual souls (or transcendental egos) in his functionalist psychology.

creative but merely selective. Thus, James Pawelski, for example, proceeds from noting that for James the will “is powerless to put new ideas into the mind” to concluding that the will is not creative and that “whatever novelty there is in the world is, strictly speaking, not a product of the human will.”²⁶⁰

Nevertheless, I believe that such characterizations go too far, since they imply an account of creativity that makes very little sense. Any definition of creativity that requires *ex nihilo* novelty is an absurd non-starter, for the same reason that libertarian freedom is an absurd non-starter. To be free does not mean issuing actions arbitrarily from nowhere but rather determining them according to one’s interests; and to be creative is not to produce novelty from nowhere but rather to rework extant novelty into some shape. In other words, the Jamesian will is creativity for the same reason, and in the same sense, as it is free: It considers genuine alternative possibilities, and it sets certain of those possibilities in motion rather than others.

The problem here is not with the very idea of *ex nihilo* novelty. With his tychistic indeterminism, James holds that new elements irrupt inexplicably into the world (including the human nervous system), such that genuine novelty is an irreducible feature of human life and of existence in general. Perhaps in this sense James believes that reality itself is “creative.”²⁶¹ It is important to recognize,

²⁶⁰ Pawelski 2007, 54-55.

²⁶¹ This seems to the operative sense of “creativity” in the title of a book by Henri Bergson that James held in high regard, *Creative Evolution* (1910). As mentioned in Chapter 2 of the present work, James connects Bergson’s metaphysics to his own, describing both as forms of tychism (LWJ, June 13, 1907).

however, that this a derivative and metaphorical, not a paradigmatic, sense of the word “creative.” In actuality, pure novelty is ineffable and therefore cannot exhibit the sort of sense-making activity—the constructing of significance by way of weaving the novel into the familiar—exhibited by what we normally recognize as creativity. For this reason, a sensible reading of Jamesian creativity is that the latter process involves not the production of pure novelty but rather the mediation of novelty, where the will is understood to be creative because it mediates the novelty fed into cognition by (1) sensation received from outside and by (2) the random, tychistic irruptions that may be introduced at any point throughout the reflex arc.²⁶²

One result of such willful creativity, if I may call it that, is the altering of the conditions for future thinking and acting through the breaking or entrenching of embodied habits. Here one literally creates oneself through one’s freedom. Such creativity does not contradict the principle of the non-directedness of variation, since the will never directly produces the ideas that come to it. Rather, it is a kind of indirect or second-order creativity, wherein one stacks the deck in certain direction rather than another. To return to the biological case that inspired James’s model of the will in the first place, one can argue that natural selection is also creative in this sense: Although it is an old criticism of natural selection that it cannot explain very

²⁶² I am here denying Pawelski’s (2007) supposition that novelty for James is introduced only through perception, which for him is the passive or receptive aspect of the reflex arc (xvii). Tychistic irruptions happen all down the line for James. Notably, James compares the novel mental “out-births” that arise in cognition to Darwinian organic variations, and it is plausible that he considers them to be examples of the same kind of variants that fuel natural selection (albeit ones that may not be either congenital or heritable) (GM, 640-631). See Chapter 2 of the present study.

much because it is only able to sort existing things rather than create them, it can create indirectly by setting up specific conditions for further evolution (e.g. by entrenching development pathways more amenable to certain evolutionary directions than others).²⁶³

3.2.4. *Summary*

James's philosophical anthropology is based on the reflex arc model of sensation-cognition-action, which is itself structured by selectionist systems (and not just *selective emphasis*) at multiple levels of analysis. Given this model of the individual, the Jamesian will can be understood to channel its influence both outward into the world and back in on itself: outward in that the will produces action-variants that feed into systems that James also characterizes in a selectionist fashion, such as social evolution, communal knowledge growth, and the evolution of ethical ideals throughout history; and inward in that the will's selection of internal ideas alters the psychological environment in which the will continues to operate, thus biasing the individual's tendencies for future thinking and thus for acting. It is the latter direction of influence that is the focus of the moral philosophy of *The Principles of Psychology* and which I will argue continues to be the center of James's vision moving forward.

²⁶³ For a defense of the view that natural selection has a role in such "origin explanations" in addition to "distribution explanations," see Godfrey-Smith (2009), 41-43.

The will's freedom and creativity consists in its ability to vary the amount of attention given to ideas and thus to give preferential treatment to certain courses of action by altering the cluster of habits that constitutes one's character. This is the sense in which James's philosophical anthropologist is existentialist: His chief moral admonishment is to self-creation, or at least to creative self-*transformation* understood in the context of an embedding and constraining multi-layered evolutionary worldview. I now turn to showing how James's later philosophy builds upon this early existentialist philosophical-anthropological framework.²⁶⁴

3.3. The Continuity and Unity of James's Work

I will now further substantiate my claim that James's conception of the self-transforming individual is the center of his vision, arguing that this conception (1) continues to be operative through James's later writings in pragmatism and (2) that it remains central to his philosophy. Here I begin with a discussion of James's seeming dividedness (both across time and at any given point), before using James's conception of the individual to reconcile this dividedness through readings of *The*

²⁶⁴ James would seem to be the most "existentialist" of all the pragmatists, and he is certainly more intent on tracing explanations of both individual and social change back to the willful decisions (and idiosyncratic differences) of individuals than is the twentieth-century's most influential pragmatist John Dewey. For this reason among others (e.g. James's anti-rationalism, which only increased over his career), William Barrett claims in his classic study of existentialism *Irrational Man* (1958) that, "Of all the non-European philosophers, William James probably best deserves to be labeled an Existentialist" (18). The comparison of James to existentialism is also a theme of Roth (1969).

Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) and the pragmatic philosophy of *Pragmatism* (1907) and *The Meaning of Truth* (1909).

3.3.1. *On James's Seeming Dividedness*

One can locate different kinds of apparent division in James's work: *diachronically*, one may ask whether it is meaningful to connect James's early and later writings; and *synchronically*, one may ask whether James's thought is coherent at any given point, or when taken as a whole. These questions are of course related: If one is attempting to reconstruct a coherent, synchronic picture of James's worldview (as I am doing here), one will likely draw upon writings from different time periods and will therefore benefit from any diachronic continuity that is discovered; the more that James seems to be coherent and interesting, not only at some "sweet spot" in his intellectual development, but also across time, the stronger such a reconstruction will be.²⁶⁵ Furthermore, if one is looking for diachronic continuity, one way to do this is by locating some position that makes sense at a given point (synchronically) and tracing this position either forward or backward to locate it at other points in the author's work. For these reasons, diachronic continuity stands in the service of synchronic unity and vice-versa.

²⁶⁵ This is not to say that this is the only way to reconstruct James's thought. One could take a "developmental" approach, stressing how James's thought changed over time, perhaps in maturing toward some position that is better than earlier positions. This is the strategy, for example, of Pawelski (2007), although it has not been mine here.

The chief apparent diachronic divide in James's work is that between his early psychological writings and his later philosophical ones. Indeed, it is fairly easy to divide James's work in this way: After founding America's first psychology laboratory (at Harvard in 1875), granting America's first psychology PhD (to G. Stanley Hall in 1878), and writing America's first important treatise on scientific psychology (*The Principles of Psychology* in 1890), James turned over his laboratory to Hugo Münsterberg (1892), stopped writing about psychology proper (after condensing and revising the *Principles*, first as *Psychology: The Briefer Course* in 1892 and again as *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* in 1899), and turned his attention to more recognizably philosophical projects such as "The Will to Believe" (1897), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), *Pragmatism* (1907), and *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909). James, it seems, was a pioneering American psychologist who switched gears and became a pioneering American philosopher.

The chief synchronic divide that is discussed in the James literature, at least in the twenty-first century, is the one foregrounded by Richard Gale in *The Divided Self of William James* (1999). According to Gale, James's writings contain an irresolvable tension between a "Promethean pragmatist" philosophy, informed by a conception of humans as active, purposive and willful, and a "anti-Promethean mystic" philosophy, informed by a conception of humans as passive, receptive, and able to achieve mystical union with reality. Gale believes that this results in a number of inconsistencies in James's thought, the most important of which he calls the "Big Aporia": Whereas the Promethean pragmatist views concepts instrumentally and

relativizes ontological claims to purposes (e.g. as in the pragmatist theory of truth), the anti-Promethean mystic identifies meaning and reality with the direct perception of present reality (e.g. as in parts of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*). Gale's James is thus hopelessly divided in his conception of humanity and thus in the philosophical positions to which this divided conception leads him.

In what follows, I will demonstrate continuity from James's psychological writings to his philosophical ones (thus reconciling the diachronic divide) in a way that resolves the active-passive tension by showing how this tension in fact provides the conditions for freedom on James's view (thus reconciling the synchronic divide).

3.3.2. *Character Ethics from Psychology to Psychology*

One need only glance at such writings as "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence" (1878), "The Sentiment of Rationality" (1879), "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment" (1880), and "Reflex Action and Theism" (1881) to see that physiological, psychological, and philosophical investigations mix freely in James's early "psychological" writings; even James's very first publication, a review of T. H. Huxley's *Lectures on the Elements of Comparative Anatomy* (1865), contains a lengthy and somewhat gratuitous discussion of science's relationship to supernaturalism and final causes, demonstrating at the outset James's

philosophical bent and impatience for narrow technical disputes.²⁶⁶ What I would like to show here, as I have already suggested, is that even where James's later writings are apparently disconnected from any scientific researches, they are in fact organized around the same conception of the individual that he developed in his early writings on physiology and psychology. The resulting picture is of pragmatism as a sort of character ethics, where the selectionist structure of James's position resolves the tension between activity and passivity in James's thought is not a tragic symbol of human existence but rather a condition for the possibility of freedom.

The center of James's vision is his conception of the self-fashioning individual that he develops by way of a selectionist interpretation of the reflex arc, in combination with an ethics of willful character-formation, most explicitly in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). Although I have called this position a kind of "existentialism" in employing Kannisto's framework above, here I will prefer to call it James's "character ethics" (or "ethics of character"). This is not to claim a strong connection between James and any specific tradition such as Aristotelianism, but only to suggest that James's philosophy takes as its focal point the question "What kind of person ought I become?" and in doing so seeks to cultivate a kind of *eudaimonia* or flourishing in the individual agent. This is a non-standard reading of James, who is

²⁶⁶ ECR, 202. The very boundary between philosophy and science can also be viewed as a matter of dispute in James's writings, as Bordogna (2008) discusses in her reading of James as doing disciplinary "boundary work." On the importance of connecting James's psychology and philosophy, see Taylor (1990).

generally believed either (1) to have said very little about ethics or (2) to have merely proffered an *ethics of belief* that is disconnected from his psychology and from any broader project.

If James is thought to put forth a general statement on ethics, it is traced to what seems to be a modified version of utilitarianism that he puts forth in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (1891). Here James claim that good is just the satisfaction of the demands of sentient creatures; that demands can literally be for anything (and need not be for pleasure or the avoidance of pain); that the ideal ethical arrangement is one where the most demands are satisfied and the least are “butchered”; that the ideals of “strenuous” people, among whom he includes especially a certain type of energetic religious person, are likely to win out in the long run of history, which we should assume is progressively approaching the ideal ethical state; and that one ought to posit as a regulative ideal that the ideal ethical state already exists in the mind of God. Although “The Moral Philosopher” is not central to my interpretation below, I would read this essay as an argument against the possibility of building normative ethics upon an *a priori* foundation²⁶⁷ and also as a higher-order cosmic projection of what he has already claimed is happening within any given individual: ethical progress as the adjudication between different possible future characters. Whereas in the *Principles* this occurs through the freedom of the will and habit-formation, in the grand sweep of history an analogous process can be imagined to occur in a super-individual, where ideals (emerging ultimately from

²⁶⁷ Franzese (2008) also reads the essay in this way.

individuals) must be selectively subordinated to one another in the name of a better potential future. In both cases, the strenuous activity of individuals is given a privileged status, as the mode of existence that provides the right kind of fuel for (personal or historical) ethical progress.²⁶⁸

If James's ethics is isolated to his ethics of belief, then this position is located in his famous essay "The Will to Believe" (1897). Here James discusses a highly circumscribed case in which he argues that it is allowable to reach a decision in the absence of evidence. This is the case of a *genuine option*, which is (1) *living* in that the individual is capable of possibly accepting either opposing hypothesis, (2) *forced* in that the decision is not avoidable (as in a logical disjunction), and (3) *momentous* in that the decision is unique and has irreversible practical consequences. James's position here has been widely criticized since its inception as giving individuals license to believe whatever they would like, but given the severe restriction on when one may "will to believe," James's position is not as unreasonable as may appear at first glance.

Colin Koopman, who also locates an ethics of self-transformation (or "willful rehabilitation") in *The Principles of Psychology*,²⁶⁹ claims that the ethics of "The Will to Believe" continues the ethical project of the *Principles* under a different description: Just as in the *Principles* the will must intervene when competing ideas

²⁶⁸ In this way MP continues the idea of historical ethical progress begun in GM.

²⁶⁹ Koopman (unpublished).

conflict, thus willfully re-constituting one's character, in the genuine option of "The Will to Believe" one must choose among ethically significant choices that are by-definition forced, that is, where the will is guaranteed to be doing ethically significant work. Understood in this way, James's ethics of belief is a continuation of his ethics of character, of the self's work on itself. I consider Koopman's reading to provide a plausible way of finding continuity between James's conception of the individual in the *Principles* and "The Will to Believe," but here I would like to focus on unearthing this framework, not in James's works that have been considered overtly ethical such as "The Will to Believe," but rather in his later *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and in his mature pragmatism of *Pragmatism* (1907) and *The Meaning of Truth* (1909).

3.3.2.1. Character Ethics 1902: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is an influential study of individual religious life that crisscrosses among psychological, anthropological, mystical, and theological investigations. However, the *Varieties* is only nominally a study of religion, as its thematic lynchpin is not religious institutions or traditions per se but rather "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.”²⁷⁰ James thus makes it clear that the *Varieties* is concerned primarily with people’s deepest attitudes toward existence, rather than any particular dogma, such that even an atheist who rejects all institutions could be religious.²⁷¹ I would suggest that this means that this book is really about what I have called “centers of vision,” or the cognitive-affective centers around which ones habits and thus one’s character are organized. This philosophical-anthropological meaning is better captured by the book’s subtitle than its main one: “A Study in Human Nature.”

In this text, James continues to elaborate upon the moral framework that he had already put in place in the *Principles*, where the essence of morality is the adjudication of conflicting ideas that represent possible future selves. According to James,

Now in all of us, however constituted, but to a degree the greater in proportion as we are intense and sensitive and subject to diversified temptations, and to the greatest possible degree if we are positively psychopathic, does the normal evolution of character chiefly consist in the straightening out and unifying of the inner self. The higher and lower feelings, the useful and erring impulses, begin by being a comparative chaos within us—they must end by forming a stable set of functions in right subordination. Unhappiness is apt to characterize the period of order-making and struggle.²⁷²

The outcome of this process of adjudicating among impulses, on James’s view, is a new “centre of energy,” which I take to be equivalent what James elsewhere calls a

²⁷⁰ VRE, 34.

²⁷¹ VRE, 36.

²⁷² VRE, 142.

“center of vision” and which might just as well be called the center of one’s
character:

Let us hereafter, in speaking of the hot place in a man’s consciousness, the group of ideas to which he devotes himself, and from which he works, call it *the habitual centre of his personal energy*. It makes a great difference to a man whether one set of his ideas, or another, be the centre of his energy; and it makes a great difference, as regards any set of ideas which he may possess, whether they become central or remain peripheral in him. To say that a man is ‘converted’ means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy.²⁷³

Thus, in the terms of the *Varieties*, James’s character ethics can be described as developing and maintaining one’s center of energy, where a major shift in this center (whether religiously colored or not) may be termed “conversion.”

James claims that such shifts come in two forms, only one of which corresponds directly to the sort of willful self-transformation that was the focus of his moral theory in the *Principles*:

There is thus a conscious and a voluntary way and an involuntary and unconscious way in which mental results may get accomplished; and we find both exemplified in the history of conversion, giving us two types, which Starbuck calls the *volitional type* and the *type by self-surrender*, respectively.

In the volitional type the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of spiritual habits.²⁷⁴

Here James admits that, although one may willfully reconstruct one’s character as described in the *Principles*, one might just as well find that one changes by way of unconscious forces that one does not understand.

²⁷³ VRE, 162.

²⁷⁴ VRE, 170.

Here one can see James's framework of character ethics at work, but one can also see part of the potential conflict between activity and passivity to which Gale alludes. How much efficacy could one possibly have in shaping one's own character, and how does one know when to intervene or to allow oneself to take shape automatically?

3.3.2.2. Character Ethics 1907-1909: *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth*

As I have mentioned, I am not the first to contend that James's conception of the individual informs his philosophy of pragmatism. Ellen Kappy Suckiel, for example, claims that the reflex arc undergirds James's "teleological" conception of the human being, that is, James's view that humans are "conative, striving, desiring, purposive, idealizing, and goal-oriented" by nature;²⁷⁵ and James Pawelski claims that James's idea of reflex action is a "hermeneutic key" for understanding his work.²⁷⁶ My point here is to read James's pragmatism against the background of the specific account of the individual that I have outlined above, which is based on a selectionist reading of reflex action and a *Principles*-centered reading of James's moral theory.

Pragmatism for James comprises two related but logically distinct positions: firstly, a method for deciding the "cash value" of theories, derived from a theory of

²⁷⁵ Suckiel (1982), 47 and chap. 2.

²⁷⁶ Pawelski (2007), xix.

meaning that James adapts from Peirce; and secondly, a theory of truth (that James actually prefers to call “humanism”) on which a belief is true to the extent that it is “satisfactory,” where satisfactoriness has an indefinite number of dimensions and can only be exhibited across time. I will now treat these two aspects of pragmatism in turn.

Underlying James’s pragmatic method is the “principle of pragmatism,” which reflects a theory of meaning that he adapts from Peirce:

To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all.²⁷⁷

Applying this theory of meaning is supposed to tell us what our legitimate conceptions amount to and to exposes vacuous conceptions for what they are. It is therefore our most sophisticated guide in determining “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” to use the title of the 1878 article where Peirce introduces the “pragmatic maxim” on which it is based.²⁷⁸

Although putting the principle of pragmatism in terms of the effects of “objects” as above tends to bring to mind everyday physical objects and their properties, the pragmatic method is not limited to such conceptions as *hardness*

²⁷⁷ P, 29.

²⁷⁸ Compare Peirce’s (1878) formulation: “Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of the conception of the object” (132).

(Peirce's first example). In fact, James is most interested in using the pragmatic method as a guide to doing philosophy,²⁷⁹ and his James's favorite philosophical application of this method is to use it to resolve "idle metaphysical disputes." To test the legitimacy of a philosophical problem, one need only ask the perennial pragmatist question: "In what respects would the world be different if this alternative or that were true? If I can find nothing that would become different, then the alternative has no sense."²⁸⁰ In other words, if you encounter a philosophical dilemma, both horns of which imply the same practical effects, then the problem has been exposed as a waste of time.

The pragmatic method thus allows James to make a methodological program out of refusing to go beyond what is given in experience—or, at least, what potentially can be experienced, "immediate or remote." Although it might therefore be tempting to claim that the pragmatic method is comparable to the strict verificationism of twentieth-century logical positivism, this would be to ignore the fact that meaning for James, unlike for the positivists, is not only about what we observe with our senses or how we logically relate these observations, but rather is inextricably tied to action. This is because, on James's view, something only counts as a practical effect, and therefore as meaningful, if it has an influence, however

²⁷⁹ According to James, for example, if the meaning of an object consists of the sum of our conceptions of its practical effects, then our conception of *substance* seems to have little content at all: "The fact of the bare cohesion itself is all that the notion of substance signifies. Behind that fact is nothing" (P, 46).

²⁸⁰ P, 27.

slight, in shaping our dispositions for actions. The role of action on James's view of meaning is thus ineliminable. The meaning of the belief that my house has such-and-such address *consists*, at least in part, in a set of dispositions for action that stem from this belief. This means that any belief that is "verifiable" in the sense of being corroborated by the senses, but which has no effect on one's dispositions for action, has no meaning for James—and if James allows that *all* such verifiable beliefs have some amount of meaning, then it is because all such beliefs in some way configure our dispositions for action, and not because meaning consists only in sensory corroboration *per se*.

Here James is once again following Peirce, as well as his own physiologist's tendency to view cognition as a mediator between sensation and action in the reflex arc: Just as Peirce defines beliefs as rules for action,²⁸¹ James claims that "the tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice."²⁸² This provides another strong connection to James's early theory of willful self-transformation, since it implies that the meaning of a belief necessarily consists partially in the way in which it configures one's habits, which is to say one's center of energy, or center of vision, or character. Willful belief for James is therefore

²⁸¹ According to Peirce (1878), the function of belief is to appease the irritation of doubt and to create rules for future action: "at the same time that [belief] is a stopping-place [of doubt], it is also a new starting-place for thought. That is why I have permitted myself to call it thought at rest, although thought is essentially an action" (129).

²⁸² P, 29.

not only one's sole point of moral leverage in the world, but the practical effects of belief, including its way of altering the constitution of the individual, are an essential component of any belief's meaning. Indeed, it is arguable that such alterations of individual character are the most important practical effect of any given belief, given that such alterations set up new conditions for future thought and action.

James also uses the term "pragmatism" for his account of truth (although he prefers to call this account "humanism"). Whereas the pragmatic method understands beliefs in terms of their practical effects (which can be good or bad), James's theory of truth is that a belief is true if and only if it has practical effects *and these effects are good*. More precisely, a belief for James is true just when it is satisfactory, where satisfactoriness is defined as including ordinary verifiability but also indefinitely many further criteria, which may be fulfilled by degrees and which may only exhibit themselves across time.²⁸³ This is the meaning of James's pat statement that "true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of the belief."²⁸⁴

Notice that James's position does not amount to the commonsensical claim that truths are useful because they are true; this would be either incorrect or vacuous on James's view, no more informative than claiming that someone has a lot of money

²⁸³ This may be described as a theory of truth, or perhaps just a theory of the meaning of the concept of truth (based on James's conception of meaning). As Suckiel (1982) points out, "truth" for James seems to be a purely descriptive term, which is unsatisfactory if one desires an *explanation* of truth (120). Of course, whether one can expect an explanation of truth that is neither trivial nor metaphysically problematic is itself a substantive philosophical question.

²⁸⁴ P, 42. Emphasis removed.

because he is rich.²⁸⁵ If there is a special relation of “agreement” between true beliefs and the world on James’s view, it is just the kind that obtains when a certain type of organism feeds its abstractions back into concrete experience in a fruitful manner. A true idea for James is any “idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily.”²⁸⁶

James’s account of truth is deeply radical in that it does not distinguish between truth and justification but rather considers both to be temporal processes that obtain by degrees. According to James, “Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself.”²⁸⁷ Although some might accept James’s descriptions of how we *in fact* come to form beliefs, many will not accept that the process described is that of a belief’s *becoming true*, as truth is generally considered to be a property that certain mental or linguistic entities (ideas, thoughts, sentences, propositions) just have (or do not) in virtue of their relation to the world (or perhaps to other mental or linguistic entities). However, James does not go along with the idea that truth is static and binary, while justification is temporal and a matter of degree.

²⁸⁵ James’s cites Ernst Mach’s quotation of an epigram from Lessing, which asks how it is that the richest person in the world has the most money: “Sagt Hänschen Schlau zu Vetter Fritz, / “Wie kommt es, Vetter Fritzen, / Dass grad’ die Reichsten in der Welt, / Das meiste Geld besitzen” (P, 105).

²⁸⁶ P, 34.

²⁸⁷ P, 97.

James does require truths to have certain specific *types* of benefits, however. Specifically, “True ideas are those we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those we cannot.”²⁸⁸ A belief that meets this holistic and coherentist requirement may be true (in as far as it goes), but it need not justify our most self-indulgent dreams: The pragmatist will refrain from believing in unicorns if the world does not offer them up, precisely because such a belief would constitute an inexplicable break from the rest of her more-or-less coherent worldview. James believes that we are all conservatives when it comes to this testing process, negotiating the relationship between an entrenched worldview and a novel and potentially dangerous new fact. The function of new truths is therefore everywhere the same: “New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity.”²⁸⁹

Although a true belief must be able to smooth the transition between parts of experience for an individual through verification and corroboration, beyond this there is no in-principle limit to the number of things that could contribute to its being true. James makes this clear, for example, in the essay “Humanism and Truth” in *The Meaning of Truth*, where the following are among his summary points on the subject of truth: “An experience, perceptual or conceptual, must conform to reality in order to

²⁸⁸ P, 97.

²⁸⁹ P, 35.

be true”; “By ‘conforming,’ humanism means taking account-of in such a way as to gain any intellectually and practically satisfactory result”; and “ To ‘take account-of’ and be ‘satisfactory’ are terms that admit of no definition, so many are the ways in which these requirements can practically be worked out.”²⁹⁰ Satisfactoriness thus has indefinitely many dimensions, corresponding to the indefinitely many ways in which a belief may prove itself meaningful and (if meaningful in a good way) true. This means that, although pragmatic meaning is supposed to be what matters when trying to understand philosophical disputes, it can never fully be defined. Indeed, what it means to be satisfactory may itself have to be revised over time.

It might sound like a nonstarter to claim that truth is just what works, but that we have an incomplete understanding of what it means to “work,” which we may have to revise as we go. However, James’s suggestion that we try thinking this way about truth is perhaps no less rational than the assumption that beliefs simply have a determinate meaning at any given time, which does not depend on practical effects. Both are stipulations, or starting points, and the pragmatist will adjudicate between starting points based on the (fallibly) predicted practical effects of doing so. James is placing a bet, based on his understanding of the function of thought, that it makes sense in this way to embrace “the open air and possibilities of nature, as against

²⁹⁰ MT, 59-60. The essay was originally published in 1904.

dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth.”²⁹¹ This bet, like all bets, is based on incomplete information, which is the only kind of information one has.²⁹²

In my view, the open-endedness of the definition of meaning (and thus of the definition of truth) on James’s view results from the open-endedness of what for James constitutes a “practical effect.” A practical effect for James reflects a possible difference in action, and an idea will produce different such differences when it arises in the context of different environments. This means that there are as many ways for a given idea to be meaningful as there are environments in which that idea may be embedded. Meaning for James is not absolute but relative, and the conditions to which it is relative are in flux. Furthermore, “environment” here has two senses: firstly, the external environment (including the broader natural and cultural world); and secondly, the internal environment (that is, the cluster of habits that constitute one’s character or center of vision). An alteration in either of these environments will alter an idea’s practical effects and thus that idea’s meaning (and truth), and, as I have

²⁹¹ P, 31.

²⁹² One way in which one might try to save James from his own position is to claim that James believes in traditional “cognitive” meaning but is just trying to supplement it with a conception of pragmatic meaning; pragmatic meaning is just *practically important* cognitive meaning. As Suckiel (1982) points out, one can find evidence for and against such a reading in James (30-44). This is how H. S. Thayer reads James (in his Introduction to P), echoing Suckiel’s distinction between cognitive and pragmatic meaning in a discussion of cognitive and pragmatic *truth* (xxxvii). According to Thayer, James thinks that we have access to objective, but possibly useless, cognitive truths, whose meaning and truth have nothing to do with our interests. My point here is not to salvage or damn James’s conception of truth, which I take to be neither the heart of his philosophy nor his most interesting philosophical contribution, but only to show how it functions as a symptom of his selectionist character ethics.

argued, the willful alteration of the latter environment is on James's view a function of one's moral agency.

In short, because James understands the meaning of ideas in terms of practical effects, and because the most important practical effect of any idea is how it changes the future conditions relative to which practical effects are measured (including, most importantly, changes in one's character), pragmatism is a form of character ethics. In this, James's mature writings in pragmatism may be viewed as a continuation of the moral philosophy extending forward from *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) through (as Koopman would have it) "The Will to Believe" (1897) and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).

3.4. Conclusion: On James's Continuity and Unity

I have attempted to show that, even where James is seemingly focused on topics such as religion, meaning, and truth in his writings after 1900, one may plausibly read him as continuing to work within a framework that he set in place in the 1880s as which he crystallized in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). This framework is one where the individual is constituted by the reflex arc of sensation-cognition-action, which is itself structured by multiple selectionist systems that lead up to a selective and (I would say) creative will. Moral action within this framework means the willful selection of ideas that would otherwise have faded away and thus the willful alteration of the cluster of habits that constitutes one's character. This

framework extends into James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), which carries the subtitle *A Study in Human Nature*, in that the latter work is not about religion *per se* but rather about taxonomizing types of character and understanding processes of character development. Here the most dramatic type of character-development is known as "conversion," which may be either willful (as in the moral philosophy described in the *Principles*) or unconscious. This framework also extends into James's mature pragmatism in that James understands meaning in terms of practical effects, the most important of which is the effect of altering one's internal habitual environment through the willful holding of a belief (where the latter is defined as a rule for action).

This reading is meant to back up my claim that the center of James's vision is his conception of the self-fashioning individual—in other words, his very concern with centers of vision—whereas the structure of his vision is the selectionist mode of explanation that he adapts from Darwinian biology and then employs in a variety of domains. To say that this center and structure remain in place across decades of James's career is to unearth diachronic continuity, which also helps to motivate the idea of presenting a unified picture of James's position. I have also described this interpretation by saying that James's work contains a kind of philosophical anthropology, which is to say that it is a philosophy that traces all questions back to questions of human nature (for some value of "nature"); and that this philosophical anthropology is specifically *existentialist* in that it focuses on questions of how freely

to create oneself (on specifically Jamesian, selectionist understandings of freedom and creativity).

Here I would like to return, if only briefly, to what Richard Gale considers to be the chief impediment to a unified James: the divide between activity and passivity, as represented by the divided between the pragmatist James, who is purposive and instrumentalist, and the mystic James, who seeks oneness with universe and is thus receptively open to the pureness of sensation and to the push and pull of the cosmos. Gale's book concludes with the following passage, which is striking because of its implicit pessimism about human existence and about James's way of reflecting that existence:

James was in the same basic fix as were these past mystics and mystically inclined metaphysicians. One of our many selves, the mystical one, craves unity, self-containment, and the safety and peace that come from abiding in the present. But our Promethean self is always running ahead of itself into the future, living on the dangerous edge of things, risking failure, and facing its inevitable death. What James's quest to have it all most desires is to be both of these selves *at the same time*. What we really want is to be both a Sartrean *In-Itself* that self-sufficiently abides in its completeness within the present and a *For-Itself* that is always racing ahead of itself into the future so as to complete itself. In other words, we want to be God. Not surprisingly, this is forever beyond our grasp. [...] One does not solve this problem. One can only bear witness to it. And no one has done so with more passion, honesty, and brilliance than William James. No one sang the blues with more soul than did James, with his "Divided-Self Blues" as his perennial chart topper.²⁹³

Thus, although Gale admits that the tension between activity and passivity in James's philosophy is a reflection of a normal and indeed constitutive feature of human existence—to desire both present wholeness and projects that one actively pursues

²⁹³ Gale (1999), 332.

over time—he describes this tension as producing in James a sad, if poignant and soulful, blues song. James’s philosophy is therefore understood to give voice to a tension that makes life tragic, in a sense, for everyone.

I would emphasize, however, that one need not view the tension between activity and passivity in James’s work tragically, as a bar to some God-like and thus impossible *In-and-For-Itself* mode of existence, but rather that for James (and in general) such a tension should be understood positively, as a condition of the possibility of freedom and thus of the kind of meaning that such freedom affords. This is because activity and passivity are not two separate poles to which James is drawn, as if he could embrace one while repudiating the other. Rather, activity and passivity for James only make sense in relation to one another, as represented by different levels of selectionist processes. The individual *qua* ethical deliberator, for example, has agency vis-à-vis her character and surrounding world insofar as she willfully selects among the cognitive variants offered up from the mind “beneath.” This individual is also passive vis-à-vis these same variants, however, in that she is incapable of producing the ideas among which she selects; this is just the meaning of the “non-directedness variation” that all selectionist systems exhibit. Moving up to higher selectionist systems, moreover, the individual can be viewed as active vis-à-vis the external environment (e.g. in social evolution) insofar as her actions are non-directed with respect to that environment and thus “bring something new to the table,” while she is passive insofar as she is shaped (or perhaps even destroyed) by environmental pressures. Activity for James is in all cases relative rather than

absolute, a matter of different levels of reality be leveraged against one another, where this tension may take exist in a dramatic and self-aware fashion in the human will.²⁹⁴ To lack a tension between activity and passivity for James would not be to swap the “divided self blues” for some more up-beat pop number but rather to lack the only kind of constrained and relative freedom of which we are capable.

None of this is to deny that existence has a tragic element, provided by real-world checks on freedom (ranging from immovable physical objects to romantic rejection to batons and tear gas), as well as by our metaphysical flights of imagination regarding the enviable capacities of otherworldly beings. It is also not to deny that James places stress on the active and passive moments or phases of human experience differently in different texts, seeming in some places to desire the solace of mystical absorption and in others to be a goal-oriented pragmatist. It is only to suggest that James’s project was at all times one of determining how best to *integrate* activity and passivity, rather than of favoring one of these modes at the expense of the other. The question for James is that of when to intervene with willful effort and when to allow automatic behaviors to pass. There is no pre-given answer to this question, and one is no less the Jamesian pragmatist if one deliberately decides to spend half of one’s time meditating in order to achieve enlightenment rather than racing ahead of oneself in order to complete one’s opera. This is why, for example, there is nothing necessarily

²⁹⁴ In James’s more speculative moods, he suggests that this could also occur higher levels of super-consciousness. See James’s Postscript to VRE and his essay on Fechner in PU. Schull (1996) follows James in his interest in the possibility of a cascade of increasingly inclusive purposive consciousnesses.

non-pragmatist about surrendering to an experience of unconscious conversion (as opposed to the willful kind) that James discusses in the *Varieties*, should one find oneself caught up in one.²⁹⁵ To choose to be passive and receptive may still be an active choice, just as to choose to be more overtly active still requires one to be passive in the sense of relying on non-directed options for thinking and acting that one is not able to produce directly. One is thus active in one's passivity and passive in one's activity, and there is for James no other way for beings like us to lead free or meaningful lives.

This chapter concludes my reconstruction of James's philosophy as a kind of character ethics (or existentialist philosophical anthropology) built around a selectionist adaptation of the reflex arc. In the next chapter, which constitutes Part II of the present study, I broaden my investigation by exploring connections between James and several figures in the Continental tradition, thus demonstrating the breadth of James's thought while further contextualizing him within the philosophy of his time.

²⁹⁵ My reading has some resonances with that of Pawelski (2007), who also finds in James a model of the dynamics of self-realization rather than a paragon of befuddling practical contradictions. Pawelski's reading differs from mine, however, in that whereas I deal with this problem by reconstructing the Jamesian individual as nexus of selectionist systems, he downplays the importance of what he calls the "selection model" and provides a developmental reading on which James went through multiple phases until finally developing an even-handed way of activity and passivity relative to one another toward the end of his life (e.g. in his final book, *Some Problems in Philosophy*). Perhaps James did place different weights on activity and passivity at different times, but my point here is just that the framework for understanding how James adjudicates between activity and passivity is the selectionist one I have ascribed to him, without which James would have a different sense of the very meaning of activity or passivity.

Part II.

4. James in Context: Nietzsche, Husserl, Hegel, and Philosophical Anthropology Redux

4.1. Introduction

In Part I of this study I argued that the center of James's vision is his very concern with centers of vision, by which I meant that James's philosophy is everywhere concerned with the structure and dynamics of individual character, which he identifies with a cluster of plastic habits that is mediated by a free and creative will. I also situated this Jamesian individual within a broader evolutionary worldview that is structured by selectionist systems—systems that generate patterns by way of the differential interaction of variants with environments—at multiple levels of analysis, such that the will serves both as a selective environment for cognitive variants “beneath” as well as a generator of variation for selection in broader selectionist systems “above” or “outside.” In the present chapter, I situate James's philosophy in relation to several seminal figures in the Continental tradition, adding further depth and nuance to my picture of James and drawing some connections between pragmatic and Continental thought.

This chapter consists of four main sections. In the first section, I argue that James's reading of Nietzsche in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is both uncharitable and ironic, given that James critiques Nietzsche on a point where they actually share much in common: their ideals of ethical character, which in both cases

results in significant part from their reactions to evolutionary biology. In the second section, I compare James's and Husserl's conceptions of temporality, and in particular their conceptions of the punctual "Now" in relation to a notion of the extended present. Here I argue that, whereas Husserl reserves a privileged place for the Now, James's pragmatism avoids a sort of foundationalism by refraining from doing this. In the third section, I explicate James's critique of Hegel's idealism, which James considers to be a strong example of "vicious abstractionism," or the practice of taking an abstraction to stand in for the reality from which it was abstracted. In the fourth section, I conclude with a brief return to the conception of philosophical anthropology, which refers both to (1) a specific German school of thought and (2) any philosophy that focuses on questions of human nature (for some value of "nature"), saying how James might be said to practice the latter (in part through a consideration of his resonances with the former). Finally, I argue that the sort of non-foundationalist, non-reductive naturalism that James shares with German *philosophische Anthropologie* can give us an enriched picture of the human being without sacrificing individual agency, and that a question for future research along Jamesian lines is that of how to account for normativity.

4.2. Master's and Saints: James, Nietzsche, and the Ethics of Character

William James (1842-1910) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) were contemporaries who, while living on separate continents and writing in different

languages, made remarkably parallel contributions to philosophy. On the negative side, their critiques of the tradition were equally sweeping, both of them rejecting the empiricist view that knowledge consists in the mind's accurate reconstruction of an independent reality, the post- and neo-Kantian transcendentalism that grounds cognition and values outside of the natural world, and the reductionistic scientific materialism that acts as just one more dogmatic metaphysics among others. On the positive side, both thinkers re-envisioned philosophy as a new kind of non-foundationalist, practically oriented discipline. Although Nietzsche's genealogy is retrospective, re-valuing current practices via a reconstruction of the past, whereas James's pragmatism is prospective, focusing on the anticipated consequences of ideas, philosophy for both thinkers means critically analyzing the value of beliefs and practices in terms of their function within individual lives and within human life more broadly.²⁹⁶ Furthermore, and most importantly for present purposes, both thinkers place at the center of this process the *individual*, considered neither as passive mechanism nor supernatural agent, but rather as active, multivalent, self-fashioning organism.

The similar character of James's and Nietzsche's philosophies might be explained in part by a couple of biographical commonalities. Firstly, neither received advanced formal training in philosophy: James studied chemistry, anatomy and

²⁹⁶ Notably, James's pragmatism seems closer to what Williams (2004) calls "vindictory genealogy," which vindicates current morality, whereas Nietzsche's genealogy is the paradigmatic "unmasking genealogy," which exposes how current morality emerged from the non-moral. On this distinction, see also Hoy (2009), 224-242.

physiology, and medicine at Harvard, and he taught physiology and psychology before becoming a professor of philosophy; and Nietzsche was a classical philologist who retired from his professorship at Basel into a solitary life of self-publishing iconoclastic books. Secondly, both suffered chronic physical ailments as well as severe mental crises: Nietzsche famously collapsed physically and mentally at age 44, and James suffered at various points in his life from severe depression and seems to have been committed at one point to an asylum near Boston.²⁹⁷ Furthermore, and relatedly, both thinkers would have considered the latter point of comparison relevant for understanding their points of view, as each views what are called “illnesses” as alternative modes of health that bring with them their own perspectives and modes of valuation.²⁹⁸ According to James, for example, “Few of us are not in some way infirm, or even diseased; and our very infirmities help us unexpectedly. [...] If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish the chief condition of the requisite receptivity”,²⁹⁹ and Nietzsche reports, “I am very conscious of the advantages that my fickle health gives me over all robust squares. A philosopher who has traversed many kinds of health, and keeps traversing them, has passed through an equal number of philosophies.”³⁰⁰

²⁹⁷ On James’s asylum stay, see Richards (1987), 415.

²⁹⁸ This shared belief of James and Nietzsche’s is the main theme of Wirth (2009).

²⁹⁹ VRE, 28-29.

³⁰⁰ *The Gay Science*, Preface, §3.

Although James and Nietzsche's developed similarly radical philosophies during the same historical moment, they developed their views almost entirely independently of one another. On the one hand, the only evidence I am aware of that Nietzsche knew about James, recently adduced by Thomas Brobjer,³⁰¹ is that in 1887 Nietzsche appears to have read a book by one Henri Joly, *Psychologie des grands hommes* (1883), which contrasts James's views on the inexplicable idiosyncrasies of geniuses in "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment" (1880) with Francis Galton's genetic-determinist view of intelligence.³⁰² Thus Nietzsche may have been aware of James, but only at second-hand and late in his own career. Nietzsche's aversion to reading in English was likely no help here.³⁰³

On the other hand, while James read German with ease and owned at least two of Nietzsche's books,³⁰⁴ he does not seem to have engaged with Nietzsche's thought in a particularly serious way. By my count,³⁰⁵ James mentions Nietzsche in eight

³⁰¹ Brobjer (2004), 45; Brobjer (2008), 103-104.

³⁰² See Joly (1883), chap. 3. Joly actually cites a translation of James's article, "Les grand hommes, les grandes pensées et le milieu," which was published in *Critique Philosophique* in 1881. Thanks to Jocelyn Hoy for help with Joly's French.

³⁰³ Nietzsche's ignorance of James can be explained in part by the fact that Nietzsche's philosophical life was cut short in 1889, soon before the publication of James's first major work, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). Nevertheless, James had been steadily publishing original essays since 1878, many of which treated Nietzschean concerns such as the role of "great men" in history, the critique of Herbert Spencer, and the need to rethink truth in light of Darwinism.

³⁰⁴ James's extant library at Harvard contains copies of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* and *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (VRE, 435).

³⁰⁵ My count has increased by several pieces of correspondence thanks to the astute commentary of Megan Mustain.

letters,³⁰⁶ one book review,³⁰⁷ two minor essays,³⁰⁸ and twice in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.³⁰⁹ Unfortunately, although James's correspondence indicates an increasing fascination with Nietzsche toward the end of his life, these references to Nietzsche range from casual name-dropping to unfair caricature. Indeed, only in the second mention of Nietzsche in the *Varieties* does James attempt anything like an analysis of Nietzsche's thought, and here James reads Nietzsche uncharitably and

³⁰⁶ There is a letter from James to his wife in 1905, mentioning that he had read Émile Faguet's 1903 book *En lisant Nietzsche* (CWJ v. 10, 567); to T. S. Perry in 1905, saying of Nietzsche that "In his high and mighty way he was laying down the law about all the European countries" (LWJ I, 233); to J. G. Huneker in 1909, claiming to enjoy the latter's article on Nietzsche, whom he declares to have been "an extraordinary human being" while also stating, "The Nietzsche *cult* to me is sickening, however" (CWJ, v. 12, 265-266); to his wife in 1910 (the final year of James's life and thus the year of all subsequent letters), enthusing about another French book on Nietzsche, Daniel Halévy's 1909 *La Vie de Frederic Nietzsche* (CWJ v. 12, 510); to T. S. Perry, recommending the latter book (CWJ v. 12, 527); to his daughter Margaret Mary, also recommending the latter book (CWJ, v. 12, 538); to W. M. Salter, who would himself publish *Nietzsche the Thinker* in 1917, mentioning that he had ordered Nietzsche's *Geburt der Tragödie* and vol. 3 of some edition of Nietzsche's works (CWJ v. 12, 533); to J. Goldstein, claiming that the latter's article on Nietzsche had made him more sympathetic to the Nietzsche (CWJ v. 12, 540); to E. Gibbons, showing that he anticipates W. M. Salter's finishing his work on Nietzsche (mentioned previously) (CWJ v. 12, 540). Nietzsche was also mentioned to James in at least two letters: from T. Davidson in 1897, recommending a review of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (CWJ v. 8, 251); and from J. Ward in 1909, asking James the following good question: "By the way did it ever occur to you to claim Nietzsche?" (CWJ v. 12, 373).

³⁰⁷ The book review is of Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1895), a polemic against modern culture that harshly condemns Nietzsche's thinking. In James's review, Nietzsche merely appears in a list of philosophers whom James thinks Nordau "abuses" (ECR, 508).

³⁰⁸ In an essay on Italian pragmatism, James mentions Nietzsche in a list of philosophers discussed by Giovanni Papini (EIP, 145); Papini also seems to have reminded James of Nietzsche, since James is reported to have written the words "Nietzsche's tho't as well as style" on a copy of an article by Papini entitled "From Man to God" (EIP, 244). In another essay, James compares the attitude of mystic Benjamin Blood with Nietzsche's idea of *amor fati*, thus showing an appreciation for one of Nietzsche's terms of art (EIP, 189).

³⁰⁹ VRE, 39; 295-298. I discuss these mentions of Nietzsche below.

with seemingly no appreciation for their shared philosophical orientation. Thus, whereas James celebrates, for example, his commonalities with his French contemporary Henri Bergson,³¹⁰ he simply fails to engage substantively with his German contemporary Nietzsche.

Things have not gotten much better for the James/Nietzsche comparison in the century since their deaths. Rather, with a few (mostly minor) exceptions, focusing primarily on truth, the James/Nietzsche comparison remains a surprisingly neglected, if promising, area of research. Indeed, despite the proliferation of such studies as *Freud and Nietzsche* (2000) and *Wittgenstein and William James* (2002)—as well as a book on Nietzsche and James’s novelist brother *Henry James*³¹¹—there is still no book comparing James and Nietzsche in English.³¹²

³¹⁰ See, for example, the essay on Bergson in PU.

³¹¹ Donadio (1978).

³¹² The most substantive comparisons I have found are Hingst (1999), a published dissertation in German, and Sabo (1997), an unpublished master’s thesis in comparative literature. James and Nietzsche are compared on the topic of truth for a few pages in Allen (1993), chaps. 3-4; Allen (1994); Cormier (2001), chaps. 1-2; and Medina and Wood (2005), 9-13. Although Richard Rorty provides an interesting case because of his wide influence and his regular invoking of both figures, he is not particularly interested in scholarly comparison *per se*; however, see Rorty (1982) and Rorty (2007) for some of his more sustained comparisons, as well as Boffetti (2004) for a critique of Rorty’s too-Nietzschean reading of James. Italian scholar Sergio Franzese is closer to the present study than most of the above in that his occasional comparisons of James and Nietzsche are done in the context of what I would call “philosophical anthropology” (as in Chapter 3 of this study), rather than focusing on truth *per se*; see Franzese (2003) and Franzese (2008), 194-200, as well as a review of Franzese (2008) by Marchetti (2011), which brings in Foucault for a three-part comparison. Wirth (2009) also treats the question of health in James and Nietzsche in a manner broadly consonant with the present study. Intellectual histories in which James and Nietzsche enjoy a few pages of comparison include Cotkin (1994) and, quite recently, Ratner-Rosenhagen (2011). The number of references here is meant to show exhaustiveness rather than to belie

My goal here is to make a substantive inroad into this area of research by arguing that James's discussion of Nietzsche in the *Varieties* is both ironic and disappointing: ironic because James misses the fact that he and Nietzsche share similar views on the ethics of self-fashioning; and disappointing because a careful reading of Nietzsche by a major American philosopher would have been useful in James's time.³¹³ My aim here is not to scorn or belittle James, whose re-orientation of the philosophical tradition rivals Nietzsche's in its scope and importance, but rather to do him the favor of bringing him together with Nietzsche at last. More broadly, James and Nietzsche's missed opportunity for productive dialog also underscores the need for taking seriously a plurality of philosophical methods and traditions—a lesson that is apparently no less necessary for those of us who, like James and Nietzsche themselves, are putatively committed to a sort of philosophical pluralism or perspectivism.³¹⁴

the point that the comparison of James and Nietzsche has not received the depth of scholarly attention that it deserves.

³¹³ The irony is not unrelated to the disappointment, since it was exactly the conditions that made a good reading of Nietzsche by James *unlikely* that also would have made such a reading *precious*: the lack of English translations of Nietzsche's works before 1896 and the subsequent translation of his works out of order; the domination of early Nietzsche interpretation by the skewed viewpoints of Nietzsche's literary executor Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, who lionized her brother, and raving polemicist Max Nordau, who demonized him in a popular work that was available in English before any of Nietzsche's works were; the use of Nietzsche as a handy pawn in ideological political debates; etc. See Pütz (1995), Stassen (1995), and Steilberg (1995), and Steilberg (1995a).

³¹⁴ The most important omission here is any discussion of Emerson. A more developed study of James and Nietzsche would have to cover the influence of Emerson on each, which in both cases was substantial.

4.2.1. James on Nietzsche in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, originally a lecture series at Edinburgh University in 1901-1902, is an influential study of individual religious life that interweaves psychological, anthropological, mystical, and theological investigations. As I have claimed in Chapter 3, however, the proper subject matter of the *Varieties* is not religious institutions or traditions *per se* but rather, as James overtly claims, "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."³¹⁵ The *Varieties* is in fact concerned with individuals' deepest attitudes toward existence, which explains why the bulk of the book is spent discussing and taxonomizing character types and experiences of changing from one kind of person to another. The *Varieties* is, as the subtitle indicates, "A Study in Human Nature." It is in the context of an investigation into human attitudes and characters in this sense that James twice mentions his recently deceased German contemporary Nietzsche.

Nietzsche's first appearance in the *Varieties* is merely as an off-hand reference, and yet this reference already says a great deal about how James views him. Here James uses Nietzsche as an example of someone whose attitude toward life is too flippant or peevish to be considered religious, even on the very liberal

³¹⁵ VRE, 34.

definition of religion operative in the *Varieties* (which may include even atheistic positions):

The mood of a Schopenhauer or a Nietzsche—and in a less degree one may sometimes say the same of our own sad Carlyle—though often an ennobling sadness, is almost as often only peevishness running away with the bit between its teeth. The sallies of the two German authors remind one, half the time, of the sick shriekings of two dying rats. They lack the purgatorial note which religious sadness gives forth.³¹⁶

Here James clearly conflates Nietzsche's attitude with that of Arthur Schopenhauer, whose pessimistic brand of post-Kantian idealism (supplemented with ancient Indian Vedic philosophy) understands life itself as an evil that cries out to be quelled. In particular, Schopenhauer recommends disinterested aesthetic contemplation and ascetic self-abnegation as two antidotes to the suffering that constitutes existence. James detests such an attitude, thus leading him to portray both thinkers as equally pathetic "dying rats."

James's second mention of Nietzsche in the *Varieties*—which is his only substantive discussion of Nietzsche in any of his published writings—comes at an interesting point in the book, because it is here that James switches from a descriptive, scientific mode to a tentatively normative one. Here, after spending many lectures discussing various types of religious experience and types of religious person, James finally asks the question of what is the *best* way to be religious, which again for James boils down to the question of what is the best way of reacting on the

³¹⁶ VRE, 39.

whole to life. This is an interesting turning point, not just in the *Varieties*, but also in James's body of work as a whole, since in his other writings on ethics, James shies away almost completely from giving overt ethical prescriptions, focusing instead on the conditions for moral development in society or in the individual.³¹⁷

In answer to this question, James puts forth his ideal character type of the "saint," which is comprised by a set of spiritual or psychological propensities and their attendant behaviors. The psychological propensities, slightly abridged, are as follows:³¹⁸

A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal Power.

A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control.

An immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down.

A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections, towards 'yes, yes,' and away from 'no,' where the claims of the non-ego are concerned.

The behaviors that are supposed to issue from these propensities are then as follows:³¹⁹

- (a) Asceticism
- (b) Strength of soul
- (c) Purity
- (d) Charity

³¹⁷ See PP, chaps. 4 and 26; MP.

³¹⁸ VRE, 219-220.

³¹⁹ VRE, 221.

Although James admits that each of these qualities can be taken to pathological extremes, he nevertheless strongly suggests that in harmonious combination they define an ethically ideal human being, at least in the relative sense that a future community comprised of saints would be the best community conceivable.³²⁰

Having thus defined the saint, James introduces Nietzsche's ideal of the "strong type" or "master" as a foil. According to James,

The most inimical critic of the saintly impulses I know is Nietzsche. He contrasts them with the worldly passions as we find these embodied in the predaceous military character, altogether to the advantage of the latter.³²¹

In fact, on James's view, Nietzsche not only dislikes the saint but also finds the saint *threatening*:

For Nietzsche the saint represents little but sneakingness and slavishness. He is the sophisticated invalid, the degenerate *par excellence*, the man of insufficient vitality. His prevalence would put the human type in danger.³²²

James then justifies this interpretation of Nietzsche with a quotation from section 14 of the Third Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, which James himself translates (somewhat loosely) as follows:³²³

³²⁰ VRE, 298–299.

³²¹ VRE, 295.

³²² VRE, 296.

³²³ James admits to having "abridged, and in one place transposed, a sentence" (VRE, 297n24). In fact, James omits two sizeable chunks of text, representing the first one with an ellipsis ("disgust and pity for our human fellows. . . .") and disguising the second one completely by connecting two clauses with a dash that in the original text connects the latter clause to something else. (I.e., "the victorious is hated—as if health" is James's construction, the dash appearing in place of a good deal of omitted text.) For all this, James's translation is

The sick are the greatest danger for the well. The weaker, not the stronger, are the strong's undoing. It is not *fear* of our fellow-man, which we should wish to see diminished; for fear rouses those who are strong to become terrible in turn to themselves, and preserves the hard-earned and successful type of humanity. What is to be dreaded by us more than any other doom is not fear, but rather the great disgust, not fear, but rather the great pity—disgust and pity for our human fellows. . . . The *morbid* are our greatest peril, not the 'bad' men, not the predatory beings. [...] Here is woven endlessly the net of the meanest conspiracies, the conspiracy of those who suffer against those who succeed and are victorious; here the very aspect of the victorious is hated—as if health, success, strength, pride, and the sense of power were in themselves something vicious, for which one ought eventually to make bitter expiation. Oh, how these people would themselves like to inflict the expiation, how they thirst to be the hangmen! And all the while their duplicity never confesses their hatred to be hatred.³²⁴

Thus, Nietzsche claims that the “weak” or “sick,” because of their hateful envy, conspire against the strong in order to drain them of their strength, thereby securing a higher position of power. Although Nietzsche nowhere mentions saints or saintliness in this passage, James clearly believes that Nietzsche would look upon the Jamesian saint as an example of despicable weakness or sickness.

If James is right about this, then he and Nietzsche surely have completely opposed ethical ideals for humanity, such that Nietzsche's role here would seem to be not just that of *foil* but rather of *arch-villain*: Whereas James envisions a future utopia of gentle saints, Nietzsche would seem to value an elitism that tramples on the weak.

not particularly misleading, at least not any more misleading than is inherent in taking Nietzsche's passage out of context in the first place. Here the ellipsis in brackets indicates my own abridgment of James's long quotation.

³²⁴ VRE, 296-297.

4.2.2. *The Irony of James's Reading of Nietzsche*

James's reading is actually ironic because it misses his deep commonalities with Nietzsche. In particular, the Jamesian saint and the Nietzschean master reflect very similar philosophical frameworks and attitudes toward character-formation.

First, it is ironic that James conflates the “two German authors” Nietzsche and Schopenhauer in first the passage quoted above, because here James misses the fact that, as formative as Schopenhauer's work was for Nietzsche, Nietzsche's own favorite reason for citing Schopenhauer was in fact the same as James's: to illustrate an unacceptably passive reaction to the horrors of existence. Nietzsche was in fact at pains to distance himself from Schopenhauer's “resignationist” pessimism, arguing instead for a joyous *Ja-sagen* to life that James himself echoes in the yes-saying of the saint.³²⁵ Unfortunately, James was simply less familiar with Nietzsche than he was with Schopenhauer—whom he once likened to “a dog who would rather see the

³²⁵ See, for example, the “Attempt at a Self-Criticism” that Nietzsche appended to *The Birth of Tragedy*: “How far removed I was from all this resignationism!” (§6). For the yes-saying of the saint, see VRE, 219-220.

world ten times worse than it is, than lose his chance of barking at it”³²⁶—and thus was too quick to place Nietzsche in the ultra-pessimistic Schopenhauerian camp.³²⁷

James and Nietzsche thus actually share an emphasis on being active and constructive in the face of the apparently tragic aspects of existence. Of particular interest from the perspective of the present study is that both thinkers frame this position, not just in relation to Schopenhauer’s pessimism, but also in relation to the evolutionary philosophy of Herbert Spencer. The following two passages in particular are worth considering back to back.³²⁸

Firstly, consider James’s reaction to Spencer’s conception of utopia in “The Dilemma of Determinism” (1884):

Why does the painting of any paradise or utopia, in heaven or on earth, awaken such yawnings for nirvana and escape? The white-robed, harp-playing heaven of our sabbath-schools, and the ladylike tea-table Elysium represented in Mr. Spencer’s *Data of Ethics*, as the final consummation of progress, are exactly on par in this respect—lubberlands, pure and simple, one and all. [...]

³²⁶ Perry (1935) reports on James’s criticism of the idea of constructing a Schopenhauer monument in Frankfurt: “I really *must* decline to stir a finger for the glory of one who studiously lived for no other purpose than to spit upon the lives of the like of me and all those I care for. [...] As for Schopenhauer himself, personally, his loud-mouthed pessimism was that of a dog who would rather see the world ten times worse than it is, than lose his chance of barking at it” (I, 722-724).

³²⁷ Further evidence that James thought of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer as interchangeable—or perhaps that he realized that he should speak of the German philosopher whose work he knew better—is the fact that in the first lecture of *A Pluralistic Universe* James mentions Schopenhauer as an example of a thinker whose philosophy is clearly a consequence of his personal “vision,” even though in his original manuscript he mentions Nietzsche instead (PU, 168).

³²⁸ My attention was drawn to the similarity of these two passages by a remark of Walter Kaufmann’s in a footnote in his translation of Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* (§373 n135).

tedium vitae is the only sentiment they awaken in our breasts. To our crepuscular natures, born for the conflict, the Rembrandtesque moral chiaroscuro, the shifting struggle of the sunbeam in the gloom, such pictures of light upon light are vacuous and expressionless, and neither to be enjoyed nor understood.³²⁹

In this rich passage, James contends that the problem with Spencer's utopia, as with the standard picture of Christian heaven, is that it would be *boring*. Specifically, like the mythical place of leisure referred to in the broadside ballad "An Invitation to Lubberland," it would promote a *tedium vitae* (weariness of life) that, because of its pure and uncontrasted "light," is not suited to our crepuscular (active at dawn or twilight) or chiaroscuro (involving contrast between light and dark) nature.

In fact, James feels so strongly about this point that he goes on to recommend the end of humanity before such a fate:

If *this* be the whole fruit of the victory, we say; if the generations of mankind suffered and laid down their lives; if prophets confessed and martyrs sang in the fire, and all the sacred tears were shed for no other end than that a race of creatures of such unexampled insipidity should succeed, and protract *in saecula saeculorum* [forever] their contented and inoffensive lives—why, at such a rate, better lose than win the battle, or at all events better ring down the curtain before the last act of the play, so that a business that began so importantly may be saved from so singularly flat a winding-up. [...] Not the absence of vice, but vice there, and virtue holding her by the throat, seems the ideal human state.³³⁰

This polemic of James's is remarkably similar to Nietzsche's remarks on Spencer just a couple of years later in Book V of *The Gay Science* (1886):

³²⁹ DD, 130. On the role of the concept of *tedium vitae* in James, see Cotkin (1990), chap. 4.

³³⁰ DD, 130-131.

Take, for example, that pedantic Englishman Herbert Spencer. What makes him ‘enthuse’ in his way and then leads him to draw a line of hope, a horizon of desirability—that eventual reconciliation of ‘egoism and altruism’ about which he raves—almost nauseates the likes of us; a human race that adopted such Spencerian perspectives as its ultimate perspectives would seem to us worthy of contempt, of annihilation!”³³¹

James and Nietzsche thus reject not only Schopenhauer’s “resignationism” in the face of the evils of existence, but also any world in which willful activity would not be positively required of us, such that both would rather see humankind obliterated than to allow for such a Spencerian conclusion to human history.

James and Nietzsche’s point here is intimately related to the concerns about the asymmetrically *externalist* character of Spencer’s evolutionary theory that have been discussed throughout the present study—that is, Spencer’s tendency to explain the features of organisms and populations in an “outside-in” fashion while not allowing for individuals to mold either themselves or the external environment. According to one of James’s letters, for example, “My quarrel with Spencer is not that he makes much of the environment, but that he makes *nothing* of the glaring and patent fact of subjective interests which cooperate with the environment in molding intelligence.”³³² This is much like Nietzsche’s problem with what he understands to be Darwin’s position: “The influence of ‘external circumstances’ is overestimated by Darwin to a ridiculous extent: the essential thing in the life process is precisely the tremendous shaping, form-creating force working from within which *utilizes* and

³³¹ *The Gay Science*, §373.

³³² Cited in Richards (1987), 426-427.

exploits external ‘circumstances.’”³³³ In short, both James and Nietzsche view individuals as active and form-giving beings that are able to shape both themselves and their surrounding worlds; both repudiate forms of explanation that deny this; and both claim that life is essentially worthless if one has no challenges in the face of which to exercise this capacity.

Now consider the irony of James’s use of Nietzsche’s master figure as a foil. Although James is correct that one of Nietzsche’s most striking moves is to claim that the strong need to be defended from the weak, the primary meanings of terms like “strong” and “weak” in Nietzsche’s work are psychological rather than physical. This means that an expression of Nietzschean strength in is not to be equated simplistically, as James does, with predation or physical violence. Such violence is rather the province of Nietzsche’s “blond beast,” which represents an earlier and more brutal type of existence that lives on in some of us as a “hidden core” of potential violence.³³⁴ Although Nietzsche romanticizes the blond beast as a type that existed before the influence of culture, his point in discussing this figure is not that we should revert to a pre-cultural bestial state (*per impossible*). Rather, it is that,

³³³ *The Will to Power*, §657. There is an abundance of literature on Nietzsche’s complex relationship with Darwinism, which I cannot cover here except to say that it is widely agreed that Nietzsche accepted some form of evolutionism (which included, most likely, a Lamarckian element); that Nietzsche heaped scorn unfairly upon Darwin, whom he did not read (or did not read very much, or very carefully); and that “Darwinism” for Nietzsche has more to do with the reception of Darwinism in Germany and also with Spencer. Important recent monographs on Nietzsche’s relationship to evolutionary theory and Darwinism include Moore (2002), Richardson (2004), and Johnson (2010).

³³⁴ *On the Genealogy of Morals* I, §11.

looking into the future, the image of this beast can remind us that it is better to be awed by something terrible than to live insipid or mediocre lives. A central task in interpreting Nietzsche's *Genealogy*, then, consists in determining the sense in which Nietzsche wants people to become terrible, strong, or noble, after we have realized that he is not being straightforward in how he uses such terms.

In my view, the defining characteristic of a Nietzschean master is not violence or domination as such, but rather, as in James's own conception of the individual outlined in Chapter 3, a certain way of integrating activity and passivity. Here it is important to note that activity has a double role in Nietzsche's philosophy: firstly, as spontaneous self-expression in "vigorous, free, joyful" activity;³³⁵ and secondly, as the activity involved in altering one's own habits of thinking and acting, that is, the activity referred in Nietzsche's phrase "to 'give style' to one's character."³³⁶ Activity for Nietzsche therefore denotes both a certain *lack* of control, or spontaneity, and a particular *type* of control, or self-cultivation. The question of when to modulate between these modes of activity—that is, when to intervene in order to encourage or suppress a particular impulse or drive—thus emerges as the central problematic of Nietzsche's ethics (and thus of his entire practically oriented philosophy).

For Nietzsche, asking how best to fashion oneself in this way means pursuing the stated goal of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, which is to find "the solution of the

³³⁵ *On the Genealogy of Morals* I, §7.

³³⁶ *The Gay Science*, §290.

problem of value, the determination of the *order of rank among values*.”³³⁷ In particular, it means taking the perspective that “our organism is an oligarchy,” or a collection of competing forces, in which one needs “to make room for new things, above all for the nobler functions and functionaries, for regulation, foresight, pre-meditation.”³³⁸ Similarly, in *Beyond Good and Evil* (another book that James owned), Nietzsche describes this process as follows:

L’effet c’est moi: what happens here is what happens in every well-constructed and happy commonwealth; namely, the governing class identifies itself with the success of the commonwealth. In all willing it is absolutely a question of commanding and obeying, on the basis as already said, of a social structure composed of many “souls.” Hence a philosopher should claim the right to include willing as such within the sphere of morals—morals being understood as the doctrine of the relations of supremacy under which the phenomenon of “life” comes to be.³³⁹

L’effet c’est moi—the effect is *me*—in the sense that I am the constructed product of the management of my various “souls,” a process which Nietzsche here explicitly claims to be the proper subject matter of moral philosophy.³⁴⁰

Remarkably, on my view, this is exactly the point of James’s *Varieties*, the very book in which James, through a reading of the *Genealogy*, rebukes Nietzsche utterly. Just as the central problematic of Nietzsche’s ethics (and thus of his entire philosophy) is that of how to adjudicate among conflicting impulses, the central

³³⁷ *On the Genealogy of Morals* I, § 17.

³³⁸ *On the Genealogy of Morals* II, § 1.

³³⁹ BGE, § 19.

³⁴⁰ For a treatment of Nietzsche’s conception of the multiplicity of the self (and this self’s relationship to the multiplicity of interpretation), see Hoy (2004), chap. 1.

problematic of James's ethics (and thus of his entire philosophy) is that of deciding when to attending willfully to an idea in the face of the resistance provided by entrenched habits. Nietzsche tends to describe this process in terms of drives (*Triebe*) rather than Jamesian "ideas," but if one recalls that ideas on James's ideo-motor theory are not static or inert but rather ride upon nervous impulses that are channeled through an instinctive/habitual environment, these positions look rather similar.

Although this view in James has its roots in the moral philosophy of *The Principles of Psychology*, it remains in place in the *Varieties*. According to James in the *Varieties*, for example, in everyone "does the normal evolution of character chiefly consist in the straightening out and unifying of the inner self," such that "The higher and lower feelings, the useful and erring impulses [...] must end by forming a stable set of functions in right subordination."³⁴¹ To willfully engage in this process is to fashion one's character, or "centre of energy," where "It makes a great difference to a man whether one set of his ideas, or another, be the centre of his energy."³⁴² Indeed, the saintly quality of purity for James means nothing less than the thoroughgoing resolve to harmonize one's conflicting inner tendencies:

The saintly person becomes exceedingly sensitive to inner inconsistency or discord, and mixture and confusion grow intolerable. All the mind's objects and occupations must be ordered with reference to the special spiritual excitement which is now its keynote.³⁴³

³⁴¹ VRE, 142.

³⁴² VRE, 162.

³⁴³ VRE, 234.

In Jamesian purity, one acts with severity against one's inferior parts, which, as in Nietzsche's philosophy, is a sign of strength. This is why James also defines "weakness of character" as "the inaptitude for these sacrificial moods, of which one's own inferior self and its pet softness must often be the targets and victims."³⁴⁴ Furthermore, in a remark that sounds almost uncannily Nietzschean, James claims that hardness toward oneself is good because "passive happiness is slack and insipid."³⁴⁵

In the end, both James and Nietzsche hold that one's reaction to life, as embodied in the structure of one's character, is the most important and interesting thing about a person, as well as the proper subject matter of philosophy. This shared framework for thinking about ethical self-transformation entails no specific normative position except the following fundamental one: One ought to be highly attentive to such self-transformation and intervene strictly where this seems necessary. Because of this, I would claim, returning to Heikki Kannisto's framework for philosophical anthropology introduced in Chapter 3, that James and Nietzsche both practice a sort of "essentialist" philosophical anthropology (as well as, perhaps more obviously, a sort of "existentialist" one). That is, having built a philosophy around a certain conception of the individual as capable of alternating between passive and active

³⁴⁴ VRE, 214.

³⁴⁵ VRE, 240. This is healthy asceticism, as opposed to a self-negating asceticism, or what Nietzsche would call the "ascetic ideal." On the other extreme, the danger of unthinking *strenuousness* is that of fascism.

modes, both prescribe a high level of attentiveness to the dynamics of such alternation so as to “max-out” one’s essentially human capacity to fashion oneself well. In a sense, to be a Nietzschean master or a Jamesian saint is to be human but *more so*. Thus, if the mark of essentialism in philosophical anthropology is that one prescribes the fulfillment of a normative essence of humanity (as Kannisto suggests), then this description seems not far off the mark here.³⁴⁶

Finally, one should not gloss over the differences between James and Nietzsche, the most important of which in my view is that the former understands individual flourishing as necessarily relative and contextual, such that it can only be realized through the cultivation of social relations, whereas for the latter certain character traits (e.g. “masterly” ones) seem inherently superior to others.³⁴⁷ This can be seen through James’s and Nietzsche’s different reactions to their own rather similar thought experiments.

Just as Nietzsche famously enlists a fictional demon to pose the question of whether the reader could affirm the eternal recurrence of the same life in *The Gay*

³⁴⁶ Admittedly, I am being provocative and loose with the term “essentialism.” Nietzsche admits that even his key idea of the will to power is ultimately an interpretation, and, while James does speak of “essences” in his psychology, he claims that they are provisional and interest-relative (and picked out by the practical skill of “sagacity”) (PP, 957). My point is only that, once James’s and Nietzsche’s pet interpretations of humanity are in place, they act in practice as normative ideals in the sense described above. For Nietzsche as philosophical anthropologist, see Schacht (2006). For James as philosophical anthropologist, see Chapter 3 of the present study and the conclusion of this chapter below.

³⁴⁷ Franzese (2008) argues that James’s criticism of Nietzsche in the *Varieties* is just this: that Nietzsche, unlike James, *rejects* the idea that the worth of a particular character type is necessarily a function of its role in society (194-200). I believe that this is an apt criticism of Nietzsche, although James does not explicitly present it as the crux of his problem with Nietzsche’s views.

Science,³⁴⁸ James asks his audience in *Pragmatism* whether, given a choice by “the world’s author,” they would rather take part in an uncertain universe or simply give up on life:

Should you in all seriousness, if participation in such a world were proposed to you, feel bound to reject it as not safe enough? Would you say that, rather than be part and parcel of so fundamentally pluralistic and irrational a universe, you preferred to relapse into the slumber of nonentity from which you had been momentarily aroused by the tempter’s voice?³⁴⁹

Of course, the preferred answer for both James and Nietzsche is an affirmative one, or what each of them calls “yes-saying” to life.³⁵⁰ In James’s thought experiment, however, the reader is being offered a chance to take part in a *communal* project:

Suppose that the world’s author put the case to you before creation, saying: “I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own ‘level best.’ I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world [...] It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?”³⁵¹

³⁴⁸ *The Gay Science*, §341.

³⁴⁹ P, 139.

³⁵⁰ James, like Nietzsche, also associates a negative response to life with Buddhism: “The hindoo and the buddhist, for this is essentially their attitude, are simply afraid, afraid of more experience, afraid of life” (P, 140).

³⁵¹ P, 139. This hypothetical differs from Nietzsche’s in that (depending on one’s interpretation) Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence may not involve any uncertainty, that is, in James’s terms, any indeterminism (although it may involve epistemic uncertainty). In both thought experiments, however, one is given privileged access to information about the nature of reality that is meant to be challenging in order to test one’s reaction, where the preferred reaction is one of affirmation.

Unlike Nietzsche in his unapologetic elitism, James is asking his reader to partake in a collaborative project, assuming, optimistically, that the majority of humanity is up to the task of constructing a worthwhile society in and through their respective self-constructions. Indeed, James's whole justification for granting the saint an ethically preferred status in the *Varieties* lies in the saint's projected function within an ideal society: According to James, only a society of saints could produce the kind of life most amenable to human flourishing,³⁵² and it is the saint-like among us today who lead us toward this society, as "impregnators of the world, vivifiers and animaters of potentialities of goodness."³⁵³ Obviously, given James's criticisms of Spencer's utopia, such an ideal future society would not lack opportunities for strenuous moral action.

4.2.3. Summary

Although James and Nietzsche were contemporaries who shared a range of sweeping criticisms of the philosophical tradition, as well as similarly radical practical reorientations of philosophy, they did not substantially influence each other's work. Scholars have also not done a great deal to bring them together in the

³⁵² VRE, 298.

³⁵³ VRE, 285. Compare Nietzsche's remark in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that the internalization of animal instincts at the inception of human society created an animal that "was something so new, profound, unheard of, enigmatic, contradictory, and pregnant with a future that the aspect of the earth essentially altered" (II, §16).

century since their deaths. Here I have argued that in his one attempt at a substantive analysis of Nietzsche, which comes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James reads Nietzsche uncharitably and with seemingly no awareness of their shared philosophical framework. This framework, I have argued, is one in which the central ethical (and thus the central *philosophical*) question is that of how to organize one's character by way of giving assent (or not) to impulses or ideas, which I have also characterized as the project of cultivating an attentiveness to one's alternation between active and passive modes of existence.

4.3. James and Husserl on Temporality

In this section, I compare James's and Edmund Husserl's accounts of temporality, focusing on the similarities between their conceptions of the extended present moment and their different treatments of the punctuate Now. Here I argue that James is right to avoid positing a perceived immediate present. This reading thus draws attention to another connection between James and Continental thought, while addressing a side of James that has been of some interest in the phenomenological literature.³⁵⁴

4.3.1. James's Specious Present

³⁵⁴ See Wilshire (1968), Kersten (1969), Miller (1984), Edie (1987), Hoy (2009), and Andersen and Grush (2010).

Although Husserl is careful to distinguish his phenomenology, an *a priori* science of the essential structures of consciousness, from psychology, the science that treats the mind as a natural object and seek correlations between physiological processes and mental states, Husserl's account of temporality nonetheless bears some resemblance to William James's account of temporality in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), which in fact influenced it. Here I begin with James.

James's description of the experience of the present in the *Principles* is well known:

In short, the practically cognized present is no knife-edge but a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions into time. The unit of composition of our perception of time is a duration, with a bow and a stern, as it were—a rearward- and forward-looking end. It is only as parts of this *duration-block* that the relation of *succession* of one end to the other is perceived. We do not first feel one end and then feel the other after it, and from the perception of the succession infer an interval of time between, but we seem to feel the interval of time as a whole, with its two ends embedded in it.³⁵⁵

Citing “E. R. Clay,” James calls this notion of the present as inherently durational the “specious present.”³⁵⁶ The point here is that we do not experience a succession of

³⁵⁵ PP, 574.

³⁵⁶ According to Andersen and Grush (2010), “E. R. Clay” is actually a pseudonym for E. Robert Kelly, an amateur philosopher who published an anonymous work called *The Alternative: A New Study in Psychology*. E. Robert Kelly's son, Edmond Kelly, was a friend of James's. This manner of thinking about time precedes both Kelly and James, however. See Miller (1984) for an account of the concept of the specious present in German experimental psychology (163).

times and then, in a separate act, collect them together as the specious present, but rather, “The experience is from the outset a synthetic datum, not a simple one.”³⁵⁷ Notably, the just-past part of the specious present is distinct from memory proper, which occurs after the entirety of a present experience has elapsed and requires a distinct act of recollection.

The specious present for James can only be analyzed into parts through reflection, separating the retrospective “echo” of the recent past from the anticipatory “fore-taste” of the future. Interestingly, when one does this, one finds that the “strict present” is only an ideal meeting point, something that we never perceive at all:

It is, in fact, an altogether ideal abstraction not only never realized in sense, but probably never even conceived of by those unaccustomed to philosophic meditation. Reflection leads us to the conclusion that it *must* exist, but that it *does* exist can never be a fact of our immediate experience.³⁵⁸

Thus, James claims that the (putative) immediate present is not in fact perceived but rather is only a posit made in reflection. As a result, I would argue James’s specious present is in fact a two-part rather than a three-part structure, consisting only of the immediate past abutting the immediate future; one might also call it the experienced flow of the future into the past, which is more fluvial and thus keeps more in line with James’s famous “stream of consciousness” (or “stream of thought”) metaphor. In any case, to call this a tripartite structure would be to posit a strange hybrid of an immediately perceived duration and a hypothetical point cooked up only in reflection.

³⁵⁷ PP, 574.

³⁵⁸ PP, 573.

4.3.2. Husserl's Tripartite Present

In his lectures of the early twentieth century collected as *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, Husserl provides a sophisticated phenomenological analysis of lived time. Here, having read the *Principles*, Husserl follows James in holding that we are not so blinkered in our experience of time that we only experience a train of punctuate Nows. If it were, we would not be able to experience duration, and the experience of temporal objects such as melodies would be impossible for us. Rather, according to Husserl, our experience of the present has a three-part structure: firstly, a *retention* of the immediate past; secondly, a *protention* of the immediate future, and thirdly, the “primal impression” where protention and retention meet. Therefore, Husserl does not claim that we perceive the series of Nows that make up, for example, a melody, and then add them together in a separate act of recollection, but rather that we experience the melody by maintaining in consciousness the just-past notes, while receiving a new primal impression and also portending, in however vague a fashion, what is to come (thus allowing us to be surprised by a new perception, e.g. an out-of-key note). Also as in James, the just-past part of the present is distinct from memory proper (sometimes called “secondary memory” by Husserl), which requires a distinct act.

Unlike James, however, Husserl gives the Now (or primal impression) a decidedly privileged role, claiming that it is the ultimate source of sensation and thus

of meaning. Thus, for example, any recalled object for Husserl is dated as having once been “now,” and in this way bears the stamp of its passing through the gates of primal impression. As opposed to retention and protention, which can only react to primal impression, primal impression is therefore “something absolutely unmodified, the primal source of all further consciousness and being.”³⁵⁹ Similarly, although Husserl says that retention and protention are perceptions only in a qualified sense, he claims that perception, ideally, “would be the phase of consciousness that constitutes the pure now.”³⁶⁰ Therefore, if we take Husserl at his word regarding the privileged place of primal impression, and if we take Husserl’s phenomenology to be the project of going back to the world as it is given in perception, then the most immediate or purest place to which to return for Husserl would seem to be primal impression.

On the other hand, Husserl, like James, admits that the primal impression is relative to, and cannot exist apart from, both protention and retention:

But the now is precisely only an ideal limit, something abstract, which can be nothing by itself. Moreover, it remains to be said that even this ideal now is not something *toto coelo* different from the not-now but is continuously mediated with it. And to this corresponds the continuous transition of perception into primary memory.³⁶¹

Husserl also admits, like James, the Now’s utterly evasive quality:

³⁵⁹ §31, p. 70. For Husserl’s lecture notes I include section numbers, as well as page numbers for the 1991 edition I have consulted (not to be confused with Husserl’s original page numbers).

³⁶⁰ §16, p. 42.

³⁶¹ §16, p. 42.

If in some way we divide this continuum into two adjoining parts, then the part that includes the now or is capable of constituting it is distinguished from the other part and constitutes the “rough” now; as soon as we divide this rough now further, it in turn immediately breaks down into a finer now and a past, and so on.³⁶²

Alas, the kernel of primal impression slips away whenever one attempts to grasp it by peeling away its encasing protention and retention: Or, as James says, the present moment, like a caught snowflake, “has melted in our grasp, fled ere we could touch it.”³⁶³

As a result, rather than identifying (true) perception with some *content* of primal impression, Husserl is really claiming that perception is the possession of an *ideal limit* between protention and retention. Because of this, I think that Husserl is exactly right to say that primal impression “has as its content that which the word ‘now’ signifies.”³⁶⁴ This is because I would follow Hegel’s claim in the “Sense-Certainty” section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* that “now” has *no* content when used ostensively in an attempt to pick out a particular as such—that is, in Husserl’s framework, a sensation from primal impression that has undergone no “modification.”

In short, I believe that Husserl is trying to have it both ways by retaining some (unperceived) content for primal impression, which is supposed to be epistemically

³⁶² §16, p. 42.

³⁶³ PP, 573.

³⁶⁴ §31, p. 70.

primordial, while also (correctly) denying that one can isolate any content at such a point. Thus, it would seem that if Husserl is to save the primal impression as necessary or foundational, it must be as something that is not perceived but rather as something that must be inferred. By this I do not mean merely that he would need to make the claim, made by James, that we find it natural to infer, in retrospect, a punctuate Now, but rather the decidedly *transcendental* claim that there must be a primal impression in order for experience to be possible in the first place. Such a primal impression would not be an item of experience at all, but rather a condition for the possibility of experience.

4.3.3. *Comparison*

It will be instructive to close by considering more broadly the difference between James's psychology and Husserlian phenomenology. Although James reports what he finds in introspection, he also assumes a methodological naturalism and thus has recourse to a neuro-physiological level of explanation. For example, James may argue that old neural signals take time to "fade out," in an analog fashion, in order to make sense of the phenomenological fact that the just-past phase of the specious present fades away and overlaps with a just-dawning one. Where introspection ends, therefore, James may speculate about neuroscience, or draw upon the actual findings of such science. Husserl, on the other hand, claims to be doing something deeper than scientific psychology and which in fact could not possibly be

informed by such psychology. As result, if he wants to provide truly complete explanations of phenomena, Husserl might be compelled to postulate transcendental structures that are neither instrospectible nor explicable in causal-etiological terms. Husserl cannot account for the structure of time by claiming, for example, that there is some brain process X at work here, since this would be to assume objective time in accounting for subjective time, which would be to take the stance of the “natural attitude” that includes only one constrained region of sense within the greater horizon of the life-world.

Given that Husserl is a phenomenologist, should he posit primal impression?

It is important to keep in mind here that for Husserl to claim that one must infer primal impression is to say something stronger than for James to claim that people simply will tend to infer such a thing. This is because Husserl is not at all an instrumentalist, as James was, about theories. On the contrary, Husserl would be claiming that primal impression is really there, and moreover that it is universally and necessarily there.³⁶⁵

4.3.4. Summary

³⁶⁵ I have not here leveled the critique that Husserl is guilty of what some would call the “metaphysics of presence,” although such a critique is arguably appropriate here given that Husserl seeks to ground sense and meaning in single phase of the present. For a defense of Husserl against this charge, however, see Zahavi (2003), 93-98.

James's wager, is that there are indefinitely many ways to "go back to the things themselves;" that there is promise in pragmatist instrumentalism and in understanding different methods (such as phenomenology and psychology) as complementary rather than as vying for foundational status; and that we should refrain from positing inexplicable and contentless structures as universal and necessary. In my view, James belief that the Now may be posited in reflection (and then still may be the name of nothing), as opposed to Husserl's claim that the Now is perception proper, seems appropriate.

4.4. Vicious Intellectualism: James on Hegel's Idealism

Although James devotes substantial energy to defining his position in contrast to the views of Hegel and Anglophone idealists, little attention has been paid to James's specific arguments against Hegel.³⁶⁶ Here I assess what I take to be James most serious and interesting charge against Hegel, which is that of "vicious intellectualism," or of taking concepts to exclude the reality of everything that they do not positively include. According to James, Hegel can only generate the dynamic movement of his dialectical method by way of the erroneous assumption that concepts exclude or "negate" everything not immanent to them, such that other

³⁶⁶ A notable exception is Morse (2005). I depart from Morse in my focus on the *Encyclopaedia Logic* rather than the *Phenomenology of Spirit*; in my consideration of James's early essay "On Some Hegelianisms," in addition to *A Pluralistic Universe*; and of course in the content of my argument. I return to Morse briefly below.

concepts must “negate” them back. In opposition, James views concepts as practical tools, which need not be viewed as attempting to capture absolute truth.

4.4.1. Vicious Abstractionism, AKA Vicious Intellectualism

Central to James’s later writings are his concepts of “vicious abstractionism” and “vicious intellectualism.” These two phrases, which I take to be synonymous, refer to an intellectual practice that James considers to be “one of the great original sins of the rationalistic mind”:³⁶⁷ namely, that of treating concepts as exhaustive of, or containing the full truth of, the reality that they purport to explain.

James defines vicious abstractionism in “Abstractionism and ‘Relativismus’” (1909), for example, as follows:

Let me give the name of ‘vicious abstractionism’ to a way of using concepts which may be thus described: We conceive a concrete situation by singling out some salient or important feature in it, and classing it under that; then instead of adding to its previous characters all the positive consequences which the new way of conceiving it may bring, we proceed to use our concept privatively; reducing the originally rich phenomenon to the naked suggestions of that name abstractly taken, treating it as a case of ‘nothing but’ that concept, and acting as if all the other characters from our of which the concept is abstracted were expunged.³⁶⁸

Notice that James’s problem here is not with concepts as such, which are useful because they allows us to recognize useful patterns in the world, thus allowing us to

³⁶⁷ MT, 136.

³⁶⁸ MT, 135-136.

“hop, skip and jump over the surface of life at a vastly rapider rate than if we merely waded through the thickness of particulars as accident rained them down upon our heads.”³⁶⁹ To commit vicious abstractionism, however, is to go beyond this sound positive function of concepts in order to use them “privatively,” that is, in a way that posits a lack or privation in the world for the sake of a false simplicity. In an extreme case, one may become so enamored of concepts—whether because of their practical utility or, as with Platonism, because of their seemingly eternal and formal character—that one treats a certain favored set of concepts as comprehensive of reality itself.

Similarly, in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1907), James claims that “The treating of a name as excluding from the fact named what the name’s definition fails positively to include, is what I call ‘vicious intellectualism’.”³⁷⁰ Although James here writes in terms of “names” rather than concepts, his point is the same: To name something here is to place it in a category, which is of course *not* to place it any number of other possible categories. According to James,

Intellectualism in the vicious sense began when Socrates and Plato taught that what a thing really is, is told us by its *definition*. Ever since Socrates we have been taught that reality consists of essences, not of appearances, and that the essences of things are known whenever we know their definitions. So first we identify the thing with a concept and then we identify the concept with a definition, and only then, inasmuch as the thing *is* whatever the definition expresses, are we sure of apprehending the real essence of it or the full truth

³⁶⁹ MT, 134.

³⁷⁰ PU, 32.

about it.³⁷¹

James's point is that we need not conceive of a particular act of categorization as excluding the possibility of other categorizations, and still less that the concept invoked in a given categorization should be treated as somehow exhaustive of the phenomenon it is being used to describe. This judgment on James's part reflects his key pragmatist dictum that concepts are practical tools rather than epistemological adequations to reality or metaphysical constituents thereof.³⁷²

James claims that the worst perpetrator of vicious intellectualism is not Plato but Hegel, to whom I turn now, focusing on his *Encyclopaedia Logic*.

4.4.2. Hegel's *Encyclopaedia Logic*

The *Encyclopaedia Logic* is the first of the three volumes of Hegel's *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline*.³⁷³ In order to differentiate it from Hegel's distinct work *The Science of Logic*, the *Encyclopaedia Logic* is

³⁷¹ PU, 99.

³⁷² Rasmus Grønfeldt Winther's concept of "pernicious reification" in the philosophy of science is a good example of a descendent of James's vicious abstractionism (or vicious intellectualism). Winther applies this concept, for example, in urging that competing models should be viewed as complementary in the study of consciousness and in evolutionary and developmental biology. See Winther (forthcoming), Winther (2006), Winther (2011), and Kaplan and Winther (forthcoming).

³⁷³ The *Encyclopedia Logic* was published first in 1817 and then in expanded editions in 1827 and 1830. I am working, as James did, with an English translation of the 1830 edition. Since my 1991 translation of this edition represents an improvement upon James's 1873 one, however, I will quote from the former edition unless otherwise noted.

sometimes referred to as the “Shorter Logic” or “Smaller Logic.” Here I will refer to the *Encyclopedia Logic* simply as the *Logic* for ease of reference.³⁷⁴

The sort of logic that Hegel discusses in the *Logic* is best understood as a radical development of the transcendental logic of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Unlike formal logic in Kant’s system, which concerns the form of thought only, transcendental logic concerns the way in which the world of knowable objects comes to be given. In a broad sense, this is as true for Kant as it is for Hegel. Hegel’s radical move, however, is to broaden the role of transcendental logic from that of producing objects for finite knowers to producing knowledge absolutely. That is, whereas transcendental logic for Kant is about how finite intellects come to constitute objects of empirical knowledge in the delimited phenomenal realm only, logic for Hegel is about the movement through which the world itself develops and thereby expresses what Hegel calls the Absolute Idea. Thus, according to Hegel, “Logic is the science of the pure Idea,” such that

The Idea is thinking, not as formal thinking, but as the self-developing totality of its own peculiar determinations and laws, which thinking does not already *have* and find given within itself, but which it gives to itself.³⁷⁵

In other words, logic for Hegel is the science of the self-development of thinking, but the story of the self-development of thinking in this sense is also the story of the development of the world, especially insofar as the world generates increasingly

³⁷⁴ For more on this work in the context of Hegel’s life’s work, see Hegel (1830/1991), Translator’s Preface.

³⁷⁵ *Logic*, §19.

adequate versions of truth through increasingly adequate expressions of the Idea.

The specific ways in which the Idea is exhibited in the world are explained in the second volume of the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, the *Philosophy of Nature*; and the peculiar manner in which the Idea returns to itself in a fuller state of self-realization is explained in the third volume, the *Philosophy of Spirit*. The purpose of the *Logic*, which again is my focus here, is to set the stage for all of this action by exhibiting the nature of the dynamic process through which the Idea expresses itself in all cases.

There is a particular structure of three logical aspects or “moments” that is ubiquitous in Hegel’s system, including in the *Logic*:

With regard to its form, the *logical* has three sides: (α) *the side of abstraction or of the understanding*, (β) *the dialectical or negatively rational side* [and] (γ) *the speculative or positively rational one*.³⁷⁶

Hegel believes that this structure is exhibited by everything logically real, and the laying bare of this structure is the goal of what Hegel calls, after the third moment, his “speculative method” (often later referred to as the “dialectic method”). In the first moment, the understanding attempts to grasp a specific determination among other determinations in order to get at its truth immediately. However, this effort is frustrated because the full truth of any determination is shown only to exist through other, opposing determinations. This situation necessitates the second moment, which is “the self-sublation of these finite determinations on their own part, and their

³⁷⁶ *Logic*, §79.

passing into their opposites.”³⁷⁷ This is the “dialectical” moment in which anything finite is shown to imply its own self-sublation, that is, its lack of self-sufficiency and need to pass into its own “negation” in order to express its truth. Finally, in the speculative moment, the opposing determinations are brought together under a higher unity, which is “positively rational” in the sense that it realizes the fuller truth implicit in the apparent opposition.³⁷⁸

These three logical moments are exhibited by Hegel’s system even at the highest level, represented by the three volumes of the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*: Through its self-developing thinking (*Logic*), the Idea comes to *other* itself in nature (*Nature*), before coming back home to itself fully realized (*Spirit*). This highest-level application of the triadic logic is peculiar only in that the Absolute is infinite in the sense of having no external other, which means that the second moment requires act of *self*-othering rather than the bringing into opposition of already-separate, opposite determinations.

A result of this framework is that the truth of any given determination for Hegel is only fully expressed in the fully realized Absolute Idea. That everything real is only real in this peculiar manner is the basis of Hegel’s metaphysical system of

³⁷⁷ *Logic*, §81.

³⁷⁸ *Logic*, §82. Abraham Stone (personal conversation) has brought it to my attention that this triadic structure has a predecessor in the ontology of neo-Platonic philosophy of the third and fourth centuries A.D. According to Proclus, for example, anything can be considered (1) in its permanence (by itself), (2) in its procession (emanating out of itself), and (3) in its reversion (returning back to itself). In Kant and Hegel these appear as logical “moments,” structuring Kant’s table of categories and (as just described) Hegel’s speculative method.

objective idealism, including his claim that everything is “for” the absolute.

4.4.3. James’s Critique of Hegel

James credits Hegel with bringing to the Anglophone world a certain “expansion and freedom” from classical British empiricism,³⁷⁹ especially through his vision that there is “a dialectic movement in things” such that “whatever equilibriums our finite experiences attain to are but provisional.”³⁸⁰ James thinks that this insight can be better stated in different terms, however, and the primary function of Hegelian absolute idealism in James’s writings is that of a foil for James’s own pluralistic empiricism. My concern, once again, is with James’s charge that Hegel is guilty of vicious intellectualism: the “rationalistic sin” of taking concepts to exclude the reality of everything that they do not positively include.

Vicious intellectualism, broadly construed, applies to anyone who claims to be able to substitute a single conceptual structure for reality. To be guilty of vicious intellectualism in this sense is not remarkable but rather quite common in the history of philosophy. (In fact, James, along with Nietzsche, stands out in his time for holding instead that reality can suffer indefinitely many re-descriptions and may have no privileged description.) Hegel is thus guilty of vicious intellectualism because, for

³⁷⁹ OH, 196.

³⁸⁰ PU, 45.

all of the historicism about the development of thinking—spelled out, for example, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807)—he nonetheless presumes to have attained a supra-historical vantage point from which to exhibit the very truth of this process (although Hegel might prefer to say that this process has in fact figured out how to express itself through *him*). This is why Hegel does not just claim that the world can be described according to his logic, but rather that logic as he describes it comprises “the absolute form of the truth and, even more than that, also the pure truth itself.”³⁸¹

Interestingly, however, Hegel seems to provide a special case of vicious intellectualism. Although James does not himself express it in this way, I would claim that here it is not Hegel but *Hegel’s concepts* that are guilty. In other words, not only does Hegel already commit vicious intellectualism by claiming to have a uniquely correct description of reality, but in providing this description he also posits concepts that *enact* vicious intellectualism as an essential feature of his system. Consider, for example, the following passage from *A Pluralistic Universe*:

Now Hegel himself, in building up his method of double-negation, offers the vividest possible example of this vicious intellectualism. Every idea of a finite thing is of course a concept of *that* thing and not a concept of anything else. But Hegel treats this not being a concept of anything else as if it were *equivalent to the concept of anything else not being*, or in other words as if it were a denial or negation of everything else. Then, as the other things, thus implicitly contradicted by the thing first conceived, also by the same law contradict *it*, the pulse of the dialectic commences to beat and the famous triads begin to grind out the cosmos.³⁸²

³⁸¹ *Logic* §19.

³⁸² PU, 52.

Here one might say that Hegel ascribes to concepts an extraordinary *presumptuousness*: Each of the three moments of the logic represents an attempt to express the full truth, which is of course impossible because truth is only fully realized in the Absolute Idea. However, although concepts for Hegel are always in this sense over-reaching themselves, the movement generated in doing so provides the productive tension needed to spur the system toward a fuller expression of the Absolute. In James's words, Hegel needs the concept of a particular thing to be "equivalent to the concept of anything else not being," because he needs the concept to puff itself up in this way in order to get his metaphysical machinery running.

Remarkably, what Hegel's concepts are doing here *just is* vicious intellectualism for James. That is, in their attempt to be self-sufficient by grasping a particular determination in the first moment of the speculative method, they attempt unsuccessfully to capture all of a reality that necessarily exceeds them. Thus, the interesting thing about Hegel's vicious intellectualism in particular is that it involves positing concepts that could themselves be described as viciously intellectual in their logical behavior; and that, although Hegel sees that vicious abstractionism does not work for concepts (in that their putative self-sufficiency is always negated), he does not apply this lesson to himself (believing rather than he is laying bare the Absolute Idea wherein self-sufficiency ultimately resides).

The role of concepts on James's view is much homelier. For James, to grasp a particular determination is only to bring concepts to bear on the world in a manner that is hopefully useful. To apply a concept in a given situation is not to attempt to

assert a uniquely metaphysically correct perspective on the matter at hand, and still less to attempt to short-circuit the path toward some Absolute by denying the need for other mediating concepts that might end up aiding being necessary. One's understanding might "fail" in that one might need to utilize different concepts in order better to serve one's ends, but there is no absolute sense in which one could be said to have gotten at the truth of a determination and thus no absolute sense in which one could be said to have failed. In fact, if there is a first "moment" to James's method, it contains already within it an *acknowledgment* of its own finite perspective.³⁸³

4.4.4. Morse's Analysis

One roadblock to a fair assessment of James's critique of Hegel is that the radical differences between the two philosophers make it difficult to take sides without begging important questions at the outset. Indeed, James is aware that his critique of Hegel is as much a plea for a new philosophical orientation as it is a knockdown argument that will be convincing to a committed Hegelian.

Don Morse facing this problem by pitting James and Hegel against each other on a field where they both might agree to battle: immediate sensory experience.³⁸⁴

³⁸³ On this last point see Morse (2005), 206.

³⁸⁴ Morse (2005).

Because James and Hegel both make claims about the characteristics of immediate experience, Morse reasons, such experience could then provide neutral ground from which to assess the validity of James's critique of Hegel's (supposed) vicious intellectualism. The crux of Morse's argument is that Hegel is incorrect in the "Sense-Certainty" chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to claim that in sensation an immediate thing presents itself as discrete and lacking in connections to other things, whereas James is correct in *Essays in Radical Empiricism* to claim that any given part of sensation always-already contains rich connections to other parts of experience.³⁸⁵ That is, whereas Hegel is stuck in an outmoded Humean sense-atomism, believing in the *existence* of atomistic sense-experiences but then judging these to be deficient and in need of supplementation, James rightly denies the existence of atomistic sense-experiences, believing instead that different parts of experience always exist *durcheinander*, or in and through one another. In short, any given sense-experience for James is already, in a sense, its own other, thus removing the need for Hegel's speculative method to provide an other *for* it.³⁸⁶

My concern with Morse's interpretation is that James's idea that sense-experience presents us with a flux of already-interrelated things is as much a bit of inscrutable metaphysics as Hegel's claim that immediate sense-experience is an

³⁸⁵ I would add that this view is already in place in the "Stream of Thought" chapter of the *Principles of Psychology*. For a reading of James that strongly connects the sensation of the *Principles* with the pure experience of *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, see Cooper (2002).

³⁸⁶ See especially Morse (2005), 208-211.

attempt to grasp distinct things and to know them by themselves. The problem with the appeal to immediate experience is of course that its very immediacy rules out its discursive intelligibility. On the one hand, one could say with Hegel that immediate sensation is a shoddy sort of thing, although its relations may reveal a greater truth. As Hegel says in the *Logic*, “*what cannot be said*—feeling, sensation—is not what is most important, most true, but what is most insignificant, most untrue.”³⁸⁷ On the other hand, one could say with James that it is a richly interwoven texture that already contains within itself its many different potential ways of being pulled apart. One is free to say many things, given the muteness of the putative tribunal of immediate experience.

Rather than appealing to immediate experience, I prefer to support James by focusing on a point that he makes against Hegel first in an early essay that Morse does not discuss: “On Some Hegelianisms” (1882). Here James argues, against Hegel, that the different parts of the world are related to each other just insofar as they seem to be, and are not related to each other just insofar as they seem not to be. This means that there is not necessarily anything about an act of knowledge that implies a greater expansive movement toward a fully comprehensive knowledge of everything, whether in the individual mind or as a part of some greater metaphysical process:

To me this view seems deeply probable. Things cohere, but this act of cohesion itself implies but few conditions, and leaves the rest of their qualifications indeterminate. As the first three notes of a tune comport many endings, all melodious, but the tune has not been named till a particular

³⁸⁷ *Logic* §20.

ending has actually come.³⁸⁸

This viewpoint does not force an overarching coherence on the universe, on one's thought, or on some postulated super-personal thought expressed in the world. Rather, the world is left loose and full of possibilities. As James also says later in *A Pluralistic Universe*,

*Reality MAY exist in distributive form, in the shape not of an all but of a set of eaches, just as it seems to—this is the anti-absolutist hypothesis. Prima facie there is this in favor of the eaches, that they are at any rate real enough to have made themselves at least appear to everyone, whereas the absolute has as yet appeared immediately to only a few mystics, and indeed to them very ambiguously.*³⁸⁹

To be fair, this is not a positive disproof of Hegel's view (whatever such a disproof might look like), but rather only willful pushing back against the rationalist tendency to explain parts in terms of postulated wholes, and especially to claim that reality *must* be so explained. Perhaps one could call this an appeal to Ockham's Razor, if one takes this principle to proscribe multiplying kinds of entities beyond necessity; if one can make sense of the world without the Absolute and its attendant greedy concepts, then let us do without them. In any event, this strikes me as a more persuasive way to critique Hegel than to appeal to a type of experience that is putatively immediate but which actually tends to serve as a convenient place to posit one's favorite metaphysical structures with impunity.

Finally, consider a curious aside that James appends to the close of "On Some

³⁸⁸ OH, 201.

³⁸⁹ PU, 62.

Hegelianisms.” Here James sincerely advises that the best way to understand Hegel is to reading him after inhaling nitrous oxide. After inhaling the gas, James claims, he was able to experience a great “metaphysical illumination” in which Hegel’s logic seemed to him true, in particular because of how concepts seemed to follow upon one another and interpenetrate in his subjective experience. Upon recovering from the experience, however, James had the following to say:

My conclusion is that the togetherness of things in a common world, the law of sharing, of which I have said so much, may, when perceived, engender a very powerful emotion; that Hegel was so unusually susceptible to this emotion throughout his life that its gratification became his supreme end, and made him tolerably unscrupulous as to the means he employed [...] finally, that the identification of contradictories, so far from being the self-developing process which Hegel supposes, is really a self-consuming process, passing from less to the more abstract, and terminating either in a laugh at the ultimate nothingness, or in a mood of vertiginous amazement at a meaningless infinity.³⁹⁰

In other words, in spiraling “upwards” into every-higher realms of abstraction, Hegel’s dialectical idealism becomes, for James, meaningless. This is because, as with Husserl’s primal impression, Hegel’s Absolute Idea represents the ultimate in contentless abstraction—which is puzzling to a philosopher who believes that the sole function of a concept is to reorient us as we repeatedly re-submerge into the *plenum* of experience.

4.4.5. Summary

³⁹⁰ OH, 221.

James accuses Hegel of vicious intellectualism, or the sin of taking concepts to exclude everything that they do not positively include. The interesting thing about Hegel's vicious intellectualism is that he does not only claim to have a uniquely correct vision of reality—as in all work-a-day vicious intellectualism—but that he actually posits concepts that seem (to put the point anthropomorphically) to enact vicious intellectualism through over-reaching their capacities for capturing truth. Against More, I have argued that the real strength of James's critique of Hegel lies not in an appeal to immediate experience but rather in showing that nothing becomes more intelligible by accepting Hegel's logic. If, as James suggests, there is indeed a perceived “dialectical” movement in the world, then we should say that this is a result of the dynamics of natural systems, including finite cognitive ones, and not because of the unfolding of an immanent logical order or an infinite Absolute Idea.

4.5. Philosophical Anthropology Redux

I would like to conclude by returning to the idea that James practices a kind of philosophical anthropology. As described in Chapter 3, “philosophical anthropology” can refer either to a specific school of twentieth-century German thought or, more broadly, to any attempt to specify in general terms what human beings are or what they are doing in the world. Thus far, focusing on the latter sense of the term, I have claimed that James's philosophical anthropology is *naturalist* in that it is informed by his researches into physiology and psychology; that it is *culturalist* in that it

understands truth as a communal and as unable to provide an interest-free transcript of reality (the value of which would be unclear in any event); that it is *existentialist* in that it has at its core a mechanism of individual self-creation (in a specifically selectionist sense); and even that it is *essentialist* in that James posits a normative ideal of strenuous moral living that is based upon the special self-fashioning capacities of human beings.³⁹¹ However, here I would like to make some brief remarks about James's philosophical anthropology in comparison with the German tradition of philosophical anthropology (*philosophische Anthropologie*) in particular.³⁹²

Philosophische Anthropologie was a school of philosophy that existed in Europe for several decades beginning in the 1920s, whose chief proponents included Max Scheler, Helmuth Pleßner, Arnold Gehlen, and Ernst Cassirer. The founding works of this tradition are generally considered to be Scheler's "Die Sonderstellung des Menschen" (1927) and Pleßner's *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch: Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (1928), which, although they were

³⁹¹ Again, "essentialism" is here tempered by the fact that essences on James's psychology are practical and provisional. What makes this position essentialist (in Kannisto's sense given in Chapter 3) is just that the essence (provisionally) posited is normative.

³⁹² I am not here interested in drawing lines of historical influence between James and *philosophische Anthropologie*. I have not found evidence that James was an important figure for the German tradition, whereas the other direction of influence is precluded by the fact that James died in 1910. Of course, both James and *philosophische Anthropologie* may have been influenced by the same sources, for example, Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, which James read while studying psychology in Germany in 1867; see Perry (1935) I, 512-513. See also Franzese (2008).

conceived independently of one another, each employed the term “philosophical anthropology.” Unlike the establishment neo-Kantianism that had dominated German academia from the late nineteenth-century up until that point, *philosophische Anthropologie* took as focus not mind, subjectivity, or rationality, but rather the fully embodied human organism situated in the world. It therefore drew upon psychology, anthropology, and the bio-medical sciences, in addition to phenomenological analysis, in order to provide co-ordinate and convergent perspectives on human existence.³⁹³

The robustly interdisciplinary standpoint of *philosophische Anthropologie* differentiated it from two other schools of European philosophy that emerged around the same time and which came to overshadow it, especially in the Anglophone world: phenomenology and existentialism. Whereas phenomenology, in both its Husserlian and Heideggerian forms, was supposed to be more fundamental than the sciences that it sought to ground,³⁹⁴ existentialism, especially in its Sartrean guise, did not consider the specifics of our physical or cultural embodiment important for understanding the nature of human subjectivity and freedom. As a result, *philosophische Anthropologie*

³⁹³ Cassirer, for example, drew upon Estonian “bio-semiotician” Jakob von Uexküll’s idea that an organism’s *Bauplan* (basic body type) specifies its *Umwelt* (lived world), arguing that the human being has developed cultural *Umwelten* in addition to its anatomical one. For more on this history, included a detailed analysis of Cassirer’s philosophical anthropology, see Krois (2005).

³⁹⁴ Indeed, in *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger claims to be laying the groundwork for any possible philosophical anthropology through an investigation into fundamental ontology. Notably, *philosophische Anthropologie* has more in common with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s embodied phenomenology than Heidegger’s, and indeed Merleau-Ponty is sometimes listed as a philosophical anthropologist.

was arguably the stronghold of non-foundationalist, non-reductive naturalism in twentieth-century Continental philosophy—a title that in the Anglophone world belongs to pragmatism.

I have already begun to suggest something of the kinship between James and *philosophische Anthropologie* above: James employs subtle introspective analyses without seeking to ground science in phenomenology (unlike Husserl); and he portrays freedom as gaining its particular quality from the dynamics of natural systems (unlike Sartrean existentialism). James's philosophical anthropology centers on a uniquely human kind of free self-creation, described in both phenomenological and physiological terms, where these different perspectives are viewed as mutually supportive rather than as competing for foundational status.

James seems to support something like this kind of philosophical anthropology in the following letter to Harvard president Charles Eliot in 1875, in which he characterizes a “real science of man”:

A real science of man is now being built up out of the theory of evolution and the facts of archaeology, the nervous system, and the senses. It has already a vast material extent, the papers and magazines are full of essays and articles having more or less to do with it. The question is shall students be left to the magazines, on the one hand, and to what languid attention professors educated in the exclusively literary way can pay to the subject? Or shall the College employ a man whose scientific training fits him fully to realize the force of all the natural history arguments, whilst his concomitant familiarity with writers of a more introspective kind preserves him from certain crudities of reasoning which are extremely common in men of the laboratory pure and simple?

Apart from all reference to myself, it is my firm belief that the College cannot possibly have psychology taught as a living science by anyone who has not a first-hand acquaintance with the facts of nervous physiology. On the other hand, no mere physiologist can adequately realize the subtlety and difficulty of the psychologic portions of his own subject until he has tried to teach, or at least to study, psychology in its entirety. A union of the two

‘disciplines’ in one man, seems then the most natural thing in the world, if not the most traditional.³⁹⁵

That is, although James believes that psychology ought to be informed by physiology and therefore should not be taught by non-scientific “literary” types, he also believes that psychology requires keen reasoning skills and sensitivity to introspection and therefore should not be taught by “men of the laboratory pure and simple”; and James believes that he, a trained psychologist and physiologist, or a “union of the ‘disciplines’ in one man,” is a perfect fit for the job. At stake here is the possibility of viewing psychology as a part of a full-blooded philosophical anthropology that utilizes convergent perspectives on the embodied individual, as opposed to cleaving psychology from physiology on the one hand or construing the human being as merely a set of mechanical physiological functions on the other.

That such a full-blooded philosophical anthropology is more valuable than a collection of disparate and competing frameworks is a lesson of the present study. In particular, this study follows James in wagering that the reality of any given phenomenon is richer than any abstraction that purports to represent it; that the simultaneously natural and cultural world should therefore be described from multiple complementary perspectives, including phenomenological and physiological ones, where no perspective is taken to be foundational or beyond question; that the study of the structure and dynamics of the finite individual human provides a uniquely interesting focal point for philosophy, given that it is from the perspective of the latter

³⁹⁵ Quoted in Perry (1935) II, 11.

sort of being that one comes to have a philosophy (and more broadly a cognitive-affective *character*) in the first place; and that to posit individual freedom is to assume that an individual may mediate (if not produce *ex nihilo*) its own possibilities, thereby creating new conditions for future action, both in the external world and in the internal habitual “environment.”

These propositions are not unrelated. If one commits vicious abstraction by reifying a Spencerian picture where evolution consists merely in the adjustment of internal relations to external relations, for example, then one has in an important way denied individual agency in the world. This would be problematic, not because there is any cosmic guarantee that individuals have some amount of agency, but rather because Spencer’s construal of evolution represents only one partial perspective on things. Such concerns are not confined to nineteenth-century evolutionism, but rather arise anew within twentieth-century neo-Darwinism. This is demonstrated by the critical reactions of dialectical biology and developmental systems theory to neo-Darwinism, described in Chapter 2, as well as by philosopher of biology Lenny Moss, who has argued for revisiting German *philosophische Anthropologie* in the context of rethinking biological agency. According to Moss, a proper Darwinian philosophical anthropology would avoid a “vulgar Darwinism” that, like vulgar Marxism, denies agency to individuals in the processes of which they are a part.³⁹⁶ Here I am suggesting that James could be added to Moss’s list of supporters who deny the simplistic dogma (whether in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries) that individuals

³⁹⁶ Moss (2005).

mediate neither their own development nor the evolution of populations in meaningful ways.

If the most important lesson of this study is to be wary of vicious abstractionism, especially where it leads to a denial of individual agency, perhaps the largest problem left remaining by this study is that of normativity on James's view. This problem comes to the fore when thinking about the comparison of James and Nietzsche, who could also arguably be characterized as a philosophical anthropologist in the sense I have used in describing James.³⁹⁷ If am right that James and Nietzsche share in common an ethical framework of willful self-fashioning in which the only overt prescription is that one ought to put maximal energy into this process when this seems called for, then both thinkers seem to be in danger of glorifying energy as such. The danger of such a position is that it may be susceptible to being co-opted by the forces of fascism. This is not mere hyperbole, as Nietzsche's well-known appropriation by the National Socialists shows. Indeed, less famously, but no less strikingly, this problem is also demonstrated in a 1926 interview in which Benito Mussolini remarks that his philosophical influences include both James and Nietzsche:

Nietzsche enchanted me when I was twenty, and reinforced the anti-democratic elements in my nature. The pragmatism of William James was of great use to me in my political career. James taught me that an action should be judged rather by its results than by its doctrinary basis. I learnt of James

³⁹⁷ Schacht (2006) reads Nietzsche as a philosophical anthropologist in something like this sense.

that faith in action, that ardent will to live and fight, to which Fascism owes a great part of its success.³⁹⁸

The point here is not that one may be blamed for every way in which one's works may be used (or abused) after one's death, but only to suggest, in a somewhat dramatic fashion, that it is an important question for continued research to ask how intelligence ought to guide a process of willful self-transformation such as James and Nietzsche describe. When is character-formation healthy, right, or good? This is perhaps the chief challenge for post-Jamesian and post-Nietzschean philosophical anthropology.³⁹⁹

4.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have situated James within a greater historical context, especially vis-à-vis three seminal figures in the Continental tradition: Firstly, I demonstrated the irony of James's reading of Nietzsche in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, showing that James and Nietzsche share an entire ethical framework, including a fundamental demand for self-severe intervention in one's own character-formation when one deems this necessary; secondly, I argued in favor of James's view that the immediate present moment is never perceived but only posited in

³⁹⁸ Quoted in Perry (1935) II, 575. According to Perry, Mussolini also wrote an article on Nietzsche called "La Filosofia della forza" in 1908 (II, 577).

³⁹⁹ For questions of normativity in a post-Nietzschean framework in particular, see Hoy (2004).

reflection, as against Husserl's view that the immediate present is perception proper; and thirdly, I analyzed James's charge that Hegel is guilty of vicious abstractionism, supporting his rejection of monistic idealism based, not on an appeal to immediate experience (as Morse would have it), but rather based on the idea that Hegel's Absolute does not make anything more intelligible but instead inappropriately detaches the conceptual order from the concrete world from which it is abstracted. Finally, I concluded that the sort of non-foundationalist, non-reductive naturalism that James shares with German *philosophische Anthropologie* can give us an enriched picture of the human being without sacrificing individual agency, and that a challenging question for future research along Jamesian lines is that of how to generate prescriptions beyond the demand for strenuousness as such.

Conclusion

This study has located the center of James's vision in his conception of the self-fashioning individual, and it has demonstrated that the structure of this vision is one of variation and selection at multiple levels of analysis. In doing so, it has shown James's thought to be continuous between his psychological and philosophical phases, as well as unified when constructed as a whole. This was demonstrated as follows.

In Chapter 1, I showed that, although Darwinism influenced several areas of James's thought, all of these must be understood in relation to James's *generalized selectionism*, that is, the model that James abstracts from natural selection and then applies in such domains as social theory, psychology, epistemology, and ethics. Selectionism for James means the explanation of systemic patterns in terms of the differential interaction of variants (things of the same kind that differ) with an environment, where (1) variation is not produced in direct response to environmental structures (non-directedness of variation); (2) there is reciprocal influence between variants and environment (niche construction); and (3) systems may "sit atop" one another, such that variants "graduate" from one level to another (hierarchical construction). This is the "deepest" area of James's philosophical appropriation of Darwinism in that it provides the logical structure that underlies his other Darwin-inspired positions (free-willism, anti-Platonism, and fallibilism). Here I added a missing logical dimension to the work of several scholars of James, while adding

substantial scholarly flesh to the best prior account of James's selectionism, information theorist Jonathan Schull's useful but somewhat skeletal "William James and the Broader Implications of a Multilevel Selectionism" (1996).

In Chapter 2, I demonstrated the distinctiveness of James's evolutionism vis-à-vis certain discourses and research programs with which it should not be conflated. I first differentiated it from social Darwinism, demonstrating that James does not import a Malthusian-cum-Darwinian "struggle for existence" into the social sphere, but rather that he views the rightness of political formations as a matter to be decided over the long run, which is not subject to *a priori* legislation. Next, I distinguished James's position from sociobiology, showing that James does not bring the social under the rubric of the biological ("evolutionary imperialism") but rather only proliferates a certain kind of Darwinian (i.e. selectionist) explanation at multiple levels of reality ("evolutionary cross-fertilization"). Thirdly, I compared James's position with other generalization of selectionism, showing that James does not employ "replicators" but rather represents a pragmatic image of Darwinism where such quasi-immortal enduring entities would be considered suspect (especially if reified). I concluded that the main goal of James's evolutionary theorizing is to fight against *asymmetric externalism*, or the explanation of a system in terms of "outside-in" influence without reciprocal influence in the other direction (or indeed "inside-in" influence of the system upon itself). I therefore suggested that James could serve as an ally to current schools in evolutionary theory that critique conceptions of passive adaptation and dichotomous thinking, such as dialectical biology and developmental

systems theory. I closed by claiming that theorists ought to take seriously James's critiques of "vicious abstractionism," or the practice of reifying one abstraction at the expense of all other potentially useful abstractions. Here I headed off a number of possible misinterpretations of James's position, showed that James was an innovative early generalizer of Darwinian principles, and gave those working in the history of philosophy of science reason to return to James's texts (not only on psychology but also on the abuse of abstraction).

In Chapter 3, I shifted from describing the selectionist structure of James's vision to locating that vision's center, reading him as a kind of philosophical anthropologist by interpreting his writings on religion and pragmatism against the background of his views on the constitution of the individual that he first developed in his work in physiology and psychology. I focused in particular on the ethics of character that emerges from his writings on reflex action, will, and habit, arguing that James's philosophy does not turn on the will-to-believe, or on his pragmatic theories of meaning and truth *per se*, but rather that these positions must be understood in relation to his understanding of willful action as a mode of self-transformation. Here I reconciled the putative diachronic divide between the psychological and the philosophical James by showing that the individual at the center of James's vision remained in place across his physiological, psychological, and philosophical writings, and I addressed the putative synchronic divide that Richard Gale wedges between the active and the passive James, arguing based on a selectionist interpretation of James's conception of reflex action that this tension—that is, the tension between (1) being

able willfully to chose among genuine possibilities and (2) not being able directly to produce one's possibilities—actually generates freedom on James's view. This concluded Part I, in which I provided a unified picture of James's philosophy.

In Chapter 4, which comprises Part II, I explored resonances and contrasts between James and several figures in the Continental tradition, demonstrating the breadth of James's thought and unearthing connections between pragmatism and Continental philosophy. Firstly, I showed that James's reading of Nietzsche is ironic, given that James heavily critiques Nietzsche on a point where they largely agree: their ideals of character, which in both cases reflects the need for (1) a constructive reaction to existence and (2) an especial attentiveness to the process of willful character-formation, including a willingness to intervene in one's habits in a self-severe fashion where necessary. Secondly, I compared James and Husserl's similar views of the extended present, arguing that James, unlike Husserl, was correct to avoid giving an epistemically privileged place to the punctuate Now, since such a thing would be an empty and contentless posit. Thirdly, I supported James's rejection of Hegel's idealism, not because James's position matches up better with immediate experience (which is inscrutable), but rather because Hegel's position represents an abuse of abstraction, which should feed back into concrete experience instead of spiraling away triadically forever. Finally, I suggested that both James and German *philosophische Anthropologie* can give us an enriched and scientifically informed picture of the human being that does not sacrifice individual agency, and I indicated that the chief problem of a view such as James's (and Nietzsche's) is that of

integrating intelligence into the willful process of ethical character-formation. Thus, I showed some of the ways in which American pragmatism is bound up, both in history and through interesting resonances and contrasts, with Continental thought, highlighting the promises and challenges of a post-Jamesian philosophical anthropology.

At the center of James's vision lies his very concern with centers of vision, which he believes to be Darwinian in structure. That James's vision is worth keeping in focus has been the wager of the present study, based in part upon the promise of a more pragmatic image of Darwinism.

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