

William James: Philosopher-Educator

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We are only beginning in this country, with our extraordinary reliance on organization, to see that the alpha and omega in a university is the tone of it, and that this tone is set by human personalities exclusively.

*Memories and Studies*¹

A half century has passed since a Harvard undergraduate completed a theme on the teaching prowess of one of his professors. He read it to an instructor who remarked with a sigh, "Let us turn this over and write, 'Have you heard James?'"² But only recently on a summer afternoon, a foreign student walked slowly up the path to Emerson Hall and spoke to a man on the steps. "I have just arrived from Syria, and wish to study where William James taught. Could you tell me, please, if this is the place."³

In its written phases the influence of William James has been notable, potent and enduring. A variety of considerations might be invoked to account for this: The originality of his contributions ranging from psychology and theories of mind, motivation, and emotion to philosophy and theories of meaning, truth, and value. The position he has come to occupy as representative not only of his culture but of a unique intellectual era. The vivid prose in which his thought is formulated. The fertility of his work providing as it has the soil for many distinct and even opposed contemporary movements. At any rate, in psychology and in philosophy if one would understand present tendencies whether he chooses to go through or around James, it is unlikely that he will escape him.

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¹William James, *Memories and Studies*, p. 354.

²*Harvard Illustrated Magazine*, Volume 8 (February, 1907) p. 95.

³This incident is recorded by Gordon Allport in the *Psychological Review*, Volume 50, 1946, p. 95.

James was also a teacher, the motive force behind a great department of philosophy. For thirty-four years he was in and out of its classes and seminars, one of his own plural centers of creative causation. Over and over in journals, memoirs, and letters of his students and associates (and of theirs) his influence is revealed, and the evidence is still accumulating that few teachers have had more grateful students than James and that no philosopher has been more highly esteemed as a man.⁴ Today as the world of education has shifted its center toward science, the entente of philosophy itself moving toward the methods and logic of the sciences, it is remembered that James came to philosophy through science. And this is one, though not the only, reason that in the convocations of higher education his name recurs as one who exemplified teaching dimensions of increasing significance.⁵ And it is a thoroughly modern question. What was it about James?

II

At first glance, and perhaps in the end, his background is most impressive in its diversity. Foreseeing his role as a philosopher-educator, which he through years of unsurety could not, there is much that is uniquely appropriate about the varieties of James' application. Little was wasted.

Receive a young man of promise into a family of minds where 'student' is the noblest appellation. Let his biography parallel Mill's in this respect: that he have a father with profound intellectual interests and distinguished friends. Let

⁴This analysis draws upon published materials and memorabilia at Widen-
er Library. But also upon letters of several former students of James, them-
selves teachers, written in response to a canvass by the writer. Especially help-
ful were Edgar A. Singer, Charles M. Bakewell, B. A. G. Fuller, Levi Edgar
Young, H. V. Kaltenborn, James R. Angel, and H. M. Kallen. See Notes.

⁵Cf. for example the study *Philosophy in American Education* (Harper's, 1945) where the committee reflects the judgment of teachers throughout Amer-
ica that "From William James on philosophers have stressed the necessity of
philosophers having other fields," and that "William James managed to talk
directly to the plain man." (p. 39, 260 f.)

See also Brand Blanshard's "Philosophy Teachers, Past and Present" in *The Teaching of Philosophy*, Western Reserve University (Cleveland, Ohio, 1950), p. 6 ff. where James is classed with T. H. Green as a "humanist," one who sees "how philosophy may return upon life to transform its feeling, character, and action."

And see the *Art of Teaching* by Gilbert Highet (Knopf, 1955) p. 206 f. where James is described as a master of teaching improvisation.

abundance be compounded in books and travel so that he receives the intangible advantages of a crosscut of cultures. Early in his teens let him study in Germany, France and Italy mastering the languages at first hand and reading widely. Back in America as he nears twenty let a year be given to the pursuit of painting with William Hunt, to quicken his native perceptiveness.⁶ Bring him next into a field where he learns with thoroughness the data of a science: physiology and medicine. To develop his ability for independent observation and, still in the context of natural science, the rigor of minute analysis, let him accompany Louis Aggasiz on an expedition to the Amazon. Next bring his faculties to bear on the mastery and furthering of a budding experimental science, psychology. At thirty-five with the stimulus and equipment of a university at his disposal let him undertake the sustained task of gathering his findings in a work which will be published a decade later a veritable classic. Then free him from the laboratory and bring him into reflective encounter with the perennial problems of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics where his discipline and an insatiable desire to be true to the concrete fulness of experience can work hand-in-hand.

But such a prescription, a portrait of qualifications, even if filled out with further known details of James' training, would make an all-important omission. For beneath and outside these channels of recognition James, in the very nature of himself and his world, knew intimately the currents of what he called "raw, unverbalized life." The delicacy of constitution which his professors noted in him when he first studied chemistry issued in a life-long and disappointing quest for health. Weak eyes, stomach disorders, heart together with the vicarious woes of an invalid sister conspired against him. But this was not all. His personality, sensitive and volatile in the struggle with ultimate questions underwent nervous-mental strains of extreme proportion. Well known is his account of a period in his latter twenties when there came upon him what might today be called "existentialist dread," or in his own words, "a horrible fear of my own existence."

⁶This was the only one of his early interests that James did not carry to fruition. But indirectly the training stood him in good stead.

It was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave entirely and I became a mass of quivering fear. I remember wondering how other people could live, how I myself had ever lived so unconscious of that pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life.⁷

His recovery was slow involving intellectual realignment, a Renouvier-influenced will to freedom, and not a little courage. At thirty, when he accepted a Harvard instructorship in anatomy in preference to one proffered him in philosophy, it was out of his felt need for "some stable reality to lean upon" and a fear that his voluntary faith could not survive philosophic rigor.⁸

This experience, with many others of which his biographers have made capital, indicate that James' strength in the classroom grew not from the fact that his life was especially professorial, but that it was not. His life spanned more than the distance between bookcovers and the result was, as John Dewey says, "a wider vision";⁹ he was as his son Henry writes, a *ganzer Mensch*. Whatever change his thought underwent from his earliest reflections to its mature expression there was this constant note sounded anew in a recently discovered letter, written in the year he was appointed professor of philosophy:

There can be, after all, no glib and cock-sure formulation of life. But the inarticulate *living itself* is always there to take up what can't be put into our words. That's why it seems to me that, as you say, *opinions* are less what bring men together, than the sense that each may have of being in the same depths as the other.¹⁰

If his thought was not the outgrowth of these depths of awareness, his teaching, whatever the topic at hand, was in recognition of them. Ever afterward he brought together two

⁷The account is published in full in James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* as the experience of a "French correspondent," p. 160. Cf. *The Philosophy of William James*, ed. H. M. Kallen (Modern Library) p. 26 f.

⁸See F. O. Matthiessen, *The James Family* pp. 216, 220 for an account of this period.

⁹"James as Empiricist," *In Commemoration of William James*, addresses delivered at the American Philosophical Association. (Columbia University Press, 1942), pp. 48-57.

¹⁰The letter is published in the *Philosophical Quarterly*, Number 1 (1951), p. 439.

strains: an intense awareness of his own inner life, and a studied grasp of its psychic and physiological correlates. As if in fulfillment of his brother Henry's counsel to the novelist to be "one of those on whom nothing is lost," he was able to assimilate the artistic and scientific methods, and to describe and interpret the manifestations of consciousness, even in their fugitive tints and moods. His psychology, rich rather than reductive, was born of a mind relentlessly seeking to represent the whole landscape of data while at the same time seeking universal laws of mental life. As he stood before his classes his genius was not in doing now one and now the other, but, far more difficult, doing both. In short, he combined a vital grasp of both the concrete and abstract aspect of his subject.¹¹

His explicit teaching aims harmonized with his own skills. And it is inadequate, if not mistaken, to put James' philosophy of education in a pigeon-hole of his own making; pragmatic.¹² He was the author neither of the polemical excesses nor of many later applications of this his most original and influential doctrine. Moreover, two-thirds of his university life was behind him before the view received formal articulation and then it was, so far as James followed out its implications for teaching, most fundamentally an insistence that ideas have impact *within* as well as outside the mental world. (His pluralistic metaphysics of experience and theory of consciousness tended to obliterate the distinction.) It was this outlook together with his conviction that the mental life of a student is an active unity, not "chopped up" into distinct processes and compartments, that led James to say:

No truth, however abstract, is ever perceived that will not probably at some future time influence our earthly action.
You must remember that when I talk of action here I mean

¹¹Oliver Wendell Holmes, in recommending James to Johns Hopkins wrote of him, "I doubt if I shall ever meet his equal in suggestiveness and many-sided perception among men of his years." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Volume 12 (1951), pp. 609-627.

¹²Brand Blanshard says that James' pragmatism led to an insistence on human and practical bearings of ideas "in a way which to most of us would seem hardly relevant," but adds that whatever his philosophy James "would still have invested with interest everything he said." *The Teaching of Philosophy* (Cleveland, 1950) p. 6.

action in the widest sense. I mean speech, I mean writing, I mean yeses and noes, and the tendencies 'from' things and tendencies 'toward' things and emotional determinations; and I mean them in the future as well as in the immediate present.¹³

Thus he said the educated man is able properly to cope with situations he has never met before by means of the examples with which his memory is stored and of the abstract conceptions which he has acquired.¹⁴ Higher education is that pursuit through which we acquire "standards of durability" and through which, by sifting human creations, we learn to know a good human job when we see it. This is the better part of what men know as wisdom.¹⁵ Students should be told that persistence day by day in their chosen field will eventually yield as a permanent possession "the power of judging in all that class of matter."¹⁶ And the college bred are of value to society because their critical sensibilities are more acute.^{17 18}

But much earlier than these utterances, when James first assumed his teaching duties at Harvard, he wrote an article on the teaching of philosophy in which appears this statement of what remained, with little modification, his personal teaching credo.

Philosophic study means the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again, of imagining foreign states of mind.

What doctrines students take from their teachers are of little consequence provided they catch from them the living philo-

¹³*Talks to Teachers*, p. 27.

¹⁴"The Social Value of the College-Bred," *Memories and Studies*, p. 313.

¹⁵*Memories and Studies*, p. 309.

¹⁶*Talks to Teachers*, p. 78.

¹⁷*Memories and Studies*, p. 314.

¹⁸Whether due to contact with James in the classroom or in his writings, William Peperell Montague called pragmatism a "threat" to the teaching of philosophy in that it tempted incompetent minds to deal with serious problems as "unreal, old fashioned, dialectical subtleties with which a practical man in a practical age need not concern himself." *Ways of Knowing*, 1948, p. 167. Against this sort of indictment, justified or not, contemporary analysis, semantics and formal logic are a pervasive reaction.

sophic attitude of mind, the independent personal look at all the data of life, and the eagerness to harmonize them.¹⁹

III

James in the classroom was not a great deal different than James out of it—this because he brought his world into the classroom not the reverse. He rarely attempted and more rarely achieved the finished lecture. His classes were more like seminars and his seminars like library gatherings. At the inception of his career to one who proposed to substitute the case-system for lectures in the medical school, James said:

The learned professor would rebel. He much prefers sitting and hearing his own beautiful voice to guiding the stumbling minds of students. I know it myself. If you know something and have a little practice there is nothing easier than to hear yourself talk.²⁰

Books, he felt, served to give continuity but a teacher if he is a teacher must be more than a tome. It was a maieutic pedagogy, direct and personal, that he cultivated.

And so students recall that James would enter the room, put down an armload of books germane to the subject, perch on the corner of the platform desk, cast his friendly glance and begin, "You have read today's chapter . . . but perhaps there is a question." Sparring for an opening he would eventually uncover a latent confusion or an issue. Then becoming animated, and at times fluent, he would begin the cooperative clarifying process that was his forte. There was no encyclical air, no talking down.

He was flexible, perhaps too flexible. Enlightenment was his end and in pursuit of it he was adept at seeing through the eyes of the student, abandoning his own framework to follow a suggestion or capitalize on an illustration. The floundered had an ally in him, but he was a considerable antagonist in the face of the too-confident. He would thus express surprise at a fresh idea or a new mode of presentation and overwhelm

¹⁹"The Teaching of Philosophy in Our Colleges," *Nation*, Volume 28, (1876), p. 178. Cf. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, Volume I, p. 442-3.

²⁰Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 444.

its sponsor by the warmth of his appreciation. On the other hand he was known to say, "Mr. Jones, I cannot stand your almighty air."

The activity of his body seemed to keep pace with his mind. He could not sit immovable grinding through a syllabus with only the talk muscles in play. Rising from his chair, toying with his beard, he spoke, moved, gestured rapidly. Bold strokes on the blackboard might be followed by a moment of absorption, foot on chair and elbow on knee. But for the most part he was a peripatetic, moving to the window and back in obvious tension. Once during a class held in his own study, he had the problem of holding a blackboard steady, having it in class vision and writing. This he finally achieved by lying down full length, holding it with one hand, and while continuing his commentary, writing with the other.

His desire to identify himself with the student showed up in little things: His impatient hand-waving when someone called him "Professor," or "Doctor." His appropriation of student terminology. His dress. Visitors at Cambridge dropping in on a class and noting his vigorous air, bronzed complexion and brown tweeds were led to remark, "He looks more like a sportsman than a professor." Yet this athletic mien, and his other candid qualities, if they left newcomers a bit doubtful of his stature as a scholar did not rob him of dignity. Palmer records that he was not identified with loose radicalism nor thought bumptious or odd in the academic community. And Bertrand Russell has now added his opinion of James' personal impressiveness which remained, he says, "in spite of a complete naturalness."²¹

No degree of democratic feeling and of desire to identify himself with the common herd could make him anything but a natural aristocrat, a man whose personal distinction commanded respect.²²

²¹But Russell elsewhere objects to James as one of those thinkers "who have allowed their opinions as to the constitution of the universe to be influenced by the desire for edification; knowing, as they supposed, what beliefs would make men virtuous, they have invented arguments, often very sophistical, to prove that these beliefs are true." *History of Western Philosophy*, 1945.

²²In his *Unpopular Essays* (Harpers, 1953), p. 167.

From his father he had learned the force of apt exaggeration, and so his phraseology was freckled with superlatives. But there was little of the theatrical about him. The element of surprise and a subtle, rarely caustic humor pervaded his discourse. Though section-managers felt obliged to counsel their groups, "Don't forget the philosophy while writing down the epigrams," students were not always sure where to draw the line. James often told on himself the story of one who interrupted him with, "But doctor, doctor, to be serious for a moment . . ." in an earnest tone that brought a volley of laughter.²³ To show that chance does not carry any guarantee he told a class there was a chance each would receive from him a souvenir at the end of the course. When he arrived the final day empty-handed intending to observe that "chance had turned out wrong," the class made that point and another one too by presenting him a silver-mounted inkwell.²⁴

As he preferred ideas to formulas, he preferred interpretation to exposition and he was less inclined to argue historical questions than to examine the implications of varying standpoints whether historical or not. This he was qualified to do in a many-sided way. Even in didactic courses such as Mill's logic this technique showed through. Thus a student to whom James later apologized because the course was "loose" in the Jamesian sense, writes:

James was rather hampered, perhaps, by the textbook used but he could have given a good course with anything for a textbook, Plato's Dialogues or Tupper's poems: perhaps a course with the latter might have been quite as good as the former because it would have had more, I take it, of James himself in it . . . The very fact that he had not well organized the course and that he was perhaps rather bored with the textbook, gave him opportunity to show his own personal reactions.²⁵

Words did not come easily to James in spite of his celebrated talent for expression.²⁶ His search for the right word

²³"The True Harvard," *Memories and Studies*, p. 349.

²⁴*Harvard Illustrated Magazine*, Volume 8 (February, 1907) p. 93.

²⁵Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 443.

²⁶Cf. Grattan's account of his labor in writing the *Principles of Psychology* in *The Three Jameses* (New York, 1932), pp. 138 ff.

in discourse was born of *une longue patience* persistent as he was in seeking clarity and dissatisfied with anything less than grace. Students felt his mind at work both to find and formulate its insights. "Everything comes out wrong with me at first," he once said. Still, when a phrase or argument "offended him no more" it was usually born to longevity and many are the distinctions of his mind that are still active philosophical currency: The "tender" and the "tough-minded" approach to reality, the "each-form" vs. the "all-form" of metaphysics, the "stream of consciousness" and the "blooming, buzzing confusion." His influence, indeed, established the term "pragmatism" to the later regret of both his allies and himself. But in the teaching workshop a whole hour might pass without yielding much light. Scientific students especially found James obscure. Still we must grant with Schiller that even in his letters written spontaneously as he would speak there is an evident gift of style. Perhaps what he said would have been less impressive if uttered by someone else. Thus B. A. G. Fuller can write of a course in metaphysics:

James technically speaking was not, I should say, a good lecturer. The ebullition bottled up inside him tended to fizz when he lectured, and made him at times jerky and incoherent.

And then can add

But he was a good professor, for what he said was never dull always interesting and exciting, held the attention of his classes, and gave them a shot in the arm.²⁷

He felt impelled to an untechnical prose. The choice, if a costing one, of a presentation trimmed for communication but unfortified in the heavily systematic or security-minded way, was made deliberately. In his later years he lamented platform assignments which obligated him, he felt, to stand by this style. And near the end he undertook a summation of his thought that was to be "serious, systematic, and syllogistic," a project he did not live to complete. Of course he knew

²⁷In a letter to the writer. Fuller contrasts James with Santayana whose lectures "could have been taken down short-hand and published without a change." Of James' personality he writes that he was "warm, vital, friendly, full of 'vim and vigor' and bounce, both in the class room, and in the little gatherings in his study."

that popularization conduces to thinness and that thorough work in any field will be technical. But progress in research and effectiveness in teaching are different things. At both levels an unusual range of attentive minds were able to follow him.

IV

Whatever weight one gives to the foregoing facets of his technique, James' impact remains unexplained. Others have proceeded in similar fashion without comparable drawing power, without his ability to generate intellectual excitement. Is it possible to get beyond the elusive *x* of personality, beyond Singer's typical appraisal that "His strength was himself"?²⁸ Not far perhaps. But some further elements are discernible.

First, James assimilated an extraordinary number of ideas ordinarily assumed to be opposed. His primal imperative was fidelity to the full flow of radical empiricism, an empiricism so broad that he found restriction of what should count as data the cardinal failing of scientists and philosophers alike.²⁹

²⁸In a letter to the writer. Singer says, "I always come back to the same point. His strength was himself. This does not mean that his personality made up for inadequate equipment or superficialities of thought." And again, "It was the man in him that most appealed to the man in me."

²⁹Perhaps the two extreme interpretations of James' empiricism at present are the positivistic and the phenomenological. But James' total thought defies these classifications even when redefined in his context and taken together. Feigl, for example, in calling James' thought "tough-minded" finds it advisable to add in a footnote "disregarding some of James' own tender-minded deviations." (*Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, p. 3)

Against a positivistic reading it may be urged that though James claimed "matchless intellectual economy" for his pragmatic test, he also insisted that it proposed "no rigid canon of what shall count as proof" and would "entertain any hypothesis." (Cf. *Age of Analysis*, p. 122 f.) Where sensory operations are not forthcoming, practical import determines meaning, which for James includes the "claims" of interest and obligation. Truth becomes a species of good. Again, the view that appropriation of any belief, metaphysical and ethical ones most of all, "makes a difference" is hostile to a strong positivistic reduction. Finally, James blurred the analytic-synthetic distinction which for most logical empiricists has been axiomatic.

Against a phenomenological reading one may cite James' insistence that "meanings" are in the "last things, fruits, consequences," and not separable from them as in the "epoché" of Husserl; also his view that the influence of temperament on reflection, acknowledged or not, is inevitable. But with contemporary existentialism James championed the "richness of life" against the "poverty of formulas," a view of the self as sum-total of all that is its "own" including memories and projects; freedom, spontaneity, risk; the paradoxical unfinishedness of consciousness; the irreducibility of the individual and the inevitability of personal commitment.

Reconciliation was a secondary matter and would in due time be burst by the growing content of experience. Whatever may be said of his philosophical heirs, James' criteria of meaning and of truth were far more inclusive than exclusive.

Thus, even when he was aware of contradictions in his thought, as apparently he often was not, his acceptance of both horns of a dilemma such, for example, as that presented by the ideas of freedom and determinism, endeared him to students and readers alike as one unwilling to dismiss either of two antithetical views each of which bore the credentials of experience. He was known to appear today and affirm that he had been mistaken yesterday. More, in the midst of an argument, and he was as Santayana says "short-winded in argument," he was apt to puncture his construction with a foreign flash or an injection of common sense that was at once refreshing and exasperating. And he was much better at beginnings than endings. Such mixing of incompatibles, such sparsity of even tentative conclusions, called out the innate passion for consistency and form in student minds, made them keenly aware of the scope of evidence and sponsored reflection and discussion long after the official class hour ended.

Second, James called out student effort in aid. "You would think," writes one, "that he was the veriest freshman from the number of things he could learn from others."³⁰ Sometimes his ignorance was feigned, sometimes genuine. But in any case it led to Socratic give and take.

Thus Starbuck remembers a time when James was using the blackboard to clear up some notions in psychology. Circles and lines symbolized selfhood, cognition, feeling of value, affectors, effectors. In going over the scheme he became confused. He backed away, cocked his head to one side and said, "What the deuce have we got here anyhow?"³¹ Immediately

³⁰John Elof Boodin, "William James as I Knew Him," *Personalist* (Spring, 1942), p. 125.

³¹Edwin D. Starbuck, "Impressions of James," *Psychological Review* Volume 50 (1943), p. 129. It was James who attracted Starbuck to Harvard "because he wrote and lived a psychology surcharged with cultural and spiritual fineness."

the group united in the task of disentanglement and all benefited from this bit of cooperative roadbuilding.

His deficiencies in the formal and analytic modes of thought were at times all too apparent. It is recalled that in a course in traditional logic he was caught in the intricacies of mood and figure and for a time puzzled. "You will have to wait a few minutes," he said, and turned his face to the wall. After the recovery he turned back and resumed his lecture as if nothing had happened. Edgar A. Singer writes that often James, seizing on a mathematical suggestion that might serve to illustrate a point made "some of the most absurd mistakes." But this spoiled nothing. As Singer says, "It is said to us who made worse mistakes of other kind, 'Lo, he too is human.' "³²

There were other foibles. He often forgot his notes. Getting lost in digressions was not uncommon. A flat failure at pretense, he would turn to someone in the front row and say, "What was I talking about?" Sometimes he even dismissed the class. "I can't think today," he would say with his hands to his head, "we had better not go on with the class."³³ He persisted in bringing books to class in foreign languages which for him had been equivalent to English in ease. In trying to translate directly he usually hobbled briefly and then gave up.

But all of this made students less prone to postulate in James an undersurface system subsequently to be divulged, and engendered confidence that their own insights might be worth presenting. James never capitalized on appeals such as "self-evidence," or his increasing reputation of authority. Nor did he assume that he was accountable only to a professional few. The response of the neophyte, even his *misunderstandings*, might shed light on the issues at hand. Hence he bore questions that were really criticisms with inexhaustible patience. He invited written comments as well and would often return them with a reply penciled on the back when he thought the discussion too special in scope to be of class interest. He asked for student suggestions regarding course procedure and books to be used and his method is revealed in a typical complaint that too much time was being given to wranglers.³⁴

³²In a letter to the writer. "His very imperfections endeared him."

³³Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 443.

³⁴Dickinson Miller in *Letters of William James*, Volume 2, p. 18.

Third, there was the department itself composed in the end by James and symbolizing the very intellectual chivalry for which he is remembered. It was his conviction that a university breathes life only when it is inoculated with a few men, at least, of real genius. Not only were Royce, Santayana, Palmer, Munsterberg and James himself individually great but, as Whitehead says, "as a group they are greater still, a group of adventure, of speculation, of search for new ideas."³⁵ These men gathered not to celebrate a school or system of thought in common. Each in his own way was the philosophical enemy of the other. "As much as we differ," James wrote, "we relish the personal element in the difference. We play harmoniously into each other's hands, and are bathed in the same sort of atmosphere."³⁶ In the period when his thought was most mature and organized James encouraged "trading" of students, each professor taking a semester to range his particular forces against the others. James often attended Royce's classes, and a common student recollection has them standing on the steps of Sever Hall in animated disagreement. Each time a colleague published a book James welcomed the "thickening up" of atmosphere.

Upon Royce, a man of immense learning (*The Faculty Minute* on his life said that few men knew so much about so many matters) James depended for thorough exposition of the classic systems and for logic. Palmer, whose versatility included translations of Homer, did careful work in history and ethics.³⁷ Santayana, lecturing with a refinement that is hardly surpassed by his prose, represented esthetics and scholastic philosophy.³⁸ And in a day when philosophy and psychology were still united, Munsterberg manned the laboratory.

Not alone by providing personal and philosophical contrast this outstanding faculty much enhanced James' contribu-

³⁵Alfred North Whitehead, "The Aim of Philosophy," in *Problems of Philosophy*, ed. by Krikorian and Weiner (New York, 1947), p. 707. Tucker of Dartmouth said this department was not only the strongest department of philosophy in the country, but the strongest department of any kind. Cf. *Autobiography of a Philosopher*, George Herbert Palmer, (New York, 1930).

³⁶*Harvard Illustrated Magazine*, Volume 8, p. 95.

³⁷See *Autobiography of a Philosopher*, George Herbert Palmer (New York, 1930).

³⁸Cf. *Letters of George Santayana* (Daniel Cory, ed.) Scribners, New York, 1955. p. xxviii.

tion. Many of those who registered for courses with James were already disposed for or against him by departmental opponents. And since his colleagues made up in various ways for the gaps and limitations of his approach he could the more remorselessly be himself. For a student who was astute, and perhaps advanced students profited most, this was an intellectual climate of genuine stature and power. The interpenetration that resulted was one of the great examples in the liberal tradition.

V

To an assembly of teachers James once said:

Prepare yourself in the subject so well that it shall be always on tap; then in the class-room trust your spontaneity and fling away all further care.³⁹

His own preparation was prodigious. His sense of the ocean that remained unexplored, his relish for seeing an old idea in a fresh way, his hunger for factual disclosures however out of the way the source, all these went with him to his study. He developed despite weak eyes a capacity for rapid reading and could assess the meat of a book with dispatch. He made critical notations on book margins, copying out key passages and summaries and organizing them in indexed notebooks—a task he told his son that made a man a philosopher. Two things stand out in addition to the breadth of his work: He forced himself to read books to which he felt a keen aversion, and he read everything he could get his hands on in biography.

More, James believed and taught that much fine gold could be mined in literature and the arts. To overlook these sources, or in the name of science to exclude them was to atrophy one's sensibilities with a corresponding loss in teaching force. It was in his seminars that students, often through allusion, felt the deep store of his contact with the poem and drama, with museum and symphony hall. He did not consider himself an esthete. "I envy ye the world of art," he wrote his brother, Henry. And he denied the self-sufficiency of the

³⁹*Talks to Teachers*, p. 222.

aesthetic insisting that it must be the overflow of a life rich in other ways. But from his youth he devoted much time and effort to the arts. "Has there been in our generation," writes Miller, "a more cultivated man?"⁴⁰

His reading assignments were heavy. He once defined a professor as one who "distributes bibliographical information" and said he felt a sham as a "walking encyclopedia of erudition." But only his implacable modesty has led some to underestimate the bibliographical bulk which he demanded both of himself and his students. Along with the need, he wrote of his first students, to "stir them up and not bore them," he recognized the challenge to "make them work."⁴¹ This challenge he met on the first day of class with a blackboard filled with many-languaged lists, insisting further that papers and reports be begun early. He spoke of Harvard as "a forcing house for thought," and his articles on university life stress "persistence," "pain," "faithfully busy." Despite the widely known quotations which reveal his disesteem of technical virtuosity, James felt that no degree should be granted a student who, whatever his originality and intellectual promise, had not acquired a "heavy technical apparatus of learning."⁴²

Nevertheless there is evidence that in legislating for a student career James took a wide span of factors into account beyond the standard indices of examination and transcript. There was, for example, the student of psychology who faced an oral examination. It took place in James' home, James sitting on one sofa in his library and the student across from him on another. The method was conversational and there was easy, almost aimless discussion of the intellectual premises of philosophy and psychology. The one direct question asked late in the session was answered briefly. In due time after conversation the student was given to understand that this was sufficient and withdrew. Only the fact that the

⁴⁰Dickinson Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 18. See also his "William James Man and Philosopher" an address delivered at the University of Wisconsin (University of Wisconsin Press, 1942), and "A Debt to James," in *In Commemoration* (New York, 1942), p. 24 ff.

⁴¹Perry, *op. cit.*, Volume I, p. 336.

⁴²"The Ph.D. Octopus," *Memories and Studies*, p. 330.

department had prescribed it and that he never heard to the contrary assured him he had performed satisfactorily.⁴³

From the first James concerned himself with possible avenues of discovery of the different ways in which student energy reserves might be appealed to and set loose.⁴⁴ Individual experiences of varied kind were drawn upon here including the abnormal. Some students, he said, were capable and confident and needed nothing but opportunity to work out their possibilities. But many without marked originality or native force were easily driven aback. And these were the "tender plants," the unfit in the academic struggle for existence who called out his initiative.

The notations on student papers were geared to student stimulation. His comments were pithy, sometimes sharp, and always whether the subject was brain-states in sheep, problems of perception, or the pragmatic theory of meaning, James addressed a person behind the formal construction. On one paper he would write, "Damn it, why cannot you be more clear!" To another, "You have come out at last." To another, "That theory's not a warm reality to me yet—still a cold conception." If he complained of the "loutish character" of the undergraduates, so few of whom showed interest and ability, he took it as reflecting in part on himself. And if he rebuked, he followed it with an increase of personal attention. The function of the university, he once said, was to provide that the lonely thinker be "least lonely, most positively furthered, and most richly fed."⁴⁵

He hovered over a developing idea with anxious care. First thoughts might be more significant than second ones, and the insight than its expression. He encouraged students to set down their ideas without being intimidated by their youth. To think the truth through with one's own experience

⁴³Bernard C. Ewer, "William James as Psychologist," *Personalist* (Spring, 1942), p. 159.

⁴⁴James in his "Energies of Men" says, "The two questions, first that of the possible extent of our powers; and, second, that of the various avenues of approach to them, the various keys for unlocking them in diverse individuals dominate the whole problem of individual and national education." *Memories and Studies*, p. 263 f.

⁴⁵*Memories and Studies*, p. 314.

the compass, regardless of the advantages of standard classifications, was the important thing. His appreciation of such efforts was extravagant. John Elof Boodin, for one, writes of his researches on the problem of time. James seemed to sense something before he himself. He encouraged him to present his work in a seminar of Royce's. This first draft was diffuse and hazy. But laboring further Boodin was soon prepared for a second presentation which James attended and followed with great closeness. The next day he was invited to dinner at the James home and spent the entire evening talking the subject over. James led Boodin on to talk, answered questions with questions, remained noncommittal. Finally with enthusiasm he walked up and said, "Boodin, you have earned your degree. Any man with one original idea deserves a degree."⁴⁶

James became outspoken against the tendency of the university to become "a tyrannical machine." He felt that men unfit for the profession should be properly screened. But he believed that faithful labor, even if commonplace, should be acknowledged formally and added that after all native distinction needs no official stamp. Each student should be lifted to his fullest expression. Where standards could not be met James still refused to abide academic distance.⁴⁷ There was, for instance, a man who having brought his family to Cambridge in order to earn a degree in philosophy could not meet the qualitative test. The impact of the departmental decision to drop him, which James sought to soften and redirect, was intensified when the man's wife became ill and died. No one served the man more closely than James. But in all of this he never reversed the decision.⁴⁸ Still, Palmer records

⁴⁶John Elof Boodin, "William James as I Knew Him," *Personalist*, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁴⁷Cf. Arthur O. Lovejoy's statement: "He (James) had—what is one of the least common qualities—a constant sense that other people have, as he puts it, 'insides of their own,' often quite different from his; and he had an eager desire and an extraordinary power to get outside of what was peculiar to himself and to understand 'from the centre outwards,' what was peculiar to any of his fellows. . . Any spark, or even seeming spark, of originality or uniqueness in his students, or in any man or writing, however little regarded by most of the professional philosophers, aroused his instant interest, his sometimes too generous admiration and a hope that there might be here the disclosure of one of the many aspects of a happily very various universe which an adequate philosophy could not neglect." *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, 1936), p. 313.

⁴⁸John Elof Boodin, *op. cit.*, p. 127-8.

that in their committee, when voting on candidates, James favored the merciful side. "Of course Smith isn't a genius. But, poor devil, how he has worked!"⁴⁹

VI

"He had an uncanny way of coming to know us individually."⁵⁰ The pluralistic universe for James was too great for any one actual mind; many cognizers are required to take in the whole of its facts and worth and every man is afflicted with "a certain blindness." The slightest contact with students, therefore, whatever else its merit, was for James a gain for truth. And he had what one student calls "an empathic interest in everyone." Considering the commitments to writing that came with his position, his administrative tasks, the steady flow of eminent visitors, cares of family, the drain on his energy—"a small teacup full"—of teaching schedules it is the more remarkable that he made time for the individual. But make time he did.

In and out of office hours he was caught by students who came, as did one whose field was history, "to have a word with him, a word of encouragement really, and he never forgot me. I never forgot him."⁵¹ He had a willingness to be interrupted, indeed he is quoted as saying that life is a series of interruptions, and was prodigal with his resources. At his best he was adept in getting to the heart of things, including underlying motives and strains, and a reliable aid in mediating protocol. His suggestions for corrective reading, or for a proposed project that would blend student ability with course demands were acute. But the problems laid before him were often only remotely related to school matters. He was asked to read poetry, importuned for psychological therapy, pressured for the signature-sanction of some crank project. Anxieties were unfolded to him in endless detail. Usually a patient listener at whatever level, his counsel was anything but

⁴⁹George Herbert Palmer in *The Development of Harvard University* edited by Samuel Eliot Morison, (Cambridge, 1930), p. 5.

⁵⁰Edmund B. Delabarre, "Impressions of James in the Late 80's," *Psychological Review, op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁵¹Levi Edgar Young in a letter to the writer.

standardized. A punctilious phrase would often make it stick. To one sophomore who presented him a study card with only philosophical electives on it James said, "Jones, don't you philosophize on an empty stomach!"⁵² To a student who was on the verge of making a career of philosophy James said, "Don't do it. You will be filling your belly with the east-wind." The man went on to distinguish himself in science.⁵³ However unpredictable might be James' advice many were the number who sought it and who found themselves talking to him after five minutes "as if I had known him all my life."⁵⁴ The extent of this following was more apparent to his colleagues during James' temporary absences. Royce, for example, once wrote a letter to James complaining that he was forced to psychologize and brood over students "who formerly confided in you and now come to me for relief and consolation."⁵⁵ Somehow James managed to attract and sustain where others, as well qualified, did not. There is, for example, something of pathos in the confession of his English ally, F. C. S. Schiller, that on James' death, friends tried to attach themselves to him but that he could not retain their allegiance. "I suppose," he writes, "I was too distant either spiritually or geographically."⁵⁶

His passion for first-handedness alerted him to people of unique backgrounds. Exponents of psychic research of such questionable standing as Madam Palladino as well as representatives of minority groups and visitors from the Orient were among the number who were invited as guest speakers to James' classes and seminars. He would introduce the speaker reassuringly, ask for candid statement, sit close by, and remain a considerate go-between. There were times when such visitors became uncomfortable under the inevitable question

⁵²Morison (ed.), *op. cit.*

⁵³This was Walter Bradford Cannon later of Harvard Medical School. "The remark," he says, "probably sprang from his quick recognition of my lack of fitness rather than from his disdain for philosophy. Whatever the reason for his advice, I followed it." *The Way of an Investigator* (New York, 1945), p. 19.

⁵⁴F. C. S. Schiller so describes his first meeting with James. *Must Philosophers Disagree*, p. 61.

⁵⁵Perry, *op. cit.*, Volume 2, p. 804.

⁵⁶F. C. S. Schiller, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

period. James would then arise and say in his inimitable way, "I thank Mr. Young for his contribution. It is always interesting to get new viewpoints on religion and philosophy. This Mr. Young has certainly given us. Gentlemen of the class, let us stand and thank Mr. Young." Always he had a new friend.⁵⁷

Students saw a lot of him on the side. Informal gatherings, not to mention many graduate classes, were held at his home. A supper *en famille* was often included. Again, students were prone to come forward at the end of the class hour and extend discussion. "Come over to the house," James would say, "and we will talk it over." Starbuck postulates that James made appointments for conferences at a designed time, eleven or five o'clock, in order to usher students into the mealtime hospitality of his home.⁵⁸ "Above all," he said to an assembly of educators at Stanford, "offer the opportunity of higher personal contacts."⁵⁹ And so the James table was frequently graced by a visiting dignitary. Students were fitted into such groups with sometimes only first name introductions. One, for instance, wrote home about a certain guest who had been at the James' home and talked a lot. "I gathered he wrote books," he said by way of identification. This it turned out, was James' renowned brother, Henry.⁶⁰ In the course of the meal James encouraged lightweight intellectual grist but kept things on a personal basis. Around the board he had what Palmer calls "an aptitude for vicariousness."⁶¹

Apparently James did not have his own kind of student. Little, unless it was bigotry or indolence (and some temperamental lapses on his own part) could push anyone out of his

⁵⁷Levi Edgar Young in a letter to the writer. He was asked to speak on a little-known religious sect. He describes James' personal relations as "simple and kind."

⁵⁸Edwin D. Starbuck, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁵⁹*Memories and Studies*, p. 362.

⁶⁰B. A. G. Fuller in a letter to the writer. He writes that William James was "immensely amused" by this incident, but would not let Fuller pass it on to Henry.

⁶¹One wonders how much Palmer was influenced by James in his essay the *Ideal Teacher*. Vicariousness, he says, the power to put ourselves in others' places, is the first prerequisite. "It is in this chief business of the artistic teacher, to labor imaginatively himself in order to diminish the labors of his slender pupil, that most of our failures occur."

range. Of artistic makeup, depressed for example by the kind of floor under his feet, or a superabundance of foliage, or ill-proportioned architecture and even more deeply responsive to personalities, James must have struggled for this quality. He taught that people who had nervous burdens to carry, perhaps hereditary, could order their lives well and perhaps capitalize on their "degenerate sensitiveness." This was autobiographical of his own effort. Nor again did James seek disciples in the schoolish sense but put a premium on independence. In his youth he had been impressed by a student of Agassiz's who had told him that he now felt qualified to go anywhere on earth, his notebook in hand, and proceed scientifically. "Agassiz must be a great teacher," James wrote in his journal.⁶² Men from many fields looked to him for guidance. But though committed to a movement which in its precipitous stages he called a "crusade," he refused to superimpose his thought on anyone, believing this to be a kind of crime. Provide the materials of growth, champion what was one's own, yes. But tamper coercively by dint of professional strength, no. One of the quotations which he often repeated to classes, and James disliked repetition, was from Ezekiel, "Son of man stand upon *thy* feet and I will speak to thee." He once said that the darkest day for a university is when it begins to stamp a hard and fast type of character on its children. "Our undisciplinables are our proudest product," he said of Harvard.⁶³

VII

Finally, James remained diffident about his task; was never sure of himself, his subject nor his method. Students were attentive and he was responsive to signs of approval at whatever remove. But professorial authority, flattering to some, was always somewhat frightening to him. He was grateful when he could shift to a new idea, a new course, more so when he could forget all about it. "Why," he once said of Royce, "the man enjoys the act of teaching."⁶⁴ And again, "I

⁶²Cf. *Philosophy of William James*, ed. H. M. Kallen (Modern Library), p. 22.

⁶³*Memories and Studies*, p. 355.

⁶⁴*Harvard Illustrated Magazine*, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

actually hate lecturing." During his final semester he said to a student, "I have lectured all these years and yet here I am on the way to my class in trepidation."⁶⁵ Looking back over his career he "shuddered at the bad instruction," and in this spirit advised a junior to be as methodical as possible, since he said his disorderliness had stood in the way—"too incoherent and rambling."⁶⁶ There was the monotony of the process and the abiding hunger for praise which he took to be the philosopher's goal. His retirement brought him a great sense of relief, helped though he acknowledged he had been in his work by the university climate.⁶⁷

But if James ever taught as if he hated it, few of his associates were aware of it. His career saw philosophy classes grow in size from one hundred when courses were prescribed to as many as five hundred when elective. At his retirement about three-fourths of the Harvard student body were taking one or more courses in this widely-known department drawn by his colleagues as well as himself.⁶⁸

VIII

And so we return to an insight which James claimed to derive from an unlearned carpenter: "There is very little difference between one man and another, but what little there is is very important."⁶⁹ Teachers of philosophy, after all, can be fitted into basic types.: Great lecturers variously distinguished by their almost dramatic power or massive erudition. Expositors, masters of comparison and relation. Dialecticians who have a rigorous command of implication and validity. Analysts who strive with infinite patience for the clear and distinct. Socratic midwives who elicit latent ideas from student minds. James could hardly be rounded into any of these types, unless it be the last. He was a little of each and not perhaps pre-eminently any. In each category he had colleagues who surpassed him. Yet it might be said that his particular

⁶⁵Dickinson Miller in *Letters of William James*, Volume 2, p. 16.

⁶⁶Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 442-3.

⁶⁷See his letter on retirement. *Letters of William James*, Volume 2, p. 279.

⁶⁸*Harvard Illustrated Magazine*, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁶⁹*Will to Believe and Other Essays* (New York, 1897), p. 256.

genius was in the composite; that at his best he exhibited such unusual combinations as zest and scholarliness, flexibility and control, originality and clarity. And so he did.

But what James said and did as a teacher demonstrated something more pervasive and, in comparison with "time-caught" elements of his thought, permanent: That a maieutic approach, defined primarily as the abiding concern for communion of mind—getting inside the student and working, as it were, from the centre outwards—is compatible with all other methods. No one of the teacher types, nor combination of them, need sacrifice it. Indirect it may become in variable teacher-student relations and subject matter. But it is the presupposition of all genuine teaching. It was the constant in James' technique through the whole of his career.

Further, James showed that scholarliness and discipline need not—though they often do—entail the seclusion and exclusion of personality; that wealth of spirit is not essentially—though it often is practically—incompatible with exact thinking and exacting teaching. In every facet of academic life, from lecture to examination, James claimed the right to be a man in the fullest sense, endowing all with the decisively personal radiation that was himself.⁷⁰

On his retirement some of his students and associates paid tribute to him in the *Harvard Illustrated Magazine*. Reprints were requested from many parts of the world, and several editions were necessary. Moved by this gesture of good-will, James wrote the editor of the magazine, H. V. Kaltenborn, a letter of thanks which concluded, "I have tried all my life to be good, but have only succeeded in becoming great."⁷¹

Let it be granted that a legend in the academic world, even in critical hands, is pliable; that recorded estimates of

⁷⁰Withal it should be remembered that James' conscience of mind was sensitized by long scientific training. He practiced his own maxim in the classroom, "The greatest proof that a man is *sui compos* is his ability to suspend a belief in the presence of an emotionally exciting idea. To give this power is the highest result of education," (*Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 2, p. 308)

⁷¹H. V. Kaltenborn in a letter to the writer. For his evaluation of James' teaching influence see his *Fifty Fabulous Years* (New York, 1950) pp. 47-50. Cf. Rollo Walter Brown's portrait of James in his *Harvard Yard in the Golden Age* (New York, 1948) pp. 67-84.

him by student, colleague and friend alike are tinctured with charity. Admit too that the generosity of their esteem reflects that of his. Still to those who sat under him William James was great. Great because in teaching philosophy he taught students as well, because in the process of learning he helped them discover themselves. He was great because he was unable to teach what he had not himself experienced and because in experience nothing human was foreign to him.