The Bases, Limits, and Values of Pluralism: An Engagement with William James

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This is pluralism, somewhat rhapsodically expressed.
—William James

IN ENGAGING with the pluralist theory of William James, I address a thinker for whom the contrast between pluralism and monism, as well as the arguments for each, was the focus of attention. The preponderance of James’s arguments, certainly of his most intensely polemical formulations, is directed against the monistic theories of Hegel, of Bradley, and of other philosophical Idealists. He repeatedly attacked their metaphysics, their epistemologies, and especially their moral philosophies. Notwithstanding their centrality in his works, however, James’s disputes with Idealists (or, as at intervals he labeled them, “intellectualists,” “rationalists,” and “tender-minded” thinkers) are not the primary focus of this essay. This is not because Idealism and related positions are no longer with us. Although declared moribund if not dead by Bertrand Russell and much of the “analytic” philosophy influenced by him, it lived and lives on in Collingwood and Oakeshott, and positions akin to it remain prominent in moral and political theory in various versions of wholism and communitarianism. Accordingly, the bearing of James’s arguments on these views will be a concern in what follows.

The great merit of James’s thinking, however, is that he developed a theory of pluralism that is deeper and more complex than most of those current in social, political, and moral theory. He sought to under-

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1 I would like to thank several colleagues who have read and commented helpfully on this paper: Jane Bennett, William Connolly, Alfonso Damico, Kennan Ferguson, George Kateb, and participants in a panel on William James at the Southern Political Science Association Annual Meetings to which an earlier version of the paper was presented.
stand how and why pluralities develop, what sustains or diminishes them, and why some of them should, and others of them should not, be valued. In part because he addressed the entire range of philosophical issues—cosmological, metaphysical, epistemological, moral, aesthetic, and religious—his pluralism is philosophically richer than most of the many versions of that theory. (It should be added that James had a strong interest in, and a receptive attitude toward, mysticism and various parapsychological phenomena such as the claimed experiences of mediums.) Thus his pluralist theory speaks quite directly to most of the issues that are currently being controverted under that rubric. Most important here, although James had no developed political theory (note the omission of that category in the foregoing list), his theorizing bears importantly on a number of much-disputed political issues.

_Moi-même, je suis un pluraliste._ But what does this mean? And when we have explained its meaning (no easy task given the diversity of views that are commonly gathered under this family resemblance term), why am I a pluralist? What are and what should be the commitments signaled by my self-identification as a pluralist? The present engagement with William James is a first step in addressing these questions. As per my title, I critically examine James’s views concerning the bases, limits, and values of pluralism.

1. The Bases of Pluralism

The sparsest, the most minimal, version of James’s claim to the undeniability of at least some pluralities, and hence the unavoidability of at least some acceptance of pluralism, is part of his argument against “hard” determinism. Pluralism “is not obliged to stand for any particular amount of plurality, for it triumphs over monism if the smallest morsel of disconnectedness is once found to exist. ‘Ever not quite’ is all it says [needs to say] to monism; while monism is obliged to prove that what pluralism asserts can in no amount whatever possibly be true—an infinitely more difficult task.”

2 Because it was essential to his argument for humanly produced novelties in experience, and also to his promotion of a “strenuous” life of action that seeks to ameliorate the human condition, James believed that pluralism in at least this minimal form is not only true but of great moral and political value. To deny it is either to sink into the torpor of deep pessimism (as with Schopen-

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hauer) or to take flight (as with Leibniz) into an illusory empyrean of uncritical optimism.

As descriptive analysis or critical metaphysics and epistemology, however, in the bare form just discussed pluralism is primarily negative: it merely denies what monism is obliged to assert. And rather than claim to prove that free will and melioristic activities are possible, it argues only that we should believe and act on the belief that they are available to us. James was often “rhapsodic” in championing this belief, but his “pluralism rhapsodically expressed”3 was a much deeper, richer and complex doctrine.

The pluralities over which a pluralist theory generalizes and which it seeks to assess can be grouped or classified in numerous ways (some of them themselves constituting prominent features of James’s pluralism). One such classification—albeit not one that James himself explicitly uses—can be thought of as by or into modes or domains in which pluralities are experienced or, alternatively, in terms of their sources in our experience. We can distinguish, for example, cosmological, ontological or metaphysical, psychological, ethical and aesthetical, and religious pluralities. As we see below, all of these can also be viewed as cognitive and conative if we attend to the manner in which they are identified/created in and out of our experience.

A. Cosmological and metaphysical pluralities

The notion of cosmological pluralities is at first sight rejected by James. A central feature of his philosophy is that the universe is a constantly changing plenitude of particulars that presents itself to us without order or any other rationality. It is a Many, but not a Many that forms groups of Ones that are in part discrete from the Many. A form of pluralism does enter his cosmology when, in his most mystical moments, he sympathetically considers the possibility that there is no single universe but rather a multiverse, the components of which are related to one another exclusively in that they are parts of a multiverse. For the most part, however, he thinks in terms of a universe, and it can be called a mode of plurality, if at all, only in the sense that it is the largest, the most encompassing of our categories. If pluralities are always

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3 “Not unfortunately the universe is wild,—game-flavored as a hawk’s wing. . . . This is pluralism, somewhat rhapsodically expressed.” McD., 135. The quotation is from the chapter entitled “Radical Empiricism” and is in the collection The Will to Believe. I have consulted this work in William James: Pragmatism and Other Writings, edited and with an introduction by Giles Gunn (New York: Penguin Books, 2000). Hereafter Gunn plus page number and where possible the book or essay in which the passage occurs.
groups of collections of items the members of which are in identifiable ways connected with one another but in some significant respects discrete from all others, then the cosmos contains no pluralities. Viewed in this way, “the universe” is the class or category that includes all other categories and if it can be subdivided at all it is only by distinguishing between the elements of space and time in which all experience occurs. But at a somewhat lower level of abstraction James distinguishes between “spaces” and “space” and between “times” and “time.”

The categories “space” and “time” are no part of de rerum natura; they are devisings that human beings have constructed as a step toward reducing the chaos of particulars presented to them by nature. James denies that we have what Kant called intuitions of space and time. Rather, these concepts, as with all others, are human creations that we develop out of the attempt to make distinctions among and establish relationships between the particulars of experience. For this reason, although they operate in part at the cosmological level, they must also be viewed and assessed epistemologically. Because they are the most general categories into which or by which we organize and give meaning to experience, we can also think of them as ontological or metaphysical, as the most general features of our experience and hence of reality as it is constructed by us. (James’s insistence on the created or constructed character of all concepts is the feature of his philosophy that he emphasizes when he calls it a humanism as well as a pragmatism and [later] a radical or pure empiricism.)

In addition to space and time, in his metaphysics James sometimes speaks of other (distinct) “existent things” by which he seems to mean entities or phenomena the existence of which we have no choice but to “posit.” The most basic of these “existents” he sometimes calls “consciousness,” sometimes “thought,” and sometimes the fact that “thought goes on.” (“Consciousness” is the term he most often uses in The Principles of Psychology and writings from the same period, but it is largely replaced by the latter terms in A Pluralist Universe and other later writings.) We can identify various features of this existent (including neurophysiological features necessary to it) but, as with free will, we cannot prove that it exists. But because it is the condition of all further thinking and meaningful experience we are obliged to posit it.

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Other candidates for the standing of “existent things” will be considered later; insofar as we can identify them, we can say that at its deepest levels James’s metaphysics, in contrast with his cosmology, is pluralistic.

**B. Psychological pluralities**

Every human being is distinguished from all others by sets of more or less identifiable characteristics. These include the array of sensations that they have experienced and the perceptions that they have formed out of their sensations; and they include temperaments, emotions, dispositions, habits, inclinations, purposes, intentions, and beliefs. Each of these characteristics is a complex of particulars, all of which fluctuate internally and in their relations with one another. As experience unfolds and differentiating and organizing conceptions develop (processes discussed below), associations of various kinds—e.g., of simultaneity, succession, resemblance, causation—are noticed, held together, and remembered. These associations and commonalities develop over time and are gathered, usually loosely, in consciousness or in thought—in particular in memory—that is in an emergent assemblage or (more often) a loose concatenation of concepts that are constructed, by thinking, out of sensations and perceptions. To the extent that they are “taken” and held together, they constitute the identity of the person. There are of course commonalities among the identities of various persons, most particularly commonalities in neurophysiological structures and functions such as the brain, the central nervous system more generally, and other physical features. These commonalities are often augmented and solidified by interactions and other shared experiences, especially among those who participate in the same physical and cultural environment. But there is one distinction that every person does and must make. “One great splitting of the whole universe into two halves is made by each of us: . . . [W]e all draw the line of division between them in a different place. . . . [The names of these two halves] are ‘me’ and ‘not-me.’ . . . The altogether unique kind of interest which each human mind feels in those parts of creation which it can call me or mine may be a moral riddle, but it is a fundamental psychological fact.”

Psychologically, then, we construct both unities and diversities, onenesses and manynesses, out of the stream of our experience. The characteristics that unite to form our personal identities are distinguished from those that do not do so, and distinguish us from the identities of

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7McD., 74, from *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1, chap. 1. The chapter is entitled “The Stream of Thought.”
other persons. These identity-forming pluralities change over time, and our similarities and differences with other persons change with them. (At the risk of repetition, it should be underlined that it is part of the conception of a plurality that it has limits; by bringing some things together, it sets them apart from other things.)

The distinction between me and all other persons is the most fundamental aggregating and disaggregating difference, but, as already implied, there are innumerable others. Whether or not they constitute part of my identity, every perception brings two or more sensations together, and every conception that is more than a perception brings together two or more perceptions. As thought goes on, perceptions accumulate and conceptions develop, constantly creating “kinds” and “classes” of things that are thought about, referred to, and acted upon, often with little or no continuing attention to the particulars that they unite. This capacity to think in terms of kinds and classes is what most importantly differentiates human beings from the “brutes,” and unusual abilities to do so and hence to think quickly and in encompassing ways is one of the marks of people who are “sagacious.” Although the thinking of most human beings occurs in and with a comparatively small number of perceptions and conceptions that they form early in life, there is no theoretical limit to the number or diversity of those that might be formed. Thus to inventory presently existing and operative pluralities is first and foremost an empirical task, the task of identifying the perceptions-cum-conceptions that have been formed and used by this or that person or among these or those peoples. But because new perceptions and conceptions are constantly being formed, it is also a task that can never be completed.

C. Cognitive pluralities

Knowing (but also mistaken thinking and believing) consists fundamentally of forming relations among our conceptions (often called our ideas) and between them and sensations and perceptions. Because sensations are constantly changing and perceptions differ over time and among persons, the ideas we form, and the partial unities in which we come to believe, and in terms of which we think and act, also change and differ. With one important exception, if and when we come to believe that our ideas stand in a “satisfactory” relationship with one another and with our sensations and perceptions, we do so “pragmatically” not intrinsically. That is, we ask, generically, whether thinking in terms of and acting upon these rather than those ideas “makes a difference” and, more particularly, whether doing so brings us to, or closer to, a “satisfactory” relation between our ideas and our sensations and...
perceptions. Because the pragmatic test or method works primarily with actions, and because actions differ from person to person, the method frequently, but not always, results in disagreement not agreement. To the extent that it does the former, it either reduces pluralities to the differences (usually psychological) among the characteristics of single persons or adds to the number of pluralities.

The exception concerns logical and mathematical beliefs that develop out of or with the emergence of shared language. Logical and mathematical propositions are created by stipulating the meanings of words and deducing the implications of those meanings. These propositions are everywhere and eternally true in the sense that the inferences that they warrant hold unless the meaning of the words is changed. Logical and mathematical truths greatly facilitate thinking (they create a subset of pluralities that are firm and definite among all those who understand and respect the logical or mathematical truths), but it is always a further question whether anything in the empirical world corresponds to them.

D. Ethical and aesthetic pluralities

James holds that there is no legitimate move from facts to values. Thus even if or when we agree concerning the facts relevant to an ethical or aesthetic judgment, it is more likely than not that we will evaluate them differently according to our accepted beliefs, temperaments, dispositions, habits, emotions, and purposes. For reasons discussed above, this means that ethical and aesthetic judgments constitute one of the two greatest and most difficult to reduce sources of pluralities. (The other is religious beliefs.) This conviction did not prevent James from attempting to develop an ethical (and to a lesser extent an aesthetic) theory that he hoped would diminish somewhat—but not eliminate—ethical disagreements and hence pluralities. Ethical and aesthetic judgments cannot be inferred from facts, but they must be (pragmatically) responsive to them. Thus “there can be no final truth in ethics . . . until the last man has had his experience and said his say.” But this was by no means a matter of regret for him. If he had an unshakable ethical conviction, it was that an abundant plurality of ethical judgments is to be welcomed.

E. Religious pluralities

Religious beliefs concern individual conceptions or imaginings, usually dim but sometimes intensely vivid, of a something larger than our

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8McD., 611. The essay is “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” and is also available in Gunn.
present consciousness. Because, as with ethics and aesthetics, there is no fact of the matter, diversity is what we should expect and is what we abundantly experience. James thought that there could be a “science” of religion, by which he meant a disciplined empirical study of the fluctuating array of past and present religious beliefs that seeks to identify the conditions under which religious beliefs have developed, the relations among them, and the values and disvalues experienced by those who hold them. His *Varieties of Religious Experience* (hereafter VRE) is such a study on a grand scale and it revels in the enormous diversities that it discerns and displays. As with his ethics, James’s strongest conviction was that we should welcome, no, treasure, the fact that we occupy a religious multiverse. It is fair to say that it is in his thinking about religion that his axiological pluralism becomes most “rhapsodic.”

2. Ways in Which Pluralities Develop

(1) As noted, the primary unity, the condition of all others, is given by the postulate that thought goes on and makes possible a loose identity that allows me to distinguish myself from all others and to have sensations, perceptions, and ideas and imaginings that are mine. Given this postulate, some things can be said about conditions necessary to thinking. This is first and foremost the task of psychology as a natural science, that is, first and foremost neurophysiology. By neurophysiological studies (primarily on cadavers but supplemented by examining and reasoning from partial paralyzes and other malfunctions of the functions thus far identified of discrete parts of the brain) we can form hypotheses concerning the brain, the central nervous system more generally, and other aspects of physiology and anatomy. Studies of this kind can and should be supplemented by consulting common sense, by introspection, and by empirical, experimental psychological investigations. Some such hypotheses have been repeatedly verified, but, as with all

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9 Is “the existence of so many religious types and sects and creeds regrettable? . . . I answer No emphatically. And my reason is that I do not see how it is possible that creatures in such different positions and with such different powers as human individuals are, should have exactly the same functions and the same duties. No two of us have identical difficulties, nor should we be expected to work out identical solutions. Each, from his peculiar angle of observation, takes in a certain sphere of fact and trouble, which each must deal with in a unique manner. . . . If an Emerson were forced to be a Wesley, or a Moody forced to be a Whitman, the total human consciousness of the divine would suffer. The divine can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions. Each attitude being a syllable in human nature’s total message, it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely” (McD., 760, from “Conclusions” to VRE). I have consulted the whole of VRE in Kuklick. James’s personal religious beliefs leaned heavily toward polytheism and a conception of each of the gods as finite.
causal generalizations, they always leave unexplained remainders in the phenomenon. There is always (in one of James’s favorite phrases) a “something more.” This is most emphatically the case with ethics, aesthetics, and religion, but thus far it is true of all experience. That is, scientific psychology sometimes identifies necessary but never sufficient conditions of motor activities, thinking, believing, the emotions, purposes, and so forth. James sometimes allows that physics and chemistry have identified genuine laws concerning the physical universe (but sometimes denies it) and scientific psychology should hold out the hope and pursue the aspiration of doing so. But there are no such laws as yet, and the belief in their possibility serves primarily as a spur to continued efforts. Otherwise put, it is an expression of his friend Peirce’s dictum that we must never “block the road to inquiry.”

Given the postulate that thought goes on, and helped by neurophysiological investigations and the other kinds of investigations just mentioned, we can arrive at well-supported understandings of, or at least presently warranted beliefs concerning, various aspects of feeling, thinking, believing, and acting. Doing so makes it possible to understand how various further unities (further to those given by consciousness) develop and come to be believed in and acted upon. The most elemental (and indispensable) of the processes by which further unities develop is the identification—which usually means the forming—of associations among perceptions of sensations. Sensations are always particular and always changing (the Heraclitian elements of James’s philosophy), but our faculties of perception sometimes allow us to notice similarities among sensations and, as thinking continues, to group or classify them as kinds. As these noticing (and rememberings) are repeated, we become able to subsume increasingly large numbers of particulars under classes, refer to them all together, and reason concerning relationships among them. This process is further simplified, extended, and accelerated by the development of language. (But James holds, controversially and I think wrongly, that thought requires neither language nor even images.)

(2) The process of forming conceptions/ideas has a subjective quality or element that is ineliminable. The kinds or classes are empty without the sensations and perceptions that they gather and distinguish, and the “whats” (as opposed to the “thats”) that we experience depend upon attention, memory, emotional state, interests and purposes, and many other factors that fluctuate and otherwise differ within and between persons.

It is a further, metaphysical and unprovable, assumption that our sensations and perceptions accurately capture (James insists that they do not copy) the “whats” that we believe they do. Broadly, this is the assumption that we and the world are made for each other such that we sometimes connect with and to the world through our sensations
and perceptions. This assumption is often pragmatically warranted by our experience, but it cannot be shown to be undeniable. And there is the further assumption, also sometimes pragmatically warranted, sometimes not, that the world is “plastic” to us, that we can alter it by thinking and acting. James had a deep need to believe in and to act upon these further assumptions.

(3) As conceptions multiply, new relations are created and experienced among them. The most encompassing conceptions are those of space and time. We gather all of our experiences as having voluminosity and duration. With the partial exception of mystical experiences, we experience all of our sensations and perceptions, and form all of our ideas, as being within the “existent” of space and time. In this abstract perspective each of them is one with all the others. All other relationships, and hence all other unities and disunities, are within, are further specifications of, space and time relationships.

Space and time relationships are the most encompassing and in that sense the most universal; but they are abstract and often loosely connected. In their particulars they vary and fluctuate within and among persons. Thus generalizations concerning them are not universal in the sense of “undeniable.”

(4) In the latter sense of universal, the only fully universal generalizations are the a priori truths of mathematics and logic. Abstractly, these admit of no exceptions. To repeat, however, it is always a further question, one that can only be answered empirically, whether these propositions hold for relations among any empirical particulars.

(5) All other relationships, whether of unities or disunities, and hence all classifications, generalizations, and inferences concerning them, depend upon sensations/cum/perceptions and ideas formed concerning them. Accordingly, they are to be assessed empirically and only secondarily logically. As already noted, the most general and appropriate criteria for assessing them are pragmatic. A pragmatically “satisfactory” relationship is always between or among our ideas, not between or among the objects that we perceive. But we connect them back to the objects of sensation and perception by experiencing whether or in what respects thinking and acting on them move us toward the objectives or purposes for which we think and act. Thus the most general criterion of a “satisfactory agreement” among our ideas and between them and their purported objects is that thinking and acting on the ideas “make a difference”; that the thinking and acting lead us to or toward out-

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10 This is a main tenet of James’s empiricism. But he distinguished himself from “associationist” empiricists such as Hume, Mill, and Bain in holding that relations among particulars are as “real” as are the particulars. This commitment is clearly vital to his pluralism.
comes different from thinking and acting on other ideas. It follows that the criteria of assessment are ineliminably teleological. Take away the object or purpose and no assessment can be made.

(6) All thinking and acting have a telos, but the interests, intentions, and purposes with and on which we think and act often fluctuate within our own consciousness, and our interests, intentions, and purposes often differ from those of others. These fluctuations and differences can be and in fact often are reduced in various ways (some of which will be considered below), but they can never be entirely eliminated. (This is one of the differences between human beings and animals.) All thinking and acting are teleological, but there is no fixed, substantive telos common to all thinking and acting. This is most markedly the case as regards ethical, aesthetic, and religious thinking and acting, but it is true of all human experience. The pluralities most often noticed, discussed, and debated are usually due in large part to various combinations of shared and differing interests and purposes.

3. What Pluralities Have Developed or Can Be Expected to Develop?

(1) Every plurality, that is, every class or kind of thing or action, is created or accepted by one or more persons. All pluralities are “owned” by someone. The pluralities are not in rerum natura, they are “made” by persons who form ideas that gather “eaches” into “manys.” The notion of a purported plurality that is not owned either is empty or is the expression of a desire not yet satisfied or a wish not yet fulfilled. Pluralities experienced as “satisfactory” tend to be sustained; those that prove to be pragmatically unsatisfactory are, or ought to be, unmade.

(2) Many, indeed most, pluralities are believed in and thought and acted upon on the basis of already made and accepted classifications. Most are accepted as real through education, acculturation, and the consolidation of habits of thought and belief. James was both impressed by the prevalence of such “received” pluralities and often welcoming of it. Some of his celebrations of it are no less than dismaying. Here is an example: “Habit is the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor. It alone prevents the hardest and most repulsive walks of life from being deserted by those brought up to tread therein. . . . It dooms us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or early choice, and to make the best of a pursuit that disagrees, because there is no other for which we are fitted, and it is too late to begin again. It keeps the social strata from mixing. . . . It is well for the
world that in most of us, by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again.”

Proof, if any were needed, that a commitment to pluralism does not necessarily go together with or lead to a liberal or progressive social and political theory!

Observations such as these, which recur with disheartening regularity in James’s writings, coexist and are in some tension with other views, some of which sustain the elitist quality of the remarks just quoted, but others of which qualify both his elitism and his enthusiasm for a kind of stasis in human relationships. As partly anticipated by discussions thus far, James was an ardent defender and promoter of notions of novelty, innovation, creativity, and other forms and sources of change. As the passage just quoted from VRE indicates, he was convinced that the religious beliefs of most people are simply accepted from the teachings of parents and religious authorities. But it was in part for this reason that he paid little attention to creeds, sects, denominations, and dogmas. His attention, rather, focused on the thinking of religious visionaries such as Fox and Wesley, on the women and men who added to the already available stock of conceptions of the divine, and to the significance of such conceptions for human life. Despite the elitist tendencies of his thinking, however, he frequently insisted that the possibilities of or for novel conceptions, and hence new pluralities, are available to all human beings. If the work of creating them is primarily done by a talented few, we can never be certain when or whence such individuals will make their appearance; in essays such as “A Certain Blindness in Human Beings” he lamented the unwillingness of himself and most human beings to appreciate the creative quality of the thinking and acting of persons from classes and walks of life different from their own.


12 This essay is in McD., 629–44, and is available in various other collections of James’s writings. For more general arguments concerning the possibilities and the great value of innovative thinking, see especially chaps. 9–13 in Some Problems of Philosophy: A Beginning of an Introduction to Philosophy, published posthumously in 1911 (hereafter SPP), all of which are concerned with the concepts of innovation and novelty. I have consulted this work in Kuklick. Here is a representative passage: The “vicious intellectualism” that he attributes to the monists “has had to butcher our perceptual life in order to make it ‘comprehensible.’ Meanwhile the concrete perceptual flux, taken just as it comes, offers in our own activity situations perfectly comprehensible instances of [human] causal agency. [Agreeing with Hume he allows that] the transitive causation in them does not . . . stick out as a separate piece of fact for conception to fix upon. Rather does a whole subsequent field grow continuously out of a whole antecedent field because it seems to yield new being of the nature called for [by the causal agent], while the feeling of causality-at-work flavors the entire sequence as salt flavors the water in which it is dissolved” (1993). For James, the ur-home of the notion of causality is our actions; our forming a belief, a desire, and a will and producing the desired effect by the action we take. He raises but does not attempt to answer the question whether this conception of causality can be employed in respect to nature generally.
(3) A pluralist *theory* is a second-order construction that seeks to gather and generalize concerning the formation and experiencing of various classes or kinds of particulars. Because James was convinced that pluralism accords with all or nearly all of our thinking and believing, he thought that issuing reminders of the plethora of pluralities, and explaining them as far as one can, was all that was necessary to establishing its correctness. Such theories are valuable less because they teach us something that we do not know than as antidotes to monistic theories. (It is probably accurate to say that James expended more intellectual energy in attacking the monistic theories of, especially, Hegel and Bradley, than he devoted to developing his own version of pluralism.) He was generous in recognizing the attractions of monism (he thought of monisms as sources of intellectual and more especially spiritual comfort—and was chagrined by the unsurprising refusal of the monists to appreciate this concession to them)—but he credited Bergson and to a lesser extent Peirce with rescuing him from it. Consistent with his conviction that there is always a “something more,” however, he held back from the claim that pluralism will always defeat all alternative theories.

(4) The pluralities that have been and now exist can be grouped or classified under various categories or classifications. One such classificatory scheme is the following:

a. Particulars as subjects of discourse. Having developed languages, we can think and talk about all particulars save perhaps those experienced mystically. The universe is (almost) one in that we can think and talk about all of the particulars that we have thus far experienced in it. What and how much we can say about them varies from case to case, but we can think and talk about those aspects of our experience with which we are acquainted (*connaître*) but of which we know (*savoir*) very little.

b. Continuities. Perceiving continuities and forming ideas concerning them, we can think, talk, and act by passing from one to the other. Doing so is greatly aided and augmented by language.

b.1. Among the continuities that we experience and collect conceptually are relationships of “influence.” One particular is perceived to be altered, in itself or in its relations with others, by the influence on it of another particular.

b.2. The strongest such continuities are called by us causal. A causes changes in B. As regards physical causation, causation among physical particulars, James accepts Hume’s argument that we never know the “intrinsic” cause of such causal continuities. But he thinks that our experience often warrants assigning special definiteness and importance to the relationships/continuities that we call causal. This is
because the relationships have been perceived as invariant in our experience thus far. Natural science has identified causal laws concerning the physical universe. These begin as hypotheses, but as they are repeatedly confirmed we are justified in calling them causal laws. The natural science of psychology has identified putative causal laws concerning interactions among parts of the brain, in the central nervous system more generally, and between the central nervous system and the organs and musculature of animals and human beings. Or, rather, it has advanced hypotheses concerning these relationships that have (thus far) repeatedly been confirmed.

As already noted, the strongest examples of causal laws concern what James calls “intentional causation.” If A believes W, forms the intention X to perform action Y to achieve purpose Z, then A will perform, or attempt to perform, action Y. This sequence is invariable and completes itself unless the W, the X, and the Z change or some forces internal or external to A prevent A from attempting to perform, or from performing, Y.

c. Generic unities. Through conceptualizations, aided and abetted by language, we gather or class particulars into kinds. We do this for a myriad of purposes that include but are not limited to identifying relations of similarity and dissimilarity, continuity and discontinuity, influence and causality or their absence. The test of the value of these classifications is whether employing them moves us toward a more satisfactory way of thinking and especially of acting about or in response to the particulars they class.

d. Unities of purpose. All unities have a teleological function, but because there are continuities and durabilities among purposes, some classifications should be regarded as purpose-specific. This is true within the thinking and acting of individuals and it is also true of persons who share a past, a language, a culture, an ideology, a religion, a national or party identification, etc. But it must be emphasized that many, or rather most, of the classifications that are regularly accepted and employed are inherited from the past and acted upon with little reflection. They are purposive, but the purposes for which they were formed are explicitly considered primarily when there are conflicts within or among classifications. An important role of philosophers, and of educated, thoughtful persons more generally, is to challenge received classifications and to recognize and be responsive to others who do so.

In most cases, these unities develop “drop by drop” and “ambulando,” thereby creating larger unities or breaking up previously established ones. But some connections are made “saltatorially,” that is, by creative leaps made by persons of rare abilities and/or intense intellec-
tual, artistic, or spiritual energies and powers.\textsuperscript{13} As further unities develop and achieve acceptance, the possibilities for reasoning concerning them are augmented. In particular, what James calls the principle or method of “skipped intermediaries and transferred relations” becomes more widely available. “Skipped intermediaries” means taking the whole of the plurality as encompassing all of its parts and “transferred relations” means transferring from one plurality to another to the extent that one perceives commonalities between them. When reasoning in this way we are obliged to return to the particulars that form the unities in question only if we experience conflicts among them or disconnections between the plurality from which our thinking begins and that or those to which we relate it. James is aware that reasoning, or more generally thinking, in this way often leads to the kinds of over-classification and over-generalization so prominent in stereotypical and bigoted thinking, but his usual emphasis is on the ways in which it speeds and otherwise facilitates thinking.\textsuperscript{14}

e. Various further and more specific pluralities develop by subsuming those discussed thus far under more encompassing concepts or categories. There are an enormous number of such further categories and no fixed or fixable limit to the number and variety of them—a point on which Hampshire places special emphasis. Most of these further pluralities are gathered under the by now familiar concepts of social, economic, political, moral, religious, and aesthetic life and it is in discussing them that James makes his closest contact with pluralism as widely understood and used. Thus there are social unities such as class, caste, and family membership and economic unities such as income and wealth

\textsuperscript{13} For these terms of art see esp. “A Word More about Truth” (1907, in Kuklick, 897–908 and “Novelty and the Infinite,” esp. 1070).

\textsuperscript{14} Skipped intermediaries and transferred relations are discussed or assumed in many places in James’s writings. One of the most explicit discussions is in “On the Notion of Reality As Changing” (McD., 301–04). It is Appendix C in \textit{A Pluralist Universe}. James likens these notions to Bergson’s idea of \textit{evolution creatrice} and says it is basically equivalent to Peirce’s “Tychism.” They are also similar to what he calls the “principle of mediate comparison,” which runs as follows: “\textit{the more than the more is more than the less; such is the great synthetic principle of mediate comparison which is involved in the possession by the human mind of the sense of serial increase}” (PP 1: 490). James relies heavily on these notions or principles in explaining how pluralities form and grow.

In using the word “reasoning” above I am referring to but one, quite delimited, form of thinking. James is more a critic of than an enthusiast for reasoning and he believes that much thinking neither satisfies nor seeks to satisfy the comparatively rigorous criteria that properly govern the notions of reasoning and rationality. In particular thinking is often influenced more by bodily processes, emotions, and interests than by rationality. For a general expression of his reservations concerning the place of reasoning in human thinking, see esp. “The Sentiment of Rationality” (McD., 317–45). The essay is part of the collection \textit{The Will to Believe}. For a more technical discussion of reasoning and rationality, see esp. PP 1: 325–71.
levels. There are political pluralities identified by concepts such as nation, party, ideological commitment, ruler and ruled, citizen and subject. There are the moral unities proposed by philosophers such as Aristotelian, Thomistic, Kantian, and utilitarian and more widely used moral terms such as honest, upright, dutiful, altruistic, beneficent, egoistic, malicious, and evil. There are aesthetic pluralities marked by terms such as sensitive, refined, beautiful, ugly, creative, dull, and banal. (Moral and aesthetic categories often meld and are difficult to keep apart, a feature of human life that James valued highly and perhaps overvalued.) And of course there are, in great abundance, the religious pluralities that James so much welcomed and admired, for example believer, agnostic and atheist, theist, pantheist, and mystic, and the whole panoply of distinctions among religions, sects, creeds, and denominations.

Most of these category terms gather and subsume individuals, but also in a higher-order way larger entities such as nations, classes, parties, and ideological orientation. But a category of great interest and importance to James is the category “individual,” which, as noted earlier, gathers the distinctive characteristics that set one person apart from all others. James’s pluralism is radical in many respects; perhaps most important is its championing of individuality. Because in its most familiar uses in social and political theory pluralism refers to groups and other collectivities, this has led a number of critics to deny that James should be regarded as a pluralist and to argue that he was insufficiently attentive to and appreciative of the many relationships that bring individuals together into larger unities and, importantly, make them what they are. I argue that the latter judgment is mistaken and that James’s championing of individuality represents pluralism at its most inspiring.

4. The Limits and Values of Pluralism

Pluralism as James construes, documents, and explains it (insofar as it is possible to do so) stands for and highlights the abundance of the pluralities that have emerged in human experience. It also celebrates, no, treasures, all but a few of these pluralities. What if any are the necessary or desirable limits of pluralism and of his enthusiasm for it; why should it be treasured? To what extent or in what respects should we endorse James’s views?

As to limits, the most general point that has emerged from the foregoing explorations is that a pluralist theory just is, is conceptually, a theory of the limits of pluralism. This is because its recognition and celebration of pluralities requires that there be, and that there be celebrated, a large number of pluralities, each of which is distinct from all others. Thus to the extent that some pluralities encompass or invade.
and come to dominate others, pluralism is diminished. Although James does not use their languages, James favors what Walzer and other pluralists have called the art of separation, the art of sustaining a plurality while, or as a part of, respecting the presence and the value of other pluralities.\textsuperscript{15} The limit case would be a monism in which all eaches and manys become one. But well short of this limit is a situation in which some small number of pluralities gobble up a large number of others. A possible example is a society in which all persons have a single self-identification such that the society becomes classless and otherwise internally undifferentiated in all significant political and moral respects. Another example would be a theocracy featuring and supported by unanimous adherence to a single religious faith. (Of course in both cases pluralities would remain at the international level.) James was well aware of at least some of these possibilities and vigorously opposed them.

Descriptively, then, a pluralist theory à la James claims that there is a multiplicity of pluralities, all or many of which are able to “stand their ground” against one another’s attempted incursions. This is one respect in which James’s pluralism, like most others, is almost certain to be a theory of competition and conflict.\textsuperscript{16} For these reasons we might say that Jamesian pluralism is a pluralism thrice over: first, descriptively/analytically; second, by generalization over the descriptions and analyses; third, axiologically.

The question of how pluralities can maintain themselves melds into the related issue of why an abundant pluralism is valuable and should

\textsuperscript{15} Michael Walzer, \textit{Spheres of Justice} (New York: Basic Books, 1983). A related argument is central to the school of British pluralism that includes Ernest Barker, J. W. Figgis, G.D.H. Cole, and the early Harold Laski. Their emphasis is on preventing the state from dominating all sub-state associations and practices. They attempt to achieve this objective in part by according jural standing to such associations. This position is also developed by Emile Durkheim and other French thinkers, especially syndicalist and corporatist theorists. I assume, though I have no proof text, that James would oppose, or at least be suspicious of, the strategy of according jural protections to associations and would hence be skeptical concerning both the British and the syndicalist/corporatist views. He might have thought, and in any case I am inclined to think, that this strategy, even if unintentionally, places too much authority in the hands of the state and its law. He wants the several pluralities to be able to stand their ground, but to do so out of their own intellectual, spiritual, and other resources.

The general position under discussion is at least implicit in the writings of recent American pluralists such as Grant McConnell, David Truman, and Robert Dahl, in virtually all arguments for federalism and co-sociational democracy, and has recently been forcefully argued by Will Kymlicka and James Tully. See especially Tully’s \textit{Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

\textsuperscript{16} This feature of pluralism, and especially its value, is potently defended and promoted by William E. Connolly. See his books \textit{Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) and \textit{The Ethos of Pluralization} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
be welcomed and promoted. Pluralities, and hence in all likelihood an abundant pluralism, sustain themselves in important part for the same reasons that they develop to begin with. They develop because of the combination of (a) a diverse and fluctuating universe and (b) a diverse and fluctuating array of persons who experience that universe and think and act about it in distinctive ways. Insofar as persons experience the universe and act in and on it in similar ways, the diversity of both (a) and (b) is diminished and stable pluralities develop. The diversity of (b) is due to numerous and potent characteristics and forces. It can, however, be substantially diminished, and James is one of a number of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers who feared its diminution. (Examples are Tocqueville, Mill, Durkheim, Nietzsche, Bergson.) Substantial diminution of (a) is necessary to human life, and considerable diminutions of (b) are necessary for life to be worth living. But excessive diminution of (b) leads to torpor and boredom.¹⁷ A pluralist theory is valuable in part because it characterizes and partially explains realities more accurately and perspicuously than available alternative theories, especially the monistic variety. Accordingly, much, indeed arguably the largest part, of James’s theorizing is devoted to exposing the weaknesses and inadequacies of monism (an intellectual war fought on many philosophical battlegrounds).

But James’s interests and passions are enlivened less by the verisimilitude of pluralism than by the human goods and values that it promotes. What are these goods and values and how and why does James champion them? What, beyond those already discussed, are pluralism’s proper limits? In answering the first question I begin with an abstract list and then address the relationships, particularly the evident tensions, between and among them.

(a) The presence of vigorously enacted and sustained pluralities heightens our awareness of the diversity and flux in the universe and

¹⁷On the latter point James’s remarks concerning his experiences at a Chautauqua Assembly in New York State give the flavor of his thinking. After praising many features of this “studious picnic on a gigantic scale,” he reports that on “emerging into the dark and wicked world” he caught himself saying, “Ouf! what a relief! . . . This order is too tame; this culture too second-rate; this goodness too uninspiring. This human drama without a villain or a pang; this community so refined that ice-cream soda-water is the utmost offering it can make to the brute animal in man; this city simmering in the tepid lakeside sun; this atrocious harmlessness of all things;—I cannot abide with them. Let me take my chances again in the big outside worldly wilderness with all its sins and sufferings. There are the heights and depths, the precipices and the steep ideals, the gleams of the awful and the infinite; and there is more hope and help a thousand time than in this.” “The ideal,” he continues, “was so completely victorious already that no sign of previous battle remained” (“What Makes A Life Significant,” McD., 646ff.). James admits to the romanticism of his views, but is unapologetic concerning it. See also his astringent remarks about “a lubberland of happiness” in lecture 3 of Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking, 539 et seq. in Kuklick.
the need for perspicacity and inventiveness in giving order and meaning to them. To the extent that we experience them in company with others, we instruct one another and heighten one another’s consciousness concerning them.

(b) Pluralities generate and sustain competition and conflict and thereby bring out the best in thinking and acting. They also resist domination and homogenization.

(c) Intra- as well as inter-plurality relations and interactions foster cooperation and mutual assistance.

(d) Commitment to pluralism generates mutual respect and appreciation.

(e) The presence of pluralities provides individuals with “live” and sometimes with “forced” options, thereby fostering individuality, idiosyncrasy, and creativity.

Of (a) to (e) the last is the value that James treasures most.

Little further needs to be said concerning (a). The passage just quoted and numerous others of a similar tenor make it clear that, for James, it is our encounters with challenges, stresses, uncertainties, and conflicts that lend zest and savor to life. He found the homogeneity and placidity of Chautauqua enervating and dull to the point of stupidity. And he feared that this was increasingly the direction in which not only America but much of the modern world was heading. Unanimity was to be avoided even when it was impassioned and energetic. James’s writings and speeches concerning the imperialist war against the Philippines are laced with outrage concerning the hyperpatriotic and xenophobic excesses stirred up by the McKinley administration.

Much the same can be said of (b), but in this regard matters are somewhat more complex. As noted, pluralities reduce as well as sustain and augment differences. With the exception of that form of plurality that is the unity in manyness of a single person, to become part of a plurality is always to form commonalities with the others who are part of it, very often commonalities of purpose and of action as well as thinking. James’s recognition of and concern about this feature of

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18 The notion of options presented to us, and the distinctions between the “live” and the “dead,” the “forced” and the “avoidable,” and the “momentous” and the “trivial” are developed in chap. 1 of The Will to Believe. This chapter is in McD., 717–35 and is at 198–218 in Gunn.

19 See the speeches and papers on this topic in Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1912). In “The Moral Equivalent of War” he argues that martial and related instincts and impulses cannot be eliminated, but that we must find peaceful and constructive outlets for them. This widely influential essay is in McD., 660–70 and in Kuklick, 1281–93. These writings, and yet more clearly his remarks concerning Chautauqua, are highly pertinent to recent formulations of communitarianism and what is increasingly called republicanism.
pluralism was undoubtedly among the important reasons that he so frequently praised individual independence and autonomy. Some pluralization, however, is indispensable to life in itself and certainly to a life worth living. Some of the reasons that this is undeniable are epistemological or cognitive in character. Each of us can make sense of our world only to the extent that we form conceptions/ideas that identify its particular parts and more or less continuing relationships among them. Doing so is essential to locating ourselves in the world, to knowing our way about in it, and hence to being able to act with intelligence and purpose in and on it. “Satisfactory” understandings are always among our conceptions/ideas, not among their objects, and the great preponderance of our conceptions/ideas are shared with other persons, a sharing that is brought about and to a great extent sustained by common acculturation, socialization, and education, in particular by learning and using the same language or languages as do many other persons.20

Taking (a) and (b) together, there are at least two mysteries to be explained (neither of which can be “fully” explained either in general or in its particulars). The first is how conceptions/ideas form at all, how the famous “blooming buzzing confusion” gets partially reduced and given some degree of order and meaningfulness. The second is why, given our capacity to form conceptions/ideas about a world that confronts us all, such a great diversity of them gets formed and sustained. Why is not the plurality that is the one in manyness of each individual

20 This may be a good place to briefly discuss James’s theory of the problem of other minds and especially of how solipsism is overcome, a problem that looms large in his thinking owing to his theories of sensation and perception and his emphasis on the ineliminably subjective character of all thinking. In most cases we assure one another that we are thinking of the same object pragmatically, that is, by finding that your thinking and mine lead both of us to that object. If, sitting with you in Harvard Yard, I say that I am thinking of Memorial Hall and you say that you are doing the same, we can assure one another that we are thinking of the same building by each going there—perhaps by different pathways—and finding ourselves at the same building. (The example is used in “A World of Pure Experience,” which is in McD., 200, and comes from The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to ‘Pragmatism,’ which is in Kuklick, where the example is at 882.) In another, more technical, discussion, he uses the quasi-geometric example of our both thinking of the same pen. There may be many differences in our thinking about it: I am sitting at my desk and reach for the pen in order to write; you are in front of the desk and, being a collector of pens, are admiring the one before you. Thus my thinking “approaches” the pen from one direction and with my purpose, and yours “approaches” it from another and for your purpose. But the “lines” of our thinking “intersect” at one and the same point, namely, the physical object that is the pen on the desk. Thus there is no difficulty about saying that your thinking and mine “intersect” at or on one and the same “point.” Again, however, we can best assure ourselves that our thoughts “intersect,” and are to that extent the same, by reaching for the same object. This example is used in “How Two Minds Can Know One Thing,” which is in McD. at 228 and in Kuklick where the example is at 1187.
the only plurality? To these two never to be more than abated mysteries there correspond two dangers that pluralism must recognize and with which it must cope. The first is the perpetuation of a senseless, paralyzing confusion; the second is a commonality so encompassing and unbroken as to be enervating and stultifying.

As we have seen, James copes with the first by a combination of metaphysical assumptions (that at least some of our sensations and perceptions give us accurate information about the world and that the world is in some respects plastic to our efforts to change it) and empirical claims concerning our cognitive and conative characteristics and capacities together with the similarities and differences among us in these respects. Experience shows that some of us, some of the time, perceive the world in the same ways and form largely congruent conceptions concerning it. Thus for all practical (usually pragmatic) purposes, the confusion and flux are diminished, pluralities develop, and common purposes are formed and sometimes successfully acted upon. But because there are differences in perception, conceptions, interests, emotions, and purposes, the usual result is pluralities, not an all-encompassing unity. The only unities that cannot be properly challenged are those effected by the laws of logic and mathematics, but in empirical fact these are often rejected or not respected, and all application of them to empirical cases is properly subject to contestation.

The value of these pluralities includes but goes beyond their role in giving meaningfulness and order to the experience of those who participate in them. They enable cooperative, mutually contributive thinking and acting, thereby reinforcing themselves and augmenting the power and efficacy of the actions of their members. They heighten what can, generically, be called the social dimensions of life and they enable, in part by engendering controversy and conflict, potent economic, political, religious, and other forms of endeavor. Notwithstanding, or rather in sometimes dissonant company with, the high value he placed on individuality (and pace critics who accused him of a failure to recognize the deeply social or “situated” character of most thinking and acting and certainly to appreciate its value), James held these contributions of a pluralism of groups, associations, classes, and the like in high regard. If the initiatives, innovations, and large-scale improvements in human affairs were most often thought up and first proposed by a creative few, in social and political, moral and religious life it is rare for the ideas of the few to achieve their meliorating potential without winning the acceptance and more or less organized and vigorous support of a substantially larger number of people.

To stay with the example introduced just above, James knew that he and his fellow opponents of the war in the Philippines would remain
voices crying in the wilderness (and would be vulnerable to social opprobrium and governmental suppression) if they did not succeed in attracting wide support and generating an antiwar movement. What was needed in this as in all cases of attempts at resistance to political and social evils, and of all attempts at large-scale reform, was what he called “a summation of stimuli,” that is, the presentation of dissenting or improving ideas by a number of people speaking and acting from differing but complementary perspectives.21

The attempts to generate support for resistance to the war against the Philippines provide a representative case. A summation of the stimuli broadcast by the McKinley administration had produced wide and fervent enthusiasm for the war. James knew that the actions these stimuli had provoked could be changed only if an at least equally powerful succession of countering stimuli were created. Lacking this, the few opponents of the war would be vulnerable to a general disapproval that supported governmental suppression of them and their activities. Although not himself given to mounting barricades, he wrote and spoke vigorously in the attempt to win adherents to his cause and to create a politically effective countermovement. Absent dissenting individuals such as himself, no such movement would develop, but the hoped-for movement could have no prospect of success unless it succeeded in winning and marshaling much wider support. James thought the same about the numerous other political and moral causes that he espoused.22

21 James introduces the idea (he goes so far as to call it a psychological law) of the summation of stimuli (or of effects) in vol. 1, chap. 3 of PP and invokes it in various other places. An example of it is that “[s]trreet-hawkers well know the efficacy of summation, for they arrange themselves in a line upon the sidewalk, and the passer often buys from the last one of them, through the effect of the reiterated solicitation, what he refused to buy from the first in the row” (85). He attempts to provide the law with a neurophysiological basis, formulating it as follows: “a stimulus which would be inadequate by itself to excite a nerve-centre to effective discharge may, by acting with one or more other stimuli (equally ineffectual by themselves alone) bring the discharge about. The natural way to consider this is as a summation of tensions which at last overcome a resistance. The first of them produce a ‘latent excitement’ or a ‘heightened irritability’ . . . the last is the straw which breaks the camel’s back. Where the neural process is one that has consciousness for its accompaniment, the final explosion would in all cases seem to involve a vivid state of feeling of a more or less substantive kind. But there is no ground for supposing that the tensions whilst yet submaximal or outwardly ineffective, may not also have a share in determining the total consciousness present in the individual at the time” (82). (For James’s own references to other discussions of the law in his work, see 85.)

22 There is an excellent summary of James’s thinking and acting concerning social, moral, and political questions in Gerald E. Myers, op. cit. See chap. 13, “Morality,” esp. 422ff. Myers lists, among others, the following then-current issues (many of them still current) to which James devoted his efforts: the Dreyfus Affair; the abominable business practices of Rockefeller and other Robber Barons; racism and especially the plight of blacks, Jews, and
These features of James’s thinking can be underlined and given a more general theoretical grounding by returning to his theory of personal identity. In discussing personal identity or the sense of “self,” we “are dealing with a fluctuating material.” But certain generalizations and classifications are possible, and we can say that “[i]n its widest possible sense . . . a man’s Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and his children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his hands and horses, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotion [the emotion of warm attachment] . . . —not necessarily in the same degree for each thing, but in much the same way for all.”23 He then distinguishes among the Constituents of the Self, the feelings and emotions they arouse, and the actions to which they prompt the Self.

Under Constituents he further distinguishes among “(a) The material Self; (b) The social Self; (c) The spiritual Self; and (d) The pure Ego.” It emerges that James is most interested in (d) and discusses it at length as the chapter continues. But after identifying the physical body as the most important element in the material self, he says the following concerning (b):

A man’s Social Self is the recognition which he gets from his mates.
We are not only gregarious animals, liking to be in sight of our fellows, but we have an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and

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noticed favorably, by our kind. No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met “cut us dead,” and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruelest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all.\(^\text{24}\)

No one of us has a single social self. Rather, each of us has as many such selves as we have relationships and interactions that play an important part in our lives. And we show ourselves to various others in quite different ways. “From this there results what practically is a discordant splitting, as where one is afraid to let one set of his acquaintances know him as he is elsewhere; or it may be a perfectly harmonious division of labor, as where one tender to his children is stern to the soldiers or prisoners under his command” (294). The subsection concerning the social self then continues with discussions of love, of fame and honor, of “club relationships,” and of relations among offspring and among members of high and stylish society. All of his observations regarding these relationships underline the general point that we are or become what we think others expect us to be, a claim that is further emphasized and developed when he argues that self-love and self-seeking are always present, but that they are inseparable from concern for the reactions of others to our attempts to serve ourselves.

The positions considered in the previous paragraphs, especially when they are taken together, make it difficult to sustain the objection that James’s is an “atomistic” or an “unsituated” individualism that is unaware of or inattentive to the socially imbricated character of human life. The same positions, however, bring up with some urgency the question raised earlier. Given his observations under the headings just reviewed, in particular given James’s emphasis on not only the other-regarding but the other-dependent character of most persons, there is at once a mystery as to why pluralities do not congeal into ever-larger, ever-more-inclusive classes or groupings, thereby severely diminishing the number of stable pluralities. And there is also the danger that they will do so, thereby putting in jeopardy goods and values that James esteems.

The issues here are of course familiar from much social psychology, sociology, and not a little political theory. The thinkers mentioned

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 293–94.
earlier who were alarmed by the danger in question (Tocqueville, Mill, Nietzsche, et al.) all struggled with them, and most of the pluralists noted above worried about conformism, excessive homogeneity, the intrusionist and imperialist proclivities of already large and powerful groups, and the consequent loss of the stimulating and restraining effects of competition and contention. From Madison’s “extended sphere” and Calhoun’s “concurrent majority” through Nietzsche’s promotion of “free-spiritedness” and up to Walzer’s anti-domination “art of separation,” Truman’s “potential groups,” Connolly’s “agonal democracy,” and Tully’s demand for “constitutional recognition,” pluralist thinkers have searched for devices and ways of thinking, arranging, and acting that would cope effectively with this danger.

Generically, the mystery is explained by the same dynamics that produce an abundance of pluralities. But each instance of the agglomeration of smaller pluralities into larger, more encompassing ones, each diminution of pluralism, has distinct causes, develops in its own way. An example partly representative of many is provided by the movement toward a unified political will that occurred during the war on the Philippines. An abundance of potent stimuli were broadcast by those who initiated the war. The “summation of effects” that these stimuli produced, together with the tendency of many of those to whom they were addressed to accept uncritically the views of authorities and leaders, led to a “crowd mentality” or “mob psychology” (James admired parts of the work of Gustav LeBon) that induced much of the populace to forget or to subordinate beliefs and values to which they had been at least nominally committed and to support destructive and tyrannical policies.

The key features of this example, an initiative taken by persons in a position to or otherwise capable of communicating widely, those persons repeatedly sending messages (emitting stimuli) skillfully chosen to speak to some of the ideas and beliefs already circulating among their addressees, and uncritical reception of those messages by large numbers of the latter, are of course familiar from any number of plurality-diminishing episodes. Race riots, pogroms, and other religiously based rampages, runs on banks, anti-Communist hysterias, and the like all involve these features. And many of them also include an actual or purported “triggering event” (in the example James discusses, the alleged sinking of the Maine) that crystallizes sentiments and “breaks the camel’s back” of hesitation before the destructive actions. Each of these features differs from example to example, but in one form or another they are present in many or most of those that come to mind.

As said above, then, pluralities are diminished in much the same way that they develop and multiply. A number of persons, on their
own or influenced by others, think that they have noticed similarities among and connections (often including what are believed to be causal connections) between sensations and perceptions, they class or gather those sensations and perceptions into kinds, and, usually skipping many “intermediaries,” they generalize over and draw conclusions concerning the entire kind. A strongly analogous process occurs concerning interests and purposes, and leads to actions that are specific to one or a small number of purposes. Generically, no pluralist can deny or entirely regret the operation of these unifying and integrating processes.

How, then, does James think that they can best become less plurality-diminishing and otherwise destructive? James says little about institutional devices and mechanisms for sustaining an abundant plurality. In combating the war, he championed the separation of powers, arguing that the executive branch had usurped the authority of Congress and violated the Constitution in initiating the war and in subverting civil and other liberties. And in some of his interventions in medical controversies he argued for divisions of authority such as the creation of review boards and other oversight and disciplinary arrangements. Moreover, as in most versions of political pluralism, there is a certain mechanical quality to his thinking about how and why pluralities, once established, can maintain themselves. To the extent that persons identify with and join together in a group, association, denomination, and the like, they develop an interest in and a commitment to its perpetuation. They become resistant to critiques and proposed alternatives to the ideas and arrangements that hold them together and become prepared to act to sustain them. The strongly “conservative” remarks quoted earlier—e.g., their apparent objection to “class mixing”—support and augment this self-sustaining character of established pluralities.

More generally and repeatedly, however, James places his primary reliance on what might be called temperamental or dispositional qualities and characteristics, in particular qualities and characteristics of individuals distinctively capable of critical thinking and vigorous acting.

Although only rarely discussed in direct connection with the question of sustaining an abundant pluralism, the qualities of character that James admired and hoped to promote, if acted on with a degree of moderation, are clearly relevant to the issue before us. Among these are the dispositions for which he argues in his (much controverted) Will to Believe. His most general point in those essays, perhaps, is that forming, sustaining, and acting on a belief often require an exercise of the will. The will comes into play primarily when the agent experiences dissonances or conflicts among beliefs to each or all of which she feels some attraction, among concurrently occurrent interests and desires, and especially among ideas.
In a discussion of “deliberate action,” that is, action that occurs “when the mind has many objects before it, related to each other in antagonistic or in favorable ways,” he writes as follows: “If one or more of these objects is an act, it might of itself bring about the action. [S]ome of the additional objects or considerations, however, . . . block the motor discharge . . . whilst others, on the contrary . . . solicit it to take place. The result is that peculiar feeling of inward unrest known as indecision. . . . As long as it lasts, with the various objects before the attention, we are said to deliberate; and when finally the original suggestion either prevails and makes the movement take place; or gets definitively quenched by its antagonists, we are said to decide; or to utter our voluntary fiat in favor of one or the other course.”

James then distinguishes among five types of decisions, differentiated according to what type of factor determines the will and produces or fails to produce an action. The first type deserves to be called reasonable because the outcome is decided by self-consciously weighing the evidence and arguments for the competing possibilities. In the second, the agent tires of deliberating and allows the outcome to be determined “accidentally” and “from without,” i.e., without the agent herself coming to a conclusion. In the third,

the determination seems equally accidental, but comes from within. . . . It often happens . . . that we find ourselves acting, as it were, automatically . . . in the direction of one of the horns of the dilemma. But so exciting is this sense of motion . . . that we eagerly throw ourselves into it. “Forward now!” we inwardly cry, “though the heavens fall.” This restless and exultant espousal of an energy so little premeditated by us that we feel rather like passive spectators . . . than like voluntary agents. [It] is a type of decision . . . [that] is probably frequent . . . in men of the world-shaking type, the Napoleons, Luthers, etc., in whom tenacious passion combines with ebullient activity. . . .

Decisions of the fourth type occur primarily when the agent experiences that radical change of “mood” in which “we suddenly pass from the easy and careless to the sober and strenuous mood or possibly the other way. . . . The consequence is an instant abandonment of the more trivial projects with which we had been dallying, and an instant practical acceptance of the more grim and earnest alternative which till then could not extort our mind’s consent. . . . The character abruptly rises to another ‘level,’ and deliberation comes to an immediate end.”

— McD., 693 (from PBC, 295). Readers familiar with Hobbes will recognize the similarities between this account of deliberation and Hobbes’s view that the will is the last appetite in deliberation.
With the partial exception of the second type, all of these ways of ending indecision are relevant to sustaining pluralities in the face of attempts to efface or subsume them. Rationalists and intellectualists of course favor the reasonable approach and may regard it as the only one that is reliably effective. But this is clearly not James's view. Famously or infamously, he was convinced that reasoning is itself a kind of sentimentality and rarely takes place if not motivated and maintained by interest or emotion. He argued, moreover, that not more than a few decisions were arrived at in this fashion. The decisiveness, the strength of will necessary to standing firm and going forward, is more likely to come from types 1, 3, 4, and, especially, the fifth type of decision-making.

In the fifth type, the feeling that the evidence is all in, and reason has balanced the books, may be either present or absent. But in either case we feel, in deciding, as if we ourselves by our own wilful act inclined the beam; in the former case by adding our living effort to the weight of logical reason which, taken alone, seems powerless to make the act discharge; in the latter [it is] . . . a kind of creative contribution of something instead of a reason which does reason's work. . . . Subjectively and phenomenally, the feeling of effort, absent from the former decisions, accompanies these. . . . If examined closely, its chief difference from the . . . former cases appears to be that in those cases the mind at the moment of deciding on the triumphant alternative dropped the other one [out of] or nearly out of sight, whereas here both alternatives are steadily held in view. . . .

The capacity to develop and expend effort, to fix in one's mind one of the diverse and often competing ideas and emotions that we experience and to summon the will to act on it, varies importantly from time to time in all persons and from person to person. “There is a certain normal ratio in the impulsive power of different sorts of motive, which characterizes what may be called ordinary healthiness of will and which is departed from only at exceptional times by exceptional individuals.”26 It is on such individuals that James places his heaviest reliance, not only for the kinds of creativity and innovation that lead to new pluralities but for “standing fast” to sustain existing ones. We measure ourselves and one another by various standards, but the deepest among them, which alone is “able to suffice unto itself” is the “sense of the amount of effort which we can put forth.” In “heroic” men capable of great effort the “world finds . . . its worthy match and

26 McD., 693 (PBC, 534).
mate; and the effort which he is able to put forth . . . is the direct measure of his worth and function in the game of human life. [H]e becomes one of the masters and lords of life” and integral to “human destiny.” It is on the presence of such persons that a pluralism that serves the goods and values listed above most depends.

Many of the thoughts just discussed are presented again in James’s discussions of the “will to believe.” Central to his conception and promotion of such a will is recognition of the conflicted and inconclusive character of much of our experience and our thinking. The point of view that James most directly confronts is one (represented—as James reads him—by the English mathematician W. K. Clifford) according to which we should believe in an idea or a proposition if and only if the evidence for it is conclusive. Insofar as reason for doubt remains, we should withhold belief and await further evidence. On this view (as James reports it), the worst fate that can befall us is to be the dupe of false claims and claimants. James argues that this view acts as an anaesthetic, stilling our thinking and especially our readiness to act in the face of uncertainty. Because uncertainty is our usual condition, it is a recipe for stagnation, stultification, and resignation to evils that might be eliminated or ameliorated. And since very few of the ideas that are the bases of pluralities can be conclusively proven to be true, it is an outlook or disposition that is an enemy of pluralism.

James’s moral philosophy (which, as we have seen, often had political resonances and sometimes implications) contains a number of positions relevant to the issues now before us and also to the question of the proper limits to his normative pluralism. The ideas advanced by these positions cannot be proven to be true (indeed, the question of truth does not properly arise concerning them), but we ought to will to believe them. Perhaps the two most general of these are, first, the belief that a moral multiverse is preferable to a moral universe (as noted earlier, this belief has a close analogue in his contention that a religious multiverse ought to be preferred to a religious universe, and sometimes reaches to his inclination to think, or to hope, that what we call the universe is itself a multiverse); and, second, the belief that we ought to commit ourselves to “meliorating” the universe that we have inherited.

The first of these beliefs is appropriately viewed as a generalization over his many arguments concerning the actuality and, more importantly,

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27 McD., 694 (PBC, 578–79).

28 This paragraph generalizes over the arguments of The Will to Believe and various related essays. Several students and critics of James have argued (complained) that James distorts Clifford’s position and that his own arguments are both confused and confusing. For a balanced assessment, see David A. Hollinger, “James, Clifford, and the scientific conscience,” in Putnam, op. cit., 69–83. I do not enter into this controversy here.
the values of pluralism. Accordingly, little more needs to be said concerning it. The second is closely associated with his arguments that we should believe in free will and act on the assumption that it is or can be real. It is therefore also connected with his view that the universe is “unfinished,” that there is always a possibility of a “something more,” and that what this something more turns out to be is primarily a function of our thinking and acting. James locates the commitment to melioristic efforts between, on the one hand, a pessimism that denies the possibility of purposive, deliberate improvements in existing relationships and interactions and leads to resignation and stagnation and, on the other, an optimism that either pretends that the world as it is is the best possible world (which, he thinks, also leads to quietism and a kind of resignation) or wishes away the difficulties that confront us and hence underestimates the need for determined, vigorous action to change it: “Midway between [pessimism and optimism] . . . there stands what may be called the doctrine of meliorism, tho it has hitherto figured less as a doctrine than as an attitude in human affairs. . . . Meliorism treats salvation [which “(y)ou may interpret . . . in any way you like, and make it as diffuse and distributive, or as climacteric and integral a phenomenon as you please”] as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become.”

“It is clear,” he goes on to say, “that pragmatism must incline towards meliorism. Some conditions of the world’s salvation are actually extant, and she [pragmatism] can not possibly close her eyes to this fact: and should the residual conditions come, salvation would become an accomplished reality.” What are the actually extant and possible residual conditions of “salvation”? It immediately becomes clear that the former consists of individuals who are already committed to meliorism and to the readiness to act vigorously to bring it about, and that the latter is the emergence of more such individuals: “Take . . . any one of us in this room with the ideals which he cherishes and is willing to live and work for. Every such ideal realized29 will be one moment in the world’s salvation. But these particular ideals are not bare abstract possibilities. They are grounded, they are live possibilities, for we are their live champions and pledges, and if the complementary conditions come and add themselves, our ideals will become actual things. . . . Does our act then create the world’s salvation so far as it makes room for itself,

29This is an exaggeration of James’s own considered views. “[O]ver beliefs in various directions are absolutely indispensable, and . . . we should treat them with tenderness and toleration so long as they are not intolerant themselves.” McD., 779, from “Conclusions” to VRE.
so far as it leaps into the gap? Does it create, not the whole world’s salvation of course, but just so much of this as itself covers the world’s extent?"\(^{30}\)

In answering this question, James introduces his notion of “the strenuous life,” the emblem of which is “I take the bull by the horns” and act on two assumptions: if I do not act, no good will come about; if I do act, some good may come about. I discuss the notion of the strenuous life just below.

James himself believes, and urges us to will to believe, a considerable number of more specific moral propositions. Some of these are vivid expressions of his commitment to individuality; some express a commitment to imperatives that are other-regarding and hence manifest the social and political elements in his thinking. The two come together in what is, perhaps, his strongest ethical insistence, namely, his insistence on a doctrine not only of toleration but of respect for all persons. As noted, these imperatives are qualified only to permit—but only after making vigorous efforts at persuasion—intolerance of the intolerant and disrespect of the disrespectful.

Moral words and ideas, James holds, “have no application or relevancy in a world in which no sentient life exists.” A purely material world would be amoral, not immoral. But given one sentient being “there is a chance for goods and evils really to exist. Moral relations now have their status, in that being’s consciousness. So far as he feels anything to be good, he makes it good. It is good, for him; and being good for him, is absolutely good” until another sentient being arrives on the scene.\(^{31}\) If no longer absolute, however, the “good for him” of the first person remains essential to moral thought and judgment. For “when we take a steady look at the question, we see not only that without a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation, but there is some obligation wherever there is a claim. Claim and obligation are, in fact, coextensive terms; they cover each other exactly.”\(^{32}\) Thus there are no a priori or impersonal obligations or other moral imperatives. Apart from the thought experiment concerning a universe with only one sentient being, all moral relations are at once deeply personal and unqualifiedly interpersonal in character.

\(^{30}\) Kuklick, op. cit., 612, from Pragmatism, lecture 8. It should be noted that James presents various considerations in support of the two beliefs just discussed, but nowhere claims that he has proven them to be “true” or that anyone could do so.

\(^{31}\) McD., 614. The essay is “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.”

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 617. Thus there are no a priori or impersonal obligations and “[i]f we must talk impersonally, to be sure we can say that ‘the universe’ requires, exacts, or makes obligatory such or such an action, whenever it expresses itself through the desires of such or such a creature. But it is better not to talk about the universe in this personified way. . . .” (617–18).
These are what James himself calls the metaphysical groundings or elements of morality. Together with more general aspects of psychology and epistemology they also answer part of what he calls the psychological questions concerning moral relationships. The third type of question that he identifies and partly addresses is casuistic and his answers to it build upon the ideas just discussed.

My claims to toleration and respect, and your obligation to accord them to me, are grounded (insofar as they have a grounding rather than merely being posited) in my status as a sentient being for whom toleration by and respect from others is a good without which most of my other goods cannot be achieved and values realized, or without which they can be achieved and realized only at great and unjustified cost. Agreeing to this idea, however, settles only the most general casuistic questions. Because those things that I regard as goods and values for me sometimes conflict with what you regard as your goods and values, the principles discussed thus far do not and cannot settle the question of whose claims must be honored or who has the obligation to honor them.

James addressed the further, more particular, casuistic questions with considerable hesitation and uncertainty. He thought that most such questions must be answered in media res, with close attention to the facts particular to the circumstances in which they arose. He disavowed general moral skepticism, but, beyond the points already discussed, he thought that there are definite limits on the extent to which moral theorizing can resolve practical moral questions. He nevertheless sketched a general casuistic theory, which he, I think, correct to treat as having modest value. (His views concerning the relationship between moral theory and moral practice are among the sources of the, to me, agreeably unmoraline character of his thinking.)

If there are echoes of Kant in his “metaphysics of morals,” it is understandable that some commentators have detected utilitarian or at least consequentialist elements in his casuistic theory. Beyond the question of moral status or standing, James thought that the morally most important feature of every person (and also of societies, nations, civilizations) was what he called their ideals or “overbeliefs,” their most encompassing, distinctive, and highly treasured beliefs and values.

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33 For these distinctions, see McD., 611 (“The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”).
34 “The most interesting and valuable things about a man are his ideals and over-beliefs. The same is true of nations and historic epochs; and the excesses of which the particular individuals and epochs are compensated in the total and become profitable to mankind in the long run” (The Will to Believe, Human Immortality and other essays on popular philosophy [(New York): Dover, 1956], preface, xiii). The second sentence is James at his most optimistic and romantic. But this statement is qualified by his recognition that there are more than a few ideals and over-beliefs the immoderate pursuit of which has produced evils without compensation.
His hesitation before the project of developing a general casuistic theory was due in part to his belief that such ideals are often incommensurable, together with his conviction that an abundant plurality of ideals was highly desirable (for many of the same reasons that an abundance of pluralities of [almost] all kinds is desirable). These beliefs were of course central to the high value that he placed on toleration and mutual respect and they led him to the thought that the ideals of other people should not be refuted or quashed but rather that practical conflicts among them should be compromised as far as possible through mutually respectful discussion and, as necessary, negotiation.

Insofar as he essayed a general formula as to how or by what criterion these discussions and negotiations should be “regulated,” the key passage, quoted by Putnam, is as follows: “In the casuistic scale . . . those ideals must be written highest which prevail at the least cost, or by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed.”35 Or, to quote an immediately preceding formulation: “Since everything which is demanded is by that fact a good, must not the guiding principle for ethical philosophy (since all demands jointly cannot be satisfied in this poor world) be simply to satisfy at all times as many demands as we can? That act must be the best act, accordingly, which makes for the best whole, in the sense of awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions.”36 Thus, as Putnam summarizes, “One must, qua philosopher, seek an inclusiveness that will do justice to some extent even to the ideals that are destroyed. What those ever more inclusive ideals are can only be determined through social experiments, judged by actually finding, after their making, how much more outcry or how much appeasement comes about.”37

Consistent with his tempered, dispositional skepticism concerning the contribution that moral (and political) philosophy can make to practical life, James offers no decision-procedure or other mode of procedure for conducting such experiments in living or for reconciling the conflicts that they create or leave unresolved. Putnam is correct in her concluding judgment that “what is at stake here is more than mere tolerance, it is a form of respect. Once one is aware of the ideal that makes

37 Putnam, 285. She correctly concludes that “James is a consequentialist: the empirical consequences of actions or of policies are what ultimately determines the rightness or wrongness of those actions or policies and guides subsequent choices. But James, though he greatly admired John Stuart Mill, is not a hedonist, nor any other kind of reductive utilitarian. While acknowledging that many of our ideals are connected more or less remotely with bodily pains and pleasures, he maintains that many others, especially the higher ones, have other sources” (ibid.).
another’s life significant, one does not merely tolerate it, one respects it, and that is why one seeks to include that ideal in one’s own.”

Full appreciation of this notion of mutual respect, however, requires that we return briefly to James’s “metaphysics of morals” and underline the intensity of James’s commitment to both the restrictive and the affirmative aspects of his conception of individuality. The “result of all . . . [the] considerations and quotations” assembled in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” is negative in one sense, but positive in another. [It is negative or restrictive in that it] absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; . . . it commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position from which he stands. Even prisons and sick-rooms have their special revelations. It is enough to ask of each that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field.

There is already affirmation and positivity here, but these qualities are yet more pronounced in James’s elaborations of the notion that claims are the bases of obligations and of his own judgments as to “What Makes A Life Significant” for oneself and—often—for others. “Wherever a process of life communicates an eagerness to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant. Sometimes the eagerness is more knit up with the motor activities [hence James’s enthusiasm for physically vigorous activities], sometimes with perceptions, sometimes with imagination, sometimes with reflective thought. But, wherever it is found, there is the zest, the tingle, the excitement of reality; and there is ‘importance’ in the only real and positive sense in which importance ever anywhere can be.” James’s pluralism was egalitarian in ways already encountered, but especially in his passionate belief that all persons are capable of a life of eagerness, of zest, and of importance. Failure to recognize this capacity in others significantly different from oneself is the worst form of the “blindness” that he deplored

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38 Putnam, 297.
39 McD., 644–45 (“On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings”). Note that the restriction is against being “forward” in pronouncing on “the meaninglessness” of the lives of others. It does not entirely forbid even judgments of this kind, and it neither can nor does forbid other kinds of judgments of the thinking and acting of other persons.
40 McD., 631 (“On a Certain Blindness . . . ”).
and is responsible for many of the most harmful forms of judgmentalism, discrimination, and cruelty. Inconsistently, he sometimes welcomed the failure of many persons to realize their potential for exciting, significant lives, the readiness with which they resigned themselves to “previous truths” and hence to repetitive, monotonous, spiritually deadening lives. But his best and most characteristic thoughts on this question are directed primarily against those who, in their blindness, fail to recognize the significance of lives that are different from their own and who thereby do what they can to impoverish the lives of those persons for whom they feel, and permit themselves to express, disdain.

We have noted some of the objections to the charge that James promoted a narrow, purely or primarily self-serving individualism. The most serious difficulties with this criticism are made evident by what I have called his best and most characteristic thoughts on the questions now before us. There is no doubt that James admired individuality—as we might initially put it—for its own sake. As we have just seen him saying, if there is importance anywhere it is in the lives of distinctive, innovative, creative individuals. Such individuals must be attentive to, must care for, themselves. If they do not, they sink into the kind of torpor in which they are nothing but what others do for and to them. But these very words signal the respects in which this “importance” is inseparable from the fact that these individuals are “social selves,” that what they think and do is influenced by and influences the thinking and acting of other persons. At a minimum, they can identify themselves, can form an identity, only by comparison with others. But this identity (or, more usually, these several identities) will develop out of their interactions with others, out of cooperating with others to form pluralities, or competing and conflicting with others to sustain or alter their identit(ies).41

We have seen that James’s most fundamental moral commitment was to a “melioristic” universe, a universe in which the human condition is improving to the extent that it is within human powers to improve it. And “[t]he melioristic universe is conceived after a social analogy, as a pluralism of independent powers. It will succeed just in proportion as more . . . [persons] work for its success. If none work, it will fail. If each does his best, it will not fail. Its destiny thus hangs on an if, or on a lot of ifs. . . . As individual members of a pluralist universe, we must recognize that, even though we do our best, the other factors will have a voice in the result. If they refuse to conspire, our good-will and labor

41 I am indebted here and in what follows to Gerald E. Myers, op. cit., chaps. 12 and 13, esp. 348ff.
may be thrown away. No insurance company can here cover us or save us from the risks we run in being part of such a world.”

These beliefs, his will to sustain and act on these beliefs, led James to champion a “strenuous life,” a life more concerned to seek goods than to avoid evils and one willing to take risks in pursuit of the former: “The deepest difference, 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. The capacity for the strenuous mood probably lies slumbering in every man, but it has more difficulty in some than in others in waking up. It needs the wilder passions to arouse it, the big fears, loves, and indignations; or else the deeply penetrating appeal of some one of the higher fidelities, like justice, truth, or freedom.”

Life in the strenuous mood is lived on what James calls the “faith ladder.” The steps on this ladder are the following: “1. There is nothing absurd in a certain view of the world being true, nothing self-contradictory; 2. It might have been true under certain conditions; 3. It may be true, even now; 4. It is fit to be true; 5. It ought to be true; 6. It must be true; 7. It shall be true, at any rate for me. Obviously this is no intellectual chain of inferences, like the sorites of the logic-books. Yet it is a slope of good-will on which in the larger questions of life [some?] men habitually live.” Otherwise put, the strenuous life is one that enacts the “martial virtues” but puts them to productive rather than destructive ends and purposes.

As James would be the first to insist, this Lebensphilosophie provides no determinate guidance in pursuing the ideals it promotes. Fortunately, however, we are provided with further guidance by inspiring examples of such strenuous lives. James was unabashed in promoting

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42 McD., 739, from “Appendix” to Some Problems of Philosophy, in Kuklick, 1096–97.
43 McD., 627. The passage is from “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” The distinction between the strenuous and the easy-going can be usefully compared with—but not assimilated to—James’s related and better-known distinction between the “tender- and the tough-minded.” For the latter, see Kuklick, 490–92 (from Pragmatism, lecture 1). In respect to both pairs, it is important to note that James thinks that both moods or orientations have their value, and that we must shift from the first to the second and vice versa in order to obtain relief from the excesses to which both can be carried. The same is true of the related distinction between the “healthy-” and the “morbid-minded” religious outlooks, although here the contrast is more steadily favorable to the former. For this distinction, see ibid., 121–53 (VRE, lectures 6 and 7). Finally, the discussions under these heads are put to somewhat different uses in James’s various—for the most part unfavorable—remarks concerning Stoicism. See, for example, PBC, 55–56.
44 McD., 737. The passage is from “Appendix” to Some Problems of Philosophy.
what he was quite prepared to call “hero-worship.” In “picking out from history our heroes, and communing with their kindred spirits,—in imagining as strongly as possible what differences their individualities brought about in this world, while its surface was still plastic in their hands, what whilom feasibilities they made impossible,—each one of us may fortify and inspire what creative energy may live in his own soul. This is the lasting justification of hero-worship. . . .”

5. Concluding Remarks

However one assesses the normative elements of James’s pluralism, there is a good deal to be learned from what I have called its descriptive/analytic and explanatory features. Much of its value is due to his avoidance of Idealism while nevertheless moving his empiricism from the atomistic associationism of Hume and Mill to an empiricism that is “radical” in its emphasis on the empirical reality of relations that bring particulars—especially particular persons—into meaningful and sometimes stable patterns of interaction with one another. No descriptive/ analytic pluralist theory denies, or could deny, this among his claims. There are of course both theoretical and especially practical purposes for James’s analyses and explanations of how and why such relations develop and stabilize as identifiable pluralities (or develop but then fall apart or otherwise disappear). Theorists and practitioners of, say, “interest group,” “multicultural,” or denominational or interdenominational politics often can and do simply take the reality of the pluralities with which they work as givens and attend, rather, to the consequences of the intra- and inter-group interactions that take place within and among them.

But pluralist theories can legitimately be expected to say something about the issues James discusses. There is no shortage of circumstances in which attention to them is of practical value. Let’s say that I want to know whether, to what extent, and why the Democratic Party or the Teamsters Union will become or remain sufficiently unified to be an effective electoral force or potent in negotiations with management; or whether and why or why not the aboriginal peoples of Canada or the United States will become and remain sufficiently cohesive to identify and pursue common objectives; or whether and why or why not the

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45 “Whilom,” Obs. or arch. 1. At times—1600. 2. At some past time; once upon a time. ME. The Oxford Universal Dictionary.

46 From “The Importance of Individuals,” in The Will to Believe: Human Mortality and other essays on popular philosophy, 261.

47 As James himself teaches us, these distinctions, useful as they can be, are anything but clean or clear-cut.
Episcopal Church will remain viable given disagreements concerning gender and sexual orientations. If so, a Jamesean analysis of the ideas, the emotions, the temperaments, and the purposes of the actual or potential participants in these pluralities will surely be pertinent to my investigations and reflections. Needless to say, the same will be true if I am concerned that one or a small number of related pluralities will become so dominant as to destroy all or many others that I value, or seriously weaken or destroy a pluralist system to the perpetuation of which I am committed.48

In the foregoing I have underlined the respects in which these features of James’s thinking weaken the argument that his pluralism is excessively individualistic, atomistic, and “unsituated.” But as the critics who have advanced this mistaken criticism are intensely aware, as it behooves all of us to be, the issues in this regard are by no means “merely” abstract, academic, or philosophical.

Closely connected with the points just discussed are the arguments that James advances when he calls his theory humanistic as well as pluralist, pragmatic, and radically empiricist and also with his championing of a belief in free will and commitments to meliorism and the strenuous life. Taken together, these three components of his pluralist theory powerfully emphasize the ways in which we are what we are and become what we become owing first and foremost to our own thinking and acting. A generous supply of these beliefs and commitments is essential not only to creating and sustaining a viable pluralism but to ameliorating and enhancing the lives of those who participate in it.49

48 In a welcome comment responding to these remarks concerning the “practical value” of James’s pluralism, Alfonso Damico wrote, “This recalls, albeit not very forcefully, an especially prominent motif in the paper about two dangers of pluralism; namely, a ‘senseless paralyzing confusion, on the one hand, or a too encompassing . . . commonality, on the other’ . . . In this connection, I come away from the paper with the stronger sense that the ‘practical value’ of James’s discussions comes in the form of a warning and a warranted hope. The warning is about the inability of any monistic theory to negotiate these two dangers. Easiest to see is the Jamesian warning about efforts to theorize politics as the search for some commonality, e.g., collective identity, that will harmonize all different identities, e.g., diminish pluralism. The discussion of James provides lots of empirical/analytical/normative reasons for seeing this as a fool’s errand. A similar ambition can be found in various liberalisms that aim at getting adversaries to reach a consensus that will override or at least discipline their disagreements. Both are threats to pluralism. Flathman’s James negotiates these dangers by treating pluralism itself as the medium within which disagreement coupled with experimentation and resoluteness is sufficient to anchor the play of pluralities. . . . The author should underline the warning and the hope.” Having found no better way to respond to the pertinent advice than to quote Professor Damico’s formulation, with his permission I gratefully do so.

49 I wasn’t just playing with words or guarding myself against charges of naïveté when I said that the analytic/descriptive-normative/axiological distinction is not clean or clear-cut!
Thus far I have foregrounded respects in which we can and should learn from affirmative arguments and conclusions that James advances. In a somewhat different register, we can and should appreciate and be responsive to what might be called—to use a word of which James himself was fond—the mood in which he promotes them. I have in mind what I earlier called the qualified, non-dogmatic, dispositional skepticism characteristic of most of his writings. James’s epistemology was of course fallibilist in that he thought all theories and all propositions, however well established up to now, are subject to, vulnerable to, disconfirmation by further experience. If fallibilism is a skepticism, in this limited sense he was a convinced, even a dogmatic, not simply a dispositional, skeptic. But his fallibilism is only one part of the skeptical mood or temper that pervades much of his writing. It is evident in the view he takes concerning many of the distinctions that he employs in developing his thought. Although a committed pluralist, he readily conceded merits to monism and acknowledged the possibility that the latter might some day be proven the better theory; although generally favoring “tough-mindedness” over “tender-mindedness,” he said that both are valuable and argued that we should sometimes take the former, sometimes the latter stance; doubtful of the contributions of moral theory to moral practice, he nevertheless essayed a moral theory; a man of strong religious dispositions and moral beliefs, he argued that we should not only tolerate, not only respect, but in most cases welcome views other than our own. Finally (albeit the foregoing list could be substantially lengthened), though he was committed to a strong conception of individuality, we have seen that he not only fully recognized but vigorously promoted a conception of the “social self.”

I end with a further comment concerning the last point, doing so by asking whether or in what respects James’s pluralism can be regarded, if not as a version of liberalism, then as valuably contributive to the deepening and strengthening of that ideology.

James occasionally uses the adjective “liberal” in an approving spirit. But this of course does not make him a liberal (I have not found a place in which he uses the noun, although he may do so in his correspondence). More important, even if he can be so labeled, doing so would do no more than place him in a large, rapidly growing, and internally disputatious ideological family. The question, then, is not whether he was, or should now be regarded as, a liberal, but rather whether elements of his thinking contribute to the development of one or more of the several competing strains of liberal thinking. Stated in this way, the answer is clearly in the affirmative.

One reason for this judgment lies in the strongly egalitarian features of his thinking. We have seen that there are strongly inegalitarian com-
ponents to his views, but that they coexist and are in tension, especially in his metaphysics of morals but also in parts of his casuistic theory, with emphatically egalitarian commitments. The latter are most pronounced, as Putnam has insisted, in his movement from a doctrine of toleration to a distinctively strong argument, indeed an unqualified argument, for mutual respect toward and among all persons. A position at least akin to this is central to most if not all versions of liberal ideology and can be regarded as the distinctive element in several among them, especially those of a recognizably Kantian provenance (for example those of Rawls and Habermas and their numerous followers). Anyone attracted to this element in liberalism will profit from James’s formulations of it.

James’s promotion of vigorous individualities is of course inseparable from the egalitarian elements in his thinking. Although he was convinced that distinctive individualities are rare, he believed that nearly all human beings have the capacity or potential to develop qualities of character, of thinking, and of acting that set them apart from all others. Accordingly, he argued that conditions conducive to such developments, in particular respect accorded to them by others, ought to be maintained.50 We have also seen that he thought that personal individualities contribute importantly to the value of the lives of other persons and indeed to the quality of human life quite generally. But individuality is valuable in its own right, would be valuable even if it did not benefit other persons or society (recall his remarks concerning where “importance” is found in human affairs).

This emphasis on individuality is of course controversial in liberal thinking and discourse, and there are salient strands and strains in liberal ideology according to which his concern with it is strongly objectionable. I have responded to these objections in other writings and will not rehearse the controversies here. Suffice to say that I find this aspect of James’s thinking inspiring and of great value to liberal thinking and acting.

In James, then, we have a pluralism that is radical in both its individuality and its sociality. It is, finally, in this always tense, frequently conflicted, combination of elements that his pluralism teaches us the most and the best.

50 I think it is correct to say that this notion of respect for others includes respecting, or rather valuing, their freedoms. With the exception of his discussions of free will, however, “freedom” is not a concept prominent in his works. He was a vigorous defender of civil liberties, but he seldom addresses the conceptual and evaluational questions concerning freedom that are central to most versions of liberalism. This is unfortunate.