

BOOK REVIEW: EXPERIENCING WILLIAM JAMES

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James Campbell makes his entrance into William James scholarship with a comprehensive study of the entirety of James's thought in his *Experiencing William James: Belief in a Pluralistic World*. In this review, I will first state the book's most promising feature, then offer a criticism about the style of the work, and finally outline its overall structure in the third section. In this third section, I should note that I only disagree about Campbell's choice to tease out the terms "subjective" and "objective" in Chapter 5. Along the way in the chapter summaries, I will highlight its overall promise and draw attention to where exactly Campbell is at his best regarding James's thought.

Most Promising Overall General Features

Unlike most other books that have an axe to grind about James or against James, one doesn't know where Campbell is going in the very beginning—which is an honest approach to providing a comprehensive introduction to James's thought. Campbell is not driving home some type of Gale-driven schizophrenic criticism of the James that wants it all, or the phenomenologically-driven interpretation of Bruce Wilshire. In fact, we might call Wilshire and Gale's efforts scholarly reconstructions of James, the type of critical reconstructions that takes its point of departure from some Jamesian ground and then *that James* becomes molded to fit the demands of the particular scholar *rather than a book about James's ideas*. James Campbell has written a comprehensive book about James's ideas.

Still, Campbell cannot help but using some measure of interpretation as the book is peppered slightly with John McDermott's process-oriented James in the very beginning, but less so throughout. More than that, Campbell's James is the outcome of a scholar who has spent an earlier two volumes introducing Benjamin Franklin and John Dewey, and now James deep down in the murky-muck of history.¹ This is a refreshing

¹ His earlier works include: *Understanding John Dewey: Nature and*

change of pace against some of the other books in the secondary literature.

Campbell is a wonderful scholar gifted at striking a balance between intellectual history and philosophical exploration. *Experiencing William James* is a welcome text to provide specialists and non-specialists insight into James and knowledge about the major issues in Jamesian scholarship without succumbing to narrow attention to James. The readability of the text is suited for advanced undergraduate and American philosophy topical survey classes. Specialist texts often run the gambit of being written to specialist audiences of scholars and graduate students, and that doesn't happen here. If anything is limiting Campbell's volume, it's that Campbell didn't have time to write more. After reading it, I want more Campbell on James, not less. Entire chapters could have been expounded into books on their own, especially Chapters 3 and 4. The themes that connect rationality and belief open up so many doors to understanding James's pragmatism that inroads from that chapter can connect to any other specialized theme in the subsequent chapters.

The Style of the Book

At the very outset, I can only pinpoint one objection *about the style* of his book, which may be a strength or weakness depending upon if the reader has strong opinions regarding the role of a scholar's place in a comprehensive book about a thinker. Campbell will often simply reproduce original quotations in entire paragraphs and arrange James to speak for himself when he merits it. Consequently, Campbell abandons the synthesizing many critical reconstructions engage in causing Campbell's voice to take a backseat to James's own words. Many might expect the voice of the scholar to be more present in a comprehensive introduction.

I'd argue that Campbell's strategy makes the presentation of James's thought more sincere, honest, and more

Cooperative Intelligence (1995) and *Recovering Benjamin Franklin* (1999).

hermeneutically grounded than a book that relies upon summary to make its point about a particular thinker.² For instance, in Chapter 3, Campbell meanders between “The Will to Believe” and *Essays in Philosophy* in entire paragraphs, yet Campbell is not interested in simply summarizing James. He lets James speak for himself. I find this refreshing since it is my view that an immersion into the full vocabulary of the thinker is necessary to understand them fully, and this is also not a scholarly reconstruction about James, but *a book that is attempting to explain William James in his own words*. On that score, it succeeds, but something may get lost when the scholarly voice recedes from view. I’ll leave it to the reader if letting James speak in his own words is a failure for Campbell’s comprehensive introduction.

Overall Structure and Highlights

Experiencing William James is divided into seven chapters: Chapter 1: Preliminary Considerations, Chapter 2: Psychology and Philosophy, Chapter 3: Rationality and Belief, Chapter 4: Pragmatism, Chapter 5: Radical Empiricism and Pluralism, Chapter 6: Ethics and Social Thought, Chapter 7: Religion, and an Afterword.

In Chapter 1, Campbell attempts to articulate two larger themes in the first chapter. He wants the reader to understand how controversial James is, and that not everyone is friendly to James and the fact that James *qua* philosopher embodies a shift or break from tradition. Instead, James turned philosophy towards the experiential demands of human existence. Indeed, James can often be read as a non-philosopher to the point that, according to F.C.S. Schiller, James was “one of a long stream of glorious amateurs” which allowed James to be “freed from ‘the dull mechanical routine of academic philosophy [such that] he

² The distinction between critical reconstruction and a book that is about James came from Joseph Campbell himself in his Author Meets Critics Section of *Experiencing William James* I attended at the 2017 Indianapolis meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy.

could approach philosophical problems freshly” (4). In this way, James’s break with tradition is seen as more positive than negative despite the fact that it was common amongst “professional philosophers” to say that James “was a brilliant psychologist with an unfortunate habit of going on philosophical binges.”³ Despite this wide array of contemporary opinion, Campbell ends Chapter 1 with a brief biography and emphasizes the hermeneutic truth that a philosopher cannot be understood without illuminating the background and climate of one’s life. He emphasizes the contrarian nature of James to tradition. Unlike someone motivated by piecemeal technical problems, James was driven to pursue “the big question of the place of human existence within the cosmos” (21). Accordingly, then, Campbell posits a tension between centrality of the scientific side and the determinism and pessimism it implies about the universe weighed against “a world of possibility and hope.” For Campbell, “this tension and his ongoing attempts at resolution, run throughout his intellectual work” (21). This ending feels like it could become its own text, and this feeling occurs throughout several chapters.

Chapter 2: Psychology and Philosophy starts where any introduction about James must start. James is often called “the Father of American Psychology.” He founded the first psychology lab and department at Harvard, and became ultimately influenced by contemporary naturalistic and Darwinian accounts of evolution. Organic growth and becoming of self and consciousness are major themes in James’s thought as well as the closing gaps between both psychology and philosophy. Campbell relies upon his own neologism “Psycholopher” to suggest James’s collapse of the distinction between philosophy and psychology, and philosophy and science more generally—especially when we pay attention to his remarks in *Some Philosophical Problems* and *A Pluralistic Universe*.⁴

³ Bode, Boyd Henry. “William James in the American Tradition,” in *William James: The Man and the Thinker*. See his 101, cf. 108-9 especially.

⁴ After attending James Campbell’s “Author Meets Critics Session” at the

Needless to say, Chapter 2 links several major themes together in a straightforward way, but its real strength and insight lies in dealing with the mystic and psychically-friendly James, the James who was after the widest conception of experience possible. Many scholars eschew this psychically-friendly James. For instance, in Graham Bird's entry on James and moral philosophy in the *Cambridge Companion to William James*, Bird ignores the role of religion in the last section of "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" and how James ties belief in God to living a morally strenuous life.⁵ Bird's analytically sanitized James misses the actual James better captured in Campbell's book. As Campbell reminds, James is a thinker involved in risks. "[F]ollowing his pragmatic principle that called for the pursuit of truth over the avoidance of error, he was willing to risk mistakes to try to answer them" (76). For James, consciousness appeared like a continuum against the backdrop of a cosmic consciousness against which our individuality formed. Lurking at the corners of this consciousness gap between cosmic and individual consciousness, persons feel things on the *fringe*. The *fringe* became a formal notion for all the experiences that exist in the vague and indirect orders of experience. Accordingly, James thought science tended to ignore these vague and indirect experiences. Campbell articulates well the sense of openness and hesitation of James never adequately finding full confirmation about those indirect and vague orders of experience to which he hoped psychological science and philosophy might address. What's more, many historic reactions to James's openness were seen as a threat to the establishment and authority of the potential of psychology itself.

Chapter 3: Rationality and Belief shows the same dedication of openness to experience that impacted how James's contemporaries regarded him, though here Campbell explains

2018 Society for Advancement of American Philosophy conference before writing this review, I heard that this neologism, "psycholopher" was coined by him.

⁵ See Graham Bird, "Moral Philosophy and the Development of Morality" in *The Cambridge Companion to William James* ed. Ruth Ann Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 260-281.

the wider view of rationality and its relationship to sentiment in James. This chapter is the most original and creative in the whole book since it sets up all the other chapters that follow it. What's more, Campbell could have written an entire book on James's rationality connecting up the themes presented in Chapters 3 and 4 as I have already hinted. Let me explain.

James overturns the Western opposition of reasons and emotions, and reveals how wrong we are to oppose these forces to each other. For James, this overturning and openness to experience is articulated in terms of religious faith, and this is the James everyone knows above all else, the William James of "The Will to Believe." In Campbell's scholarship, however, the reader is warned off from this oversimplification of that everyone knows so well since it is wrong to think that this insight of rationality-qua-sentiment did not have appeal and anchor elsewhere in James's thought. This appeal about the primacy of the rationality-qua-sentiment James runs throughout his entire work and life, especially considering that James started his career as a chemist-turned-naturalist-turned-medical-doctor-turned-psychologist-turned-philosopher.⁶

Importantly, rationality is connected to need and the demands of how reality is felt, and here is where we hear the echoes of John McDermott giving pride of place to James's felt relations in Campbell's James. Thus, rather than simply engaging James's "The Will to Believe", we should go to "The Sentiment of Rationality" (originally published in 1879 several months prior to James's appointment as an Assistant Professor of Philosophy in 1880). Through an analysis of both essays, Campbell is correct. James "applies this sense of rationality as systematic satisfaction in a descriptive fashion to consider the sorts of beliefs that tend to function successfully in our lives" (82). For James, rationality smoothes out the needs of our beliefs. Rationality can reduce the felt chaos of the world or it can focus on particulars. James favors this latter process out of the modesty he thinks the rationality of the philosopher can

⁶ This statement avoids the fact that James was also keenly interested first in becoming a painter.

achieve. No system of philosophy can unify the complexity of the whole for all people. James is more humble about its powers. Instead, philosophy embodies a type of sentiment, a way of being mindful about what needs are being met, and the fact that the universe will speak to differing temperaments in varying ways. Despite the varying ways that the universe will speak to each person, we want and hope for a sense of order, and philosophers will be drawn to systematize their insights. Accordingly, James regarded our philosophical ideas as tentative and revisable hypotheses that help us cope with the existential tension in our lives, and it's undoubtedly for this reason that Campbell ends this chapter by outlining three aesthetic and practical criteria to explain how rationality and beliefs are connected.

According to Campbell, "an idea or belief or plan will more likely be adopted if it helps us project some order into future experience" (85). Central to James's pragmatism is the "conceivable effects" an idea or belief will possess. Second, "an idea, belief, or plan will be more likely to succeed if it contains a place for us and nourishes our hopes" (85). Any philosophy fails or succeeds in how it complements our ability to act, and it must match our spontaneous capacity and powers. Fourthly, we must avoid excess simplicity, and finally excess particularity (95). When a philosophy fails to speak to us, it is often too simple in its construction, and if it is too narrow, it cannot offer us tools for future action and hope. The heart of James's pragmatism is recognizing just how much our beliefs are connected to practical action, and the existential need his philosophy serves.

Finally, Campbell introduces a helpful distinction that many people miss in their discussions concerning James's nature of truth—everyone from Bertrand Russell to G.E. Moore constantly have read James wrongly on the nature of truth, and it's for this misreading that most of my personal disagreements with analytic philosophers have been about whenever the topic turns to William James. Campbell's distinctions about truth help immensely in these continuing and unabated misreadings. Let me explain. For Campbell, there are two types of truth

operating in James's corpus. On the first, there are "(a) truths or facts that are what they are independently of what we do and what we believe, and (b) truths about those things that are dependent on our actions for their existence" (102). The former he calls *recording cases*, the latter *contribution cases*. Initially, James made this distinction in his "The Sentiment of Rationality" in which practical action always outstrips scientific evidence.

Contribution cases are the places where faith and values enter into the picture, and it's the fact that being a subject, having shared intersubjective experiences, and noting that we all collectively have a role to play in their determination is the site of pragmatism. In this intersubjective space of shared meanings, it's here that pragmatic philosophy aids us the most. By contrast most dogmas in the history of philosophy occur when we reify the insights within these dogmas, pretending that these reifications are just the way the world is irrespective of the true social nature human beings play in determining the shape, texture, and ultimate meaning of their world. In this way, contribution cases constitute human reality. When philosophers deny this, they are guilty of the vicious intellectualism we see in James's reading of Hegelian rationalists in his *A Pluralistic Universe*, or as he puts intellectualism in *Some Problems of Philosophy* as "the belief that our mind comes upon a world complete in itself, and has the duty of ascertaining its contents."⁷

Chapter 4 details James's pragmatism, and there are few, if any, surprises here. If there is one central work to which James is most read beyond "The Will to Believe", it's his *Pragmatism* lectures. Campbell spends a great deal of time showing James's development and deployment of Peirce's ideas, the growing reception of that deployment along with the central themes and inroads James thought pragmatism could make into many philosophical debates. Rather than review its major contents, I would like to draw attention to an objection I had at this point in the book.

Campbell preserved the language of subject and object

⁷ William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 111.

when talking about his metaphysics of experience. “Our reality is thus subjective,” he writes (150). Campbell should have said that selective interest and subjectivity allow for everyone to gain access to a level of intersubjectivity rather than buying into and deploying the term “subjective.” This use should be avoided since James’s later endorsement of pure experience is one of felt relations only. The fact that we have some limit into truth and access cannot be denied, and I do not think there is a substantial disagreement in the way that Campbell talks about James’s use of reality in the social sense. The interpretive moment, however, is clear. Pragmatism is a way to overcome old disagreements—including the subjective and objective distinction, and show the experiential side of knowledge insofar as pragmatism leads directly into his radical empiricism. However, Campbell regards pure experience as either being “subjective or objective” (175). A page later, he discusses James’s painting example employing James himself saying that “we have every right to speak of it as subjective and objective at once.”⁸ However, this example is not preserving the distinction as much as showing that our ontology is more experientially complex than our traditional philosophical distinctions have conceived. Campbell ignores the “at once” in the previous quote. Both the subjective and the objective are in constant relation, much like the intentionality of Husserl, or the interconnection of intentional feeling of Max Scheler. Thus, Campbell misrepresents how James should be understood as someone trying to push past the subject-object distinction into a more dynamic “double-barreled” terms rather than regarding pure experience wrongly as that which can become either subjective or objective. Pure experience is, then, a metaphysics of the flow, limited to the perceived relationships subjects enter into.

In Chapter 5, Campbell misses the point of this directedness and its phenomenological implication. James’s *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Campbell cites the familiar definition of radical empiricism as “the relations that connect

⁸ As cited in Campbell, *Experiencing William James*. William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 7

experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as real as anything else in the system [of philosophy].”⁹ For this reason, our sense of reality is subjective and with others, but our experience is always an entering-into-this-unfolding and streamingness that also points beyond the mere subjective. At this point, the subject dissolves only to be a relational term of the subject-relating-to-an-object. From this subjective-into-objective relationship, James finds common ground with someone like Husserl whose process of sedimentation is almost this very relation contribution cases lead to, and what’s more an appropriate understanding of James would preserve this insight by describing these relationships in his proto-phenomenological language. A pragmatic phenomenology would describe, then, how contribution cases solidify from beliefs to rules, and then to habits.

Apart from the earlier mistake about the unfoldingness of selective interested and the felt relations, Campbell rightly identifies James’s treatment of vicious intellectualisms as beginning with substituting pre-determined ready-made concepts of “a block universe” for the flux (what James also applies to forms of *rationalism*), and this follows upon the heels of examining the ways in which we ultimately know the world given the limitations of experience as bound to knowledge of particulars only and the time and place of such knowing.

For the rest of Chapter 5, Campbell gives us an accurate rendering about the relationship between percepts and concepts. Human knowledge originates, as it were, from two sources of knowledge. First, philosophers have talked about immediate acquaintance or intuitive apprehension, and second, knowledge from concepts and representations. This distinction follows upon the heels of James’s discussion between the relationship between concepts and percepts. Initially, both percepts and concepts are the medium from which we move back and forth so freely that we engage in this movement without so much as thinking about it. For our minds, according

⁹ James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 22.

to James, acquire teleological interest in a phenomenon. Our percepts connect us to the flux of the natural world and to our current selective attendant interest, yet our concepts can alter what we take to be perceived. Our concepts are, then, always a danger as well as the more problematic side of this relationship, but concepts are also the site of possible pragmatic experimentation in experience. In fact, experience is just these flowing and dynamic possible relationships that consciousness navigates by making concepts. "Concepts bring new values into our perceptual life, reanimate our wills, and make our action turn upon new points of emphasis."¹⁰ The danger comes when conceptual systems are substituted for perceptual richness. Conception is substituted for perception. In Campbell's words, "concepts have a kind of permanence but precisely because of this, they are unable to adapt to the flux of experience" (169). James can only talk about parts of experience. For the rest of Chapter 5, then, Campbell excellently summarizes the implications of the limits of experience, and why this warrants a type of pluralism as the in-between philosophy of idealistic rationalistic monism on the one hand and a too narrowly confined British empiricism on the other hand.

Chapter 6 is the one chapter that should be divided into two different chapters, and as far as I can tell, this is a weakness not of Campbell's scholarship as much as managing the eclectic topic of James's ethics and social thought together. Given that James himself didn't compose a lengthy ethical treatise like other philosophers, we are left reading a series of essays together for his moral philosophy alongside personal correspondences and speeches for his social thought. For James's ethics, Campbell identifies these as "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," and "What Makes Life Significant." Campbell includes thoughts in this chapter about race, war, imperialism, and I would have appreciated the social thought chapter as standing on its own proceeding after James's ethics. It felt a little rushed given the complexity of earlier chapters.

¹⁰ James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 43.

Interestingly, Campbell advances James's ethics as one of personal fulfillment and an attempt to develop "a community of tolerance based on recognizing and overcoming our animal partiality" (200). Campbell refuses rightly the utilitarian interpretations of Richard Gale and Wesley Cooper, and for good reason.¹¹ These vocabularies are imposed upon James from the outside without listening to James's texts from the inside.

Campbell identifies that James advocates a democratic principle of inclusiveness that stretches all the way into his often misunderstood claim: "the most universal principle—that the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand...the guiding principle for ethical philosophy [given that not all can be satisfied]" is "to satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can*."¹² Without imposing desire-satisfaction utilitarianism nor ideal-satisfaction utilitarianism, Campbell describes James as fostering the conditions for pluralism in much the same way that I understand de Beauvoir as wanting us to promote the conditions of everyone's freedom. Practically, we cannot help but be partisan regarding our own moral vision (tacitly, it seems, part of our moral psychology). Thus, the James we get thinks we should promote the conditions of our own personal fulfillment in much the same way that the Beauvoirian existentialist spoke about being free. Over time, we may be able to loosen the grips on our own partisan natures and become more inclusive such that we can experiment through democracy and take up projects that do not impinge on another's freedom. James thinks there is a certain power to ideals (212).

While James say these things about inclusivity, his promotion of the individual cannot meet the challenge of being

¹¹ See Wesley Cooper, *Unity of William James's Thought* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002) and Richard Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Both works take up privileging either ideals or demands. James's "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" is not clear which one should be elevated, and the semantic tension to which both of these scholars are drawn to in this debate about these words also spurs different forms of utilitarianism seen in James's text.

¹² William James, *Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 153.

anything other than an ethics of the individual and personal fulfillment—forever the consummate artist even philosophically.¹³ For an ethics of reforming social institutions, Dewey should be your model, and Campbell rightly identifies the need for both an ethics of personal fulfillment from James and an ethics of reform from Dewey as well as a need to pay attention to institutions in ways that James is skeptical of them.

Chapter 7 is the final chapter that brings Campbell's efforts to a close. This chapter is almost exclusively about *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and exactly what James claims regarding religious experience. As I said earlier, many discussions in philosophy that concern Jamesian thought almost always exclusively center on "The Will to Believe," but rarely—if ever—proceed farther into *The Varieties* despite that text being essential to the radical openness of James's philosophy.

Campbell first notes that James's definition is very open, standing for "experiential religion" since no principle or essence can be found (243, 247). The lack of essence, though, contributes to an increasing awareness of how personal religion is given the effects it has on experience (278). In this way, James treated any religious object almost as God-like and never limits what religion can mean apart from the focus on its experiential nature. For James, then, religion "shall mean for us *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.*"¹⁴ For James, individuality is rooted in feeling, and "religion is not something we should hope to move beyond" (264). Instead, there is a deep existential need to be in contact with larger absolute realities of which we may never know in full. This openness to reality gives James "a sense of presence" as Campbell describes. "For the religious person, the natural world is only partial, and beyond it stretches another reality about which nothing is known, even though it is assumed

¹³ Campbell seems on board with this when he states in the Afterword: "James's philosophical style owes less to the scientist and more to the artist or poet" (285).

¹⁴ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 34.

that the true meaning of present life is only to be found in relation to that larger reality" (265).

What is more, this reality is open-ended, in constant growth of its potential (which is the most important feature of James's *Some Problems in Philosophy*), and we have a sense of that growth in the *mystical more*. Campbell is at his best right here in this chapter. He connects the sense of more to the "unseen order" and the pragmatic personal risk that often gets confused for "reckless faith" (or reckless subjectivism as the case may be). We often have to decide the risk of beliefs even when we do not have complete knowledge, and regarding religious belief, we may not ever have complete knowledge as we do in recording cases. Instead we are allowed to risk all for happiness. As Campbell puts it, "James writes that happiness is at the core of our being" (274). James is offering us a chance to put experiential religion front and center, and test religious belief in much the same way that James's critique of representational metaphysics would fair and mirrors his criticisms of "theological ideas."¹⁵

James develops three tests: immediate luminousness, philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness. Campbell excels at explaining the last of these, and James himself doesn't really develop them. What's important, however, is that connections be made between pragmatically testing religious beliefs and the live options spoken about in "The Will to Believe." The connection is that distortions of James's openness to religion rely upon regarding James's philosophy of religion as a recording case. Instead, as Campbell insists, James "thus treats the whole matter of our relations with God as a contribution rather than recording case" (277). Campbell ends his book, then, on a deep meditation on how meliorism is connected to the whole matter of our contributions.

In the end, this book is just marvelous despite my disagreements about Chapter 5. It should be part of every James scholar's library, and it may very well be the best introductory book to the overwhelming complexity of James's tensions,

¹⁵ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 23.

contradictions, and ruptures. The most important aspect of this work is the offered correction regarding James's theory of truth and the need to read "The Will to Believe" and the "Sentiment of Rationality" together.