William James and the Force of Habit

by

Peter Alexander Livingston

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Department of Political Science
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Abstract

By paying attention to the habitual register of politics this dissertation has sought to contribute to the theoretical literature on democratic citizenship. More precisely, I offer a more complex account the moral psychology of political agency presumed by the turn to ethics within democratic theory. The central question of this dissertation is how do citizens come to feel empowered to act on their convictions in politics? Political theorists often celebrate civic action as spontaneity and willfulness, and at the same time lament the agency-foreclosing complexity and fragmentation of late-modern politics. Drawing out this tension in Michel Foucault’s analysis of docility and transgression I argue that a middle path between disembodied autonomy and docile passivity is articulated in the moral psychology found in William James’s account of habit. The study makes this case by looking at three episodes of the foreclosure and recovery of action in James’s thinking: his engagement with Darwinian science and his nervous breakdown in the 1870’s and 80’s; his critique of democratic docility and debate on strenuousness with Theodore Roosevelt during the Spanish-American war; and the cynical adaptation of James’s psychology by the democratic realism of Walter Lippmann in the 1920’s. In each case I argue that James’s lively account of habit as a force of unruly spontaneity functions as a therapy of action against feelings of powerlessness, docility, and incompetence constrain democratic
conviction. The result is at once a novel continuation of the American tradition of democratic individualism and a contribution to the contemporary debates on the democratic ethics of self-making.
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Geschrieben steht: „Im Anfang war das Wort!“
Hier stock’ ich schon! Wer hilft mir weiter fort?
Ich kann das Wort so hoch unmöglich schätzen,
Ich muss es anders übersetzen,
Wenn ich vom Geiste recht erleuchtet bin.
Geschrieben steht: Im Anfang war der Sinn.
Bedenke wohl die erste Zeile,
Daß deine Feder sich nicht übereile!
Ist es der Sinn, der alles wirkt und schafft?
Es sollte stehn: Im Anfang war die Kraft!
Doch auch indem ich dieses niederschreibe,
Schon warnt mich was, daß ich dabei nicht bleibe.
Mir hilft der Geist! auf einmal seh’ ich Rat
Und schreibe getrost: Im Anfang war die Tat!

- Goethe, *Faust I*

“Let us be human”

- Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*
Chapter 1: Introduction

“…this surface on which we now stand is not fixed, but sliding”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Circles’

Much of our interaction with the world and with each other is a matter of habit. Our bodily, perceptual, and cognitive conduct is more often than not repetitive, unreflective, and unconscious. Habits affect how we share space, how we speak to each other, which possibilities seem like live ones to us, how we treat one another, and how we harm each other. Where our habits are thoughtful and considered, they can express the bonds of solidarity, trust and mutual concern that allow us to live together as free and equal citizens. And when our habits are heedless and regardless, they enable varieties of indifference, malice, or thoughtlessness that oppress others and deny them standing as equals. This dissertation is a study of this often forgotten dimension of public life and its political potential. In what follows I reconstruct William James’s moral psychology to provide a perspicuous representation of the concept of habit and its place in political conduct.¹ I use the old fashion term moral psychology with a hint of irony for the concept of habit, and James’s psychology in particular, takes us a great distance away from the tropes of interiority and the mental that talk of the psyche evokes. But that said, I find it a useful approach as it helps us attend to the themes of judgment, persuasion and affect at the core of political action. In suggesting that the concept of habit provides a perspicuous representation of moral psychology I am arguing that in attending to the active, creative, and

¹ My use of the term perspicuous representation is borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein. “A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words – Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing the connexions’ [sic]. Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate cases.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, second ed. (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1958), paragraph 122. On perspicuous representation as a method of political theory see James Tully, "Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy: Understanding Practices of Critical Reflection," *Political Theory* 17, no. 2 (1989)
sometimes very unruly place of habit in political conduct we find new resources for answering
the questions: What is it to act? And how do we become empowered as political actors?

1.1 William James as Political Educator

William James wrote no major treatise on politics. His formal training as a scholar was in the
field of physiological psychology and he only came to the study of philosophy and ethics
relatively late in his academic career. During the final decade of his life James underwent a
political turn towards a self-conception as a “happy go lucky anarchistic sort of creature” but his
writings on politics from this era only amount to a handful of newspaper articles and a half-
dozen essays. Scholars of American political thought write of James, when they do at all, to
remark that he was basically unconcerned with politics. Indeed, as Robert Westbrook puts this
point, if James has any contributions to make to political and social theory “they must lie less in
the realm of explication than of implication.”

Political theorists in recent years have begun a process of interpretation to rescue William
James as a political thinker from the wilderness of literary studies and intellectual history where
his legacy has resided for too long. William Connolly and Kennan Ferguson have excavated

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3 Classical statements of the apolitical nature of James’s philosophy are Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American
American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), and

4 Robert Westbrook, "Our Kinsman, William James," in *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Hope*
(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 54

5 This work of recovery is indebted to the excellent scholarship in these fields. In literary studies notable works
Clive Bush, *Halfway to Revolution: Investigation and Crisis in the Work of Henry Adams, William James, and*
James’s late theory of a pluralistic universe as a way of theorizing the interconnection of identities and actions that whirl through the late-modern world.⁶ Joshua Miller finds in James an admirable “democratic temperament” worthy of imitation today.⁷ Still others look to James as a theorist of toleration and individuality at the margins of the liberal tradition.⁸ Many of these attempts to politicize James have amounted to rummaging through his texts in search of tools and concepts from which contemporary citizens might profit.⁹

In this dissertation I take an alternative approach to James as a political theorist. Rather than looking for devices to borrow from James’s philosophical toolbox, I stress that James provides a novel perspective on the problems of democracy if we approach him as a political educator.¹⁰ His contribution is not a theoretical framework that can be applied ready-made to the problems of politics, or a set of universal categories to be used for re-ordering our world. Rather,

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⁹ For a criticism of the selective quality of this rummaging by Connolly and Ferguson in particular see Jonathan McKenzie, "Pragmatism, Pluralism, Politics: William James’ Tragic Sense of Life," *Theory & Event* 12, no. 1 (2009)

James was a public intellectual who reflected directly on the experience of American democracy at the turn of the twentieth century and wrote to a public whose judgment he sought to educate and whose moral vocabulary to enrich. It is these lessons in how to re-envision our politics and to propose just this re-envisioning as a political act *de rigueur* that I aim to reconstruct here.  

Reading James as a political educator requires attending closely to his historical context and how his philosophy is linked to his practice as a public intellectual. Accordingly, this study will look not only to his published philosophical works but also to his letters, diaries, speeches, and occasional writings to reconstruct James’s practice as what intellectual historian George Cotkin calls a public philosopher. In approaching James in context, however, we must also attend to the question of how he might continue to speak to a contemporary audience. Westbrook makes this point when he stresses that to read James in the nineteenth century milieu of neurasthenic illness, social Darwinism, and imperial war, as I do here, can only function to bring out a “certain strangeness to James’s social and political thought” and thereby stress the distance between James and us today. This context-bound quality of James’s philosophy was indeed stressed in Lewis Mumford’s critique of pragmatism in his 1926 *The Golden Day*. “James,” as Mumford put it, “was only warming over again in philosophy the hash of everyday experience in the Gilded Age… he was the reporter, rather than the creator.”  

11 In this sense, James’s social and political thought meets Sheldon Wolin criteria of an ‘epic’ theory: epic in its magnitude to include the whole political world, in its effort to devise new cognitive and normative standards, in its intentions to address public concern, in its critical task, in its prioritization of problems-in-the-world instead of problems-in-theory. Epic theories are responsive to crises in political experience. Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory as Vocation," *American Political Science Review* 63, no. 4 (1969)  

12 Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher*  

13 Westbrook, "Our Kinsman, William James," 58  

14 Lewis Mumford, *The Golden Day: A Study in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Dover, 1953), 95. The point is put even more fiercely by James Livingston. Livingston argues that James’s pragmatism and radical pluralism function as an ideological “frame of acceptance” for the corporate transformations sweeping over American society at the turn of the century. I investigate the merits of this argument later on in chapters 4 and 6. See
What can we learn from James’s reflections on an era known as the high-water mark of American *laisser faire* capitalism commonly called the Gilded Age? I argue that James remains our contemporary when we look to him as a guide in making our way through a late-modern condition that is increasingly referred to as the New Gilded Age. This way of naming our present predicament of extreme disparities of wealth, debt-driven consumption, overwhelming complexity, and the sense of political powerlessness has been put forward in recent years by journals, novelists, historians, and political economists of different stripes. In making this comparison I do not mean to suggest that what will follow will be a work of comparative political economy. James was not an insightful commentator on such matters. Where he provides us with guidance is in making sense out of the resonances between the crises of modernism and democratic confidence that were so acutely felt then and now.

Key among these problems are sentiments of apathy, docility, and powerlessness. Apathy, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed, is perhaps an intractable aspect of democratic culture. But the forces of passivity and withdrawal that Tocqueville witnessed in the 1830’s pales in comparison to the psychic pressures of industrialization and complexity James experienced in the 1880’s and 1890’s, and even more so when set side by side with the scale and interdependence of the economic, environmental, and cultural crises of the early twenty-first


century. In an age where transforming our genetic codes seems a simpler process than transforming our values or identities, and where, as social critic Slavoj Zizek argues, it is easier to imagine the catastrophic end of life on earth than it is to imagine a transformation in our practices of producing and distributing wealth, our political future increasingly appears fated to the repetition of an everlasting present. Jonathan Franzen’s recent novel *Freedom* powerfully captures this same foreboding sense of closure in its depiction of the inescapable cycle of depression and rage that marks the family life of its protagonists, the Berglunds, and, by extension, everyday America during the years of the Bush presidency.

Jürgen Habermas aptly named this sense of closure and contraction of possibilities as the onset of a “new obscurity” within Western democracies. He writes,

> The horizon of the future has contracted and has changed both the *Zeitgeist* and politics in fundamental ways. The future is negatively cathected… It is by no means only realism when a forthrightly accepted bewilderment increasingly takes the place of attempts at orientation directed towards the future. The situation may be objectively obscure. Obscurity is nonetheless also a function of a society’s assessment of its own readiness to take action. What is at stake is Western culture’s confidence in itself.

Habermas eloquently expresses an emerging crisis of political and cultural agency. However, this profound sense of closure is absent from both Habermas’s subsequent political theory and political theory more generally. We find no sense of a culture devoid of confidence when Habermas champions the deliberative and participatory power of the public sphere to “counter-steer” the colonizing systems of the market and the bureaucratic state. Where citizens deliberate

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together in common action, he writes, the public can act heroically “in the manner of a siege” against these political and economic institutions.\(^{20}\) This kind self-assurance concerning the possibilities of effecting political change is not unfamiliar in political theory. Citizens, we are told, need only go out and deliberate more rationally, tolerate more sincerely, struggle for recognition more arduously, or cultivate a more open relationship to difference to bring about a better world. We hear no echo in such arguments of the bewilderment of Joey Berglund as he – and America – quickly finds himself lost in a Kafka-esque legal, financial, and political morass following the invasion of Iraq. The fact that theory lags behind practice is of itself no surprise. The owl of Minerva flies at midnight. But what is worrisome is that this absence is also telling of the lack of philosophical resources we have to draw on to understand such a contraction of agency or to aim towards a way out.

The question I pursue here is what resources theorists and citizens might draw on to understand this obscurity and renew democratic practices in a time marked by its sense of the foreclosure of political possibility. James himself deeply felt the futility of political action in an increasingly unwieldy modern world. His political theory constitutes a therapy of agency in the face of such sentiments that speaks to the crisis of conviction that ails late-modern citizens. James’s lesson is his reinvention of habit as source of agency and transformation. In this introduction I provide a survey of how these themes have been developed in the history of philosophy and contemporary political theory. As Richard Rorty suggested now almost three decades ago, James is still very much standing at the end of the road that contemporary theory is currently traveling.\(^{21}\)


\(^{21}\) Rorty famously said of American pragmatism: “James and Dewey… are waiting at the end of the road which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently travelling.” Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*
1.2 Is Habit Political?

Habits are an admittedly odd topic for a dissertation in political theory. The theme of habit is not subject to rigorous conceptual articulation in the way concepts such as justice, rights, or toleration are, and habits do not seem to belong to the set of public institutions, parties, and conflicts denoted in our ordinary language use of the word ‘political’. If we think of them at all, we usually think of habits as referring to the individual quirks and routines of private life. Hence, the question is unavoidable: But are habits political?

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that this very act of demarcation between the realm of the political and the non-political is itself a political act. The avoidance of habit in political thought in favor of concepts like subjectivity, thinking, and willing is an instance of that Jacques Rancière calls “the partition of the sensible.” The presentation of habit as something passive, dull, and mechanical is contrasted again and again both in political theory and in ordinary language with the lively, free, and thoughtfulness of willing or action. Power functions, as Rancière teaches us, in policing our perceptions of the world by parsing it into such categories of what can be sensed or judged and what falls away from perception. Accordingly, politics is the disruption of any particular partition of the sensible. Politics, he writes, “makes visible what had been excluded from the perceptual field, and in that it makes audible what used to be inaudible.” In what follows I want to disrupt this seeming obvious dichotomy between

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(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Pres, 1982), xviii. In invoking this remark I do not mean to suggest, like Rorty does, that James is some sort of postmodernist avant la lettre.


concepts of “habit” and “willing” by pulling them out of their familiar uses and bring us to a place where thinking this distinction in any clear way seems peculiar or anachronistic.

Secondly, we find traces of the public and political nature of habit when we attend to its etymology. The modern English term for habit found its first usage in the middle ages to denote a style of dress or appearance (hence, a nun’s habit).24 One’s habit was one’s way of displaying oneself in public. This public sense of habit as appearance developed over the course of the modern period to come to mean how one acted in public. In the natural sciences, this usage was developed to describe the growth of plants and development of crystals in terms of their habits. In ethics and literature, this same sense of habit as a tendency to act in a certain fashion came to express one’s character or state of mind. John Locke expresses this internalization of habit as an active capacity or power in his Essay on Human Understanding: “which power or ability in man of doing anything, when it is acquired by frequent doing of the same thing, is that Idea, we name habit.”25 From this genealogy of the word arises the two most familiar contemporary ordinary language of uses of the term: habit as a noun to indicate an active tendency to act in certain ways that is the result of past experience, and habit as a participle adjective used to describe a process of becoming habituated or getting used to something. In both uses, habit denotes how we come to act in a common world.

Despite the usage as potentiality and public action, the grammar of modern political thought has excised habit as a phenomenon of political concern. Habit, unlike the will or reason, is constitutively linked to the materiality of our bodies. It is the mechanical-chemical repetition of our bodies that we most commonly recognize as our habits. Accordingly, this denigration of habit finds it origins in the theological view of the body as a cage for the soul. St. Augustine

provides an important statement of the body’s concupiscence in his *Confessions*. There the body is figured as a “mark of lust” that obscures “the clear light of true love” felt by the spirit.  

The Enlightenment secularized Christianity’s aversion of the body in the idea of the disembodied mind. Rene Descartes provides the classical instance of this transition. To know the truth of the self, Descartes requires that he regard himself as “not having hands, or eyes, or flesh, or blood, or any senses.” These outward possessions are potential sources of deception that must be bracketed to know the mind that resides apart from them. And in moral philosophy Immanuel Kant demands that the body and its habits be rejected from ethics as contagious forces of heteronomy. Because the will’s autonomy derives from its ability to find incentives in practical reason alone, Kant views the kinds of motivation that come from past experience and custom as lamentable. “As a rule,” he writes, “all habits are reprehensible.”

This onto-theology continues to resonate in the nineteenth century despite its many rejections of the Enlightenment dualism of Descartes and Kant. Hegel provides one interesting example of this persistent denigration of habit. Hegel sought to rescue autonomy from Kant’s transcendental philosophy by situating freedom in the world as a developmental phenomenon that resides in history. Like Aristotle, Hegel thought habit to be an early but incomplete element in the acquisition of virtue. In making an action habitual, Hegel writes, “the opposition between

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the natural and the subjective will disappears, and the resistance of the subject is broken.”

This breaking down of the subject’s resistance is the first instance of a pedagogy that aims to build the given self back up as something both harmonious and rational. But habit is like philosophy itself, Hegel seems to suggest, in that it is only a ladder that can be kicked away once a state of reasoned freedom is attained. In an incredibly obscure but suggestive passage of the Encyclopedia he claims that habit is indispensable for the concrete immediacy of the subject as “part and parcel of his being” but it also haunts the rational subject as a trace of finitude. The truth of philosophy’s disparaging attitude towards habit that is “often spoken” is that “it is habit of living which brings on death, or, if quite abstract, is death itself.”

This representation of habit as uncanny, as a kind of death that haunts life, is articulated in different philosophical traditions by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Sigmund Freud. Emerson calls custom and habit a “corpse of memory” we carry around with us. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle Freud theorizes the origins of repetition and habit in the organic force of the death drive. At the heart of repetition neurosis Freud locates “a powerful tendency inherent in every living organism to restore a prior state, which prior state the organism was compelled to relinquish due to the disruptive influence of external force.” In the compulsion to repeat the analysand enacts a forgotten wish to return to a state of inactivity and passivity that Freud posits

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33 Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 76
as the inorganic state that proceeds living. The death drive is a contested thesis in psychoanalysis but Freud’s willingness to speak of repetition as a force of death says something interesting about the uncanny quality of habit in the grammar of modern philosophy.\(^3^4\) Once habit is recovered from Cartesian dualism it seems to live on only as something undecideable in our understanding of conduct. As Stanley Cavell explains, “There is a repetition necessary to what we call life, or the animate, necessary for example to the human; and a repetition necessary to what we call death, or the inanimate, necessary for example to the mechanical; and there are no marks or features or criteria or rhetoric by means of which we can tell the difference between them.”\(^3^5\)

In this dissertation I seek to remedy philosophy’s figuration of habit as either fallen flesh or uncanny death by turning instead to a pragmatic account of experience as something holistic and experimental so as to articulate an alternative account of habit. John Dewey provides a clear definition of this active conception of habit,

> The essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response, not to particular acts except as, under special conditions, these express a way of behaving. Habit means special sensitiveness or accessibility to certain classes of stimuli, standing predilections and aversions, rather than bare recurrence of specific acts. It means will.\(^3^6\)

Key to Dewey’s paradoxical redefinition of habit as will, or will as habit, is the notion of habit as a way or mode of *response*. The habituated self does not stand outside the world looking in but


rather is part of a dynamic and changing environment that makes normative claims to which the self must respond. Dewey calls this work of responding to an environment a process of adjustment. The political question of adjustment is how persons— as mutual interdependent elements caught up in a moving, complex public environment— might achieve a reflective responsiveness to each other and their claims that promotes equality and respect rather than denigration and disrespect.

Describing habit as a medium of public response pulls it directly into the sphere of political theory. This way of thinking about habit is a familiar trope of conservative and republican thought. In this dissertation I make the case for a politics of habit by avoiding the modernist rejection of habit and the unencumbered self, while at the same time rejecting the pull of the communitarian vision of the embedded self and the conception of compliant habit it frequently entails. As opposed to both I put forward an account of lively habit as something active and unruly in human conduct. Drawing out the pragmatist implications of Darwin for philosophy in Chapter 3, I argue that habit is an extension of the spontaneity and surprise of the natural world rather the mechanical and passive medium of culture and training.

I want to conclude this section by drawing out this contrast between compliant and lively conceptions of habit with an example from the history of political thought. This compliant conception finds clear exposition when we look to the locus classicus for modern thinking about the relationship between citizenship and habituation, Rousseau’s On the Social Contract. Becoming a citizen for Rousseau is not simply a matter of being granted membership status by a political community. Rather, it represents a radical transformation of individual character. Unlike the self-interested bourgeois of civil society, the citoyenne is a bearer of the general will. His own will is an expression of the republic’s will, and the republic speaks for him in turn. To create
such a harmony between the private will of the individual and the general will of the people, Rousseau argues that it is the task of the republic’s institutions and its civil religion to habituate citizens for virtue. The wise institutions of the republic’s founder aim to create a united people fit for self rule through nothing less than “changing human nature” itself.37

The end of this educational task is the remaking of human habits and character in the image of the republic. Only in doing so can the founder legislate the republic’s most important law. This law, Rousseau writes, “is graven not in marble or in bronze, but in the hearts of the Citizen; which is the State’s genuine constitution.”38 The republic’s law is not simply a document or a juridical order, but an ethos carried out through the shared moeurs of the people. As such, the republic’s virtuous citizens are not to be found, but rather made. And they are made through the careful training of the habits of interaction they exhibit in daily life.

On Rousseau’s account, and on many accounts since his, human habits are a concern of politics as the passive yet recalcitrant object of legislation. They express an opportunity for “making up people,” to use Ian Hacking’s poignant phrase, by shaping virtuous citizens through public education and fine institutions.39 The conservative notion of habit at work in the ethical writings of Aristotle, Pascal, Rousseau, Hegel and Mill is that of something fixed, inanimate, and yet subject to manipulation and shaping by skilled tools. On this point Rousseau’s metaphor of the founder’s task of engraving the constitution in the hearts of citizens is telling. To engrave is to incise into a hard surface, most typically marble or stone, and it seems that the image of the


38 Ibid. p. 81 [OC II 394]

citizen at work here is of one who is cut from rock. The legislator shapes like a skilled sculptor, and the stone he cuts and shapes are the habits of citizens. Once shaped, cut, and polished to the legislator’s delight, his sculpture is fixed and finished. Only the ravages of “time, sea, and storms”, as Rousseau says of the statue of Glauce in *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, can deteriorate the fine vision he has cut from the hard rock of human habit itself.  

This geological motif is a suggestive one, but one that is only incompletely thought through by Rousseau and the malleable, or as I call it ‘compliant’, conception of habit I take him to represent. Habits may be the stone from which citizens are to be carved, but geology is a more dynamic than Rousseau assumes. A better model for the geology of habits than the sculptor’s stone is Gilles Deleuze’s concept of stratification. The earth is made up of the layering of stratum – layers of sedimented energies and decomposed biomass that have become solid and fixed in the course of long, geological time. Strata represent the hardening and fixing of what was before dynamic and fluid. As Deleuze and Guattari express it, “Strata are Layers, Belts. They consist in giving form to matters, of imprisoning intensities or locking singularities into systems of resonance and redundancy, or producing upon the body of the earth molecules large and small and organizing them into molar aggregates.”  

A habit too is a given form to dynamic matter, an imprisoning of certain values, energies, and thoughts in the stratified layers of embodied action. But the image of stratification goes further than the sculpture model in that strata are dynamic and layered. Strata are sedimented rock, but they none the less decompose and recompose, constantly folding and buckling below the earth’s surface. The slow tectonic movements

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whereby strata separate and slide across one another rupture the calm consistency of the earth’s body through earthquakes and other natural disturbances. Likewise, a habit is not something fixed in stone that changes only in the slow deterioration of its perfected form, but rather it is a vital substance like the earth’s surface itself that is constantly changing and redefining itself, albeit in slow and unapparent ways. And just as much as the earth is made up of layers of strata, of differing consistency and density, so too is habit more than just the surface shape that penetrates all the way down. Habits do not have the regular texture of a fine piece of marble or the even grain of oak. They are more like the earth itself as a network of shifting layers that slowly redefines the surface as they reposition, breakdown, and reterritorialize in relation to one another. Habits of thinking, perception, and action make up layered, multiple registers that constitute the opacity and complexity of subjectivity.

James makes a similar point concerning the lively nature of habits in his *Principles of Psychology*. As we will see, he views habits as a phenomenon rooted in the mobile and unpredictable materiality of the body and the whirling atomic building blocks of the world. Rather than imposed form, habits are for him the loose structures that hold between the parts of a mobile, spontaneous universe where, as he would put the point in his 1908 lectures *A Pluralistic Universe*, “[w]hat really exists is not things made but things in the making.”42 Such habits are more than traces of how our identities have become fixed through culture or history. James’s pluralistic approach to habit encourages us to imagine a flexible, responsive self that can make its way through such an open, unfinished world.

In *Multitude* Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri bring together James, Dewey and Deleuze’s writings on habit and stratification to base a cosmopolitan theory of popular

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sovereignty. They argue that habit, rather than shared identity or culture, ought to make up the “productive flesh” of a radical global social movement. Collective practices produce shared habits, and these habits in turn generate new practices. “Habits,” they write, “are thus never really individual or personal. Individual habits, conduct, and subjectivity only arise on the basis of social conduct, communication, acting in common. Habits constitute our social nature.”

Hardt and Negri rightly stress habit as both something produced by past experience and practices and something productive of new practices and possibilities. What excites them about the political possibility of habit is that it provides a lens for accounting for the mutual consolidation of group- and self-identity as the result of integrative practices of communication, instead of the liberal language of consent or the old Marxist shibboleth of class-consciousness.

Hardt and Negri’s characterization of habit is the most concrete account of habit’s place in political theory. Unfortunately, they understand habit in a generic sense that fails to attend to the specificity of how individual practices and experiments culminate in anything like the “flesh” of the multitude. Their account of global democracy as the force of the people versus the force of capital operates with a romantic conception of democracy. As we will see in chapters 4 and 5 this kind of democratic romanticism that tries to mobilize mass participation has the perverse effect of disempowering and alienating citizens rather than inspiring confidence and action. Instead of their macro approach to politics as the clash of titans, I attend to the place of habit in the register of action that Deleuze calls the micropolitical. By the micropolitical I mean the political study of the interrelationship between political and social institutions and what William Connolly describes as “those complex mixtures of word, image, habit, feeling, touch, smell, concept, and

judgment that give texture to cultural life." Political projects of ecological conservation or economic redistribution on this approach are not unrelated concerns from that of how moods, sentiments, or habits make citizens more or less hospitable to such endeavors.

1.3 The Turn to Ethics

Micropolitical approaches to democratic citizenship that stress affect, the senses, moods, and sensibilities have come to prominence in political theory in recent years in what is called political theory’s ethical or aesthetic turn. Indeed, Chantal Mouffe observes, “ethics and morality have recently become very fashionable.” Like James, this turn to ethics is concerned with the renewal of democratic practices by focusing on the place of moods and feelings as registers of political concern. Central to this turn has been a shift from the liberal language of rights and responsibilities to a discussion of the cultivation of a spirit or ethos of citizenship.


[45] In saying this I do not mean to suggest that we mush chose either a macropolitics that focus on global forces or micropolitical strategies that attends to the individual and the local. “In short,” as Deleuze and Guattari put this point, “everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a macropolitics and a micropolitics” (op cit, p. 213). The distinction is a heuristic one that helps us imagine the multiples registers at which democratic politics takes place beyond the formal mechanisms of voting and public opinion formation.

[46] On this turn in general see the essays collected in Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds., *The Turn to Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2000). The rhetoric of turn to ethics is a broad handle that seems to capture too much to be of much descriptive use. It is often used to embrace an incredibly wide spectrum of normative approaches to politics, ranging from Rawls’ political liberalism to Immanuel Levinas’ ethics of responsibility, and from Isaiah Berlin’s value pluralism to Foucault’s care of the self. At the same time, the expression is used polemically to designate the shift in public political discourse in the United States after 9-11 towards an appraisal of the politics in terms of absolute categories of good and evil. For example of the broad descriptive use of the term see Ella Myers, "The Turn to Ethics and Its Democratic Costs" (doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, 2006). For the polemical uses of the term see, Jacques Rancière, "The Ethical Turn in Aesthetics and Politics," in *Recognition, Work, Politics: New Directions in French Critical Theory*, ed. Jean-Phillipe Deranty, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2007) and Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Verso, 2005)

The call for a civic ethos can be heard from diverse quarters, ranging from radical democrats, pragmatists, Wittgensteinians, and liberal egalitarians, but has come across most loudly and clearly from agonistic democrats as the call for an ethos of “presumptive generosity.” A democratic ethos, it is argued, will prefigure a more active and participatory citizenry that might animate the reach of our moral imagination. This generous ethos has taken on diverse mantles; being described as a “critical responsiveness” (William Connolly) or “a new responsiveness” (Bonnie Honig); “receptivity and responsiveness” (George Kateb), “rendering oneself more open to the surprise of other selves and bodies and more willing and able to enter into productive assemblages with them” (Jane Bennett), “a kind of moral attentiveness and self-restraint that you should display in relation to the clashing voices that engage on another in contemporary political life” (Stephen K. White), or a “fundamentally more capacious, generous, and ‘unthreatened’ bearings of the self in the midst of community” (Judith Butler).

48 These categories are all quite porous and authors who fit under one of these hats frequently fit under the other ones as well. For radical democrat appeals to ethos see Chantal Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox (London: Verso, 2000), Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), Jason Glynos, "Radical Democratic Ethos, or, What Is an Authentic Political Act?," Contemporary Political Theory 2, no. 2 (2003); for pragmatists see Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Richard Bernstein, “The Retrieval of the Democratic Ethos,” in Habermas on Law and Democracy: Critical Exchanges, ed. Michael Rosenfeld and Andrew Arato (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); for Wittgensteinians see Tully, "Wittgenstein and Political Philosophy: Understanding Practices of Critical Reflection," and Aletta J. Norval, Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in the Democratic Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), for liberal egalitarians see G.A. Cohen, Rescuing Justice and Equality (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). It is no accident that in each one of these cases the appeal to ethos is marshalled out as a critique of neo-Kantianism, whether in its Rawlsian or Habermasian variants. G.A. Cohen’s defence of an egalitarian ethos, however, is notably different from these other examples as it is not intended as a critique of moral intellectualism per se. Rather, Cohen argues that an egalitarian ethos is the more expansive and consistent application of liberal principles of justice to areas of private life. Accordingly, his is a concern with the breadth of our moral obligations, not the priority of moral character or sensibility. A final note: to the best of my knowledge, the expression presumptive generosity finds its origin in Romand Coles, Rethinking Generosity: Critical Theory and the Politics of Caritas (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997)

This recovery of James situates itself broadly within this turn to ethics in political theory. Central to this dissertation’s theoretical ambitions is a response to two common criticisms of this turn in the culture of argument.\textsuperscript{50} The first criticism is the problem of indeterminacy. As Stephen K. White observes, “Although ethos is being used more often today, this frequency is not always matched by clarity of meaning.”\textsuperscript{51} Amanda Anderson puts this same point in stronger terms, “to the extent that ‘ethos’ has appeared as a valorized term in contemporary theory, it designates a somewhat mystified ideal of enactment that defines itself against the explicitness and perceived normalizing force of reason.”\textsuperscript{52} Indeed, much of the appeal of the language of ethos draws its strength from Michel Foucault’s late ethics and its criticisms of the Kantian and rationalist predilections of liberal thinking. A perverse consequence of this heritage, however, is that talk of ethos often presumes an unnecessary suspicion of the language of moral psychology. I argue that these charges of indeterminacy – exactly what are we talking about when we talk about ethics? – can best be addressed in meta-ethical terms by shifting to the language of what Bernard Williams calls a minimal moral psychology. Foucault’s ethics provide only a rough figuration of such a minimal moral psychology. A more complete one is found in James’s psychology of habit.

The second criticism is the charge of depoliticization. Is a turn to ethics a turn away from politics? Liberals Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman argue that such approaches to citizenship from the perspective of sentiments and affects often amounts to little more than the platitude that

\textsuperscript{50} I borrow the notion of a culture of theory from Amanda Anderson, \textit{The Way We Argue Now} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 6

\textsuperscript{51} White, \textit{The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen}, 1

\textsuperscript{52} Anderson, \textit{The Way We Argue Now}, 11
“society would be better off if the people in it were nicer and more thoughtful.”\(^{53}\) Similarly, radical democrats object to this turn to ethics on the grounds that such an inward looking concern on self-transformation distracts citizens from genuinely political concerns of power and inequality.\(^{54}\) What these critics point to is the conclusion that a turn to ethics is a withdrawal from politics that rather than confronting the injustice of the New Gilded Age is only its most extreme example of twenty-first century dandyism.\(^{55}\)

This is a powerful challenge and one that was also leveled at James by his contemporaries and subsequent generations of American thinkers. As M.C. Otto wrote of James in 1947 in a spirit that anticipates these criticisms of the turn to ethics, “James treated certain important social facts as he might have brushed against strangers in a crowd.”\(^{56}\) By studying James’s *practice* as a public philosopher, and not merely his theoretical claims, I show how he mobilized this ethical concern for moods as sentiments for the purposes of concrete political struggles, not their avoidance. To push this point further I show how James’s arguments might respond to the critique of democratic faith leveled by his student and admirer Walter Lippmann. By bringing James’s political practices and Lippmann’s realism together to demonstrate the unavoidability of such ethical issues for politics I make the case that the turn to ethics is not merely a distraction from the tough political work of persuasion and mobilization. In the conclusion I deal directly with the criticism that James’s therapeutic approach is a form of

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\(^{55}\) This is a charge that of course was commonly leveled at Foucault’s late ethics as well. See Richard Wolin, "Foucault's Aesthetic Decisionism," *Telos* 67 (1986)

\(^{56}\) M.C. Otto, "On a Certain Blindness in William James," *Ethics* 53, no. 3 (1943): 188
depoliticization and that his blind spots compromise our ability to look to him to help make sense out of our contemporary democratic predicaments.

1.4 Method and Chapter Outline

To approach James as a political educator is to make two related methodological claims. The first is that the study of history of political thought need not be thought of as either strictly historical or merely anachronistic, but rather historical and anachronistic. With the Cambridge School of political thought, I agree that access to the meaning of a political text requires a careful and detailed account of the historical context which that text sought to respond to or transform. In my reading of James, particularly in chapters 3 and 4, I go into a great deal of biographical, social, and political history to situate James’s political writings. Placing James so concretely means that we cannot simply extract ready-made answers from his texts or apply his lessons verbatim in the contemporary world. But simply because political theorists do not offer concrete answers to our specific concerns does not mean that they cannot still provoke contemporary readers and challenge us to revisit our own practices and judgments concerning politics. To let a historical text affect contemporary readers requires an approach, unlike that of the Cambridge School, which is not confined to strict history. The political interests and concerns that a reader bring to the study of historical texts gives her special access to those texts that the merely objective or disinterested study of the history of political thought might not facilitate.

I turn to James and his political struggle from the perspective of the contemporary crisis of agency, and the turn to ethics in political theory. My aim in doing this is not to merely read current problems back into James, or to reduce the complexity of the modern world to the distinct historically specific problems James wrestled with. It is instead an exercise in
perspicuous representation, or what Peter Euben calls analogical thinking, that posits a dialectical relationship between the tasks of finding creative responses to current problems and that of locating parallels in the distant past. The past is a store of ideas and practices that might educate practical wisdom to get a grip on contemporary problems where our existing vocabularies or habits leave us poorly equipped to do so. And the urgency of political and ethical questions in our own lives open up a sympathy to past thinkers and the urgency with which they penned their texts.

This sort of dialectical and interested approach to political theory is particularly apt in the case of William James. According to pragmatism, all theories are tools whose validity is found in their ability to help some finite creature somewhere cope with some problem. But this is not simply a license for pure anachronism. In 1900 William James read another doctoral dissertation on his philosophy. In a response to its author, James wrote that while he appreciated “the greatly objective and dispassionate key in which you keep everything” that dissertation was guilty of the sin of “too much philological method,”

You take utterances of mine written at different dates, for different audiences belonging to different universes of discourse, and string them together as the abstract elements of a total philosophy which you then show to be inwardly incoherent. This is splendid philology, but is it live criticism of anyone’s Weltanschauung?

A live criticism, James stresses, is not merely the objective reconstruction of an author’s intellectual framework. Rather, it requires that one have “first grasped his center of vision, by an

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act of imagination.’ It is precisely the center of his vision that I seek to recover by drawing out James’s political thought from the self-conscious concerns of contemporary politics.

This brings us to the second methodological claim. To study James as a political educator is to study his political vision and to ask how it might help us re-envision our own political practices. What does it mean to study a political vision? In what follows I answer this question by an admittedly circular approach to James’s writings that involves moving from the historical James to James’s philosophy and back again. This movement back and forth between biography and theory is a necessary one for reading James politically. The political content of his philosophy, I argue, is only disclosed once we understand how it was intended to respond to his living situation. And at the same time, his own practice as an engage public intellectual can only serve as educative to contemporary readers as the instantiation of his political thought. This movement back and forth might seem disorienting but is a necessary preparation to open us up to the “act of imagination,” as James calls it, where the past and present might comingle.

This circular approach structures the following chapters as we move from contemporary political theory, back to James, and then slowly make our way back to contemporary concerns. In the next chapter (Chapter 2: ‘Ceci n’est pas une psychologie’) I begin with a reconstruction of the latent moral psychological arguments of the turn to ethics. Drawing Michel Foucault and Bernard Williams together in conversation, I analyze the implicit conception of practical reason raised by Foucault and the turn to ethics. I offer a defense of these claims but argue that their cash-value, as James might say, becomes more apparent when interpreted from the perspective of a minimal moral psychology that foregrounds the role of habit. Chapter 3 (‘The Pragmatist Enchantment’) offers a novel genealogy of pragmatism. I argue that both Peirce and James

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58 WJ to Miss S---, May 26th, 1900 in Henry James, ed. The Letters of William James, vol. II (Boston: Atlantic Monthly, 1920), 355
develop a sophisticated psychology of habit as a response to the agency-foreclosing force of nineteenth century evolutionary theory and social transformations. Through a close study of both his personal crisis-writings and *Principles of Psychology* I show how James’s interpretation of Darwinian evolution as a means of re-enchanting nature and the self lays the groundwork for the minimal moral psychology sought. Chapter 4 (‘Docility in America’) turns to James’s political writings during the Spanish-American wars to demonstrate how he mobilized his minimal moral psychology in the service of a militant democratic individualism. Contrasting James, Tocqueville, and Roosevelt on the issues of individualism and civic empowerment I argue that James sought to replace the imaginary role of the nation with the empowering imaginary of what he called a pluralistic universe. I show how this foregrounding of the imagination of chance might invite the cultivation of responsive habits of citizenship. Chapter 5 (‘Blind Faith’) responds to the criticisms raised by Robert Lacey and Patrick Deneen that James’s meliorist approach to politics amounts only to a utopian democratic faith. Contrasting James and Lippmann on the issue of moral psychology and democratic transformation, I argue that the aesthetic conception of practical reason that James develops from his habit psychology offers a middle path between the politics of faith that his critics accuse him of and a politics of skepticism that Lippmann draws out from a similar conception of habit. Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by drawing together the arguments made and outlines James’s pragmatist conception of democratic conviction as a correction to both the turn to ethics and its critics.
Chapter 2: ‘Ceci n’est pas une psychologie’

“I too with my soul and my body,/ We, a curious trio”

- Walt Whitman, ‘Pioneers, O Pioneers!’

2.1 Introduction

In a 1984 interview conducted at Berkeley, the question was posed to Michel Foucault as to what his studies of power meant for politics. Contrasting Foucault’s then-recent writings on the self to the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas, the interviewer suggests that perhaps it could be said that Habermas is primarily interested in politics while Foucault’s concerns are issues of ethics. Foucault responded, “I would more or less agree with the idea that in fact what interests me is much more morals than politics, or, in any case, politics as an ethics.” Foucault’s equation of these two terms, politics and ethics, blurs the ordinary line drawn between the practical sense of political action and the contemplative nature of ethical deliberation that his interlocutor asked him to choose between. Indeed, Foucault complicates this distinction further as he elaborates on what he means by ethics: “I think that ethics is a practice; ethos is a manner of being.”

Foucault effectively turns the questions around on itself. Ethics is not a contemplative concern. Rather it is a political practice, an ethos, “a manner of being.” This dissolution of the boundary between politics and ethics proposed by Foucault has had a profound effect on the imagination of political theorists wrestling with the meaning of democratic politics today. As I noted in the last chapter, it has become a commonplace to refer to the contemporary blurring of this line between the ethical and the political as a “turn to ethics” in political theory.

Foucault’s late ethics provide a rich source for analyzing the claims and ambitions of this turn to ethics in democratic theory. If ethics is a manner of being, then it is not a moral theory

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that can be applied to politics, let alone a deontological moral theory like Habermas’s. This emphasis on the ethical importance of “a manner of being” expresses Foucault’s deep scepticism towards rationalist approaches that envision politics as a matter of achieving consensus between individuals on moral rules and procedures. Read in contrast to Habermas’ theory of communicative rationality and deliberative legitimation, Foucault’s turn to ethos is a contention that politics is first and foremost a kind of reflective and ultimately aesthetic self-work, what he refers to elsewhere as “a work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings.” This opposition between ethos and reason frames the contemporary discussion of a democratic ethics or ethos. Ethos is accordingly introduced as a critical corrective to the influence of intellectualist strands of contemporary democratic discourse, in particular the rise of deliberative democracy, as a means of capturing deliberative rationalism’s excluded remainders; namely, the body, pluralism, and the aesthetic-affective dimension of politics.

This chapter approaches Foucault’s ethics as a theoretical model to understand the currency of ethics in contemporary political theory. While both Foucault’s original formulation and its many appropriations have employed the concept of ethos to skirt the rationalism of liberal thought, I argue that Foucault’s ethics offer an implicit but underappreciated account of practical

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3 For instance, see the defence of this interpretation in Paul Bove, "The Foucault Phenomenon: The Problematics of Style," in Foucault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Amanda Anderson provides a comprehensive review of how contemporary uses and abuses of ethos in contemporary political theory are framed as the counterpart of reason. Importantly, Anderson notes that Habermas himself reiterates Foucault’s distinction in his rejection of all forms of ethos as ethnocentrism. She argues that Habermas’ reiteration of the ethos/reason distinction belies a tension within his work between discourse ethics as an alternative to ethos and discourse ethics as a type of ethos. See Amanda Anderson, The Way We Argue Now (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), esp. 134-187

reason and moral psychology. It is this alternative language of practical reason, rather than the
search for some ‘other’ of reason, that the turn to ethics gestures towards in its diverse ways. Indeed, Stephen K. White suggests that Foucault might be more profitably read as “issuing a
challenge to later scholars to think about practical reason and our most basic political
commitments somewhat differently.”

5 In this chapter I make a stronger claim that Foucault does not merely offer a challenge but rather a refigured conception of practical reason. I here
reconstruct this account and the puzzles and ambiguities it entails as a template to understand the
psychological grounds of the turn to ethics, along with the challenges it might face.

I argue that this way of approaching Foucault’s late writings frames three issues. First is
the challenge of Foucault’s rejection of liberal rationalism. Foucault’s criticisms of reason and
autonomy raise a very demanding standard for any conception of practical reason and agency.
Critics of course have argued that they in fact raise impossibly high standards resulting in either
a form of total determinism or theoretical incoherence. Secondly, I look to how one might
engage these criticisms by drawing attention to the meta-ethical arguments Foucault develops in
his late writings. Here I argue that Foucault’s alternative conception of moral psychology can be
found in his attempt to return us from a number of philosophical abstractions that obscure rather
than illuminate the nature of agency. The third issue that follows from this, after his critique of
rationalism and his alternative account of moral psychology have been put forward, is the status
of practical reason as a care of the self. Here I bring out some tensions between his moral
psychology and Foucault’s account of transgression as an ethical practice. In the space of these
tensions Foucault gestures towards an account of practical reason as a practice of re-making the
self.

5 White, The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen, 3
Thematizing Foucault’s account of practical reason brings up a number of concepts and concern that seem to sit awkwardly with this critical writings. Practical reason is the reasoning that agents engage in when they deliberate about how to act in a given situation. Deliberation involves both a normative dimension (what ought I to do?) and an evaluative dimension (what are the possibilities available?). To present a theory of practical reason is necessarily to make some claim about the moral psychology of agents, whether implicitly or explicitly; that is, an account of what sorts of considerations and impulses go into moral decision making. A persistent problem of moral psychology is to provide an account of human psychology that avoids the problem of moralizing psychology by introducing too many categories like ‘will’ or ‘conscience’ that are prescribed by our moral theories. The flip side of this challenge is to provide a psychology that still captures the moral or deliberative dimensions of action without simply reducing our moral lives to mere biology or chemistry. I argue that Foucault steers a potential middle path through these two persistent problems by offering an instance of what Bernard Williams has called a minimalist moral psychology that is at once naturalistic and at the same time grounded in the practical perspective of the agent without supposing that there is anything exclusive about “moral” agency as opposed to our ordinary use of the term agency more generally.

2.2 Foucault’s Moral Psychology?

My claim that Foucault provides a moral psychology, even an infelicitous one, will inevitably raise some sceptical eyebrows. His central contribution to contemporary political thinking is his analytics of power and his critique of ‘normalizing’ institutions. Foucault wrote no moral theory

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or commented on debates within moral philosophy. Instead, Foucault shares an elective affinity with Nietzsche as a critic of morality, whose genealogies of modern institutions interrogate the social function of moral codes in the creation of docile, governable subjects of power. This critique of moral codes, however, is not meant as a rejection of morality tout court. Foucault’s late work contrasts the disciplinary function of moral rules and codes with an alternative conception of moral subjectivity he found in the ancient world. Looking to the classical and early-Christian practices of ascetic self-formation Foucault’s studies of what he called the care of the self point to a different way of thinking about the subject’s relationship to itself that is not reducible to the coercive practices of institutions and moral discourses as such. Foucault was typically elusive when pressed as to the implications of this other morality, but suggested that perhaps it may serve as the means for conceptualizing an ongoing resistance to existing forms of subjectivity and practices of governance through the cultivation of what he described as “the art of being governed less.”

Either as critic of morality or theorist of resistance, there does not appear to be a prima facie concern for what I am calling moral or political rationalism in Foucault’s corpus. His genealogies of Enlightenment humanism are meant to shake us from our progressive conceits, not to challenge the validity or structure of our moral theories. However, I argue that while

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7 Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflection from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) makes a persuasive argument that both Nietzsche and Foucault should be read as companions in the attempt to wrestle with the Socratic question of self knowledge and living well in a distinctively modern context.

8 Scholars of classics and ancient philosophers have often noted that Foucault’s use of the term ‘subjectivity’ in reference to the Greeks is anachronistic. While fifth and fourth century Greek ethics were crucially concerned with ethical self-formation, the concept of a ‘subject’ was not part of the moral grammar of Western philosophy until Augustine. On this point see the exchange in the ‘Summary of Discussion’ appended to Pierre Hadot, "Reflections on the Notion of 'the Cultivation of the Self'," in *Michel Foucault / Philosopher* (New York: Routledge, 1992). While I acknowledge this anachronism, I follow Foucault’s own novel use of the term for the purposes of this chapter.

Foucault himself may not have presented his writings on ethics in this light, there is a case to be made that his study of classical ethical practices can be read as a sustained reflection on this problem. Part of the difficulty of reading Foucault’s concern with moral and political rationalism is his reluctance to distinguish his descriptive and normative claims. Foucault often insisted that his theory was entirely descriptive and denied its own prescriptive status. This conflation, as his critics have charged, is untenable.\(^1\) In what follows I cleave apart the two aspects of his late work in terms of a descriptive moral psychology and a prescriptive ethics. In doing so I argue that the genuine insights of Foucault’s that can be reconstructed in terms of a moral psychology are often overshadowed by his polemical and overstated ethical claims concerning the ‘manner of being’ fit for the late-modern citizen. Crucially the former aspect provides a potential perspective for thinking about the relationship between practical reason and agency that the latter and dominant voice in Foucault’s texts unfortunately shuts out.

Perhaps more troublesome still is my claim that Foucault provides any sort of ‘psychology,’ moral or otherwise. Just as with the case of morality, Foucault’s relationship to psychology, as it has been institutionalized in the disciplines of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, is explicitly critical. Psychological discourse is Foucault’s central example of a regime of truth whose techniques and discourse are mutually entangled with power. Psychology’s categories of deviance, abnormality, and perversion, and its methods of inquiry and intervention combine to produce the subject as an object-effect of this power/knowledge. There is no internal object that psychology simply describes, let alone a set of passions, motivations, or intentions that could simply be taken as the given objects of a moral psychology. Rather, psychology and its techniques of examination produce the internalized and knowable subject as a result of coercive

\(^1\) Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 266-293
practices and institutions. Following Nietzsche again, there simply is no doer behind the deed for Foucault. There are only scientific discourses, actions and relations of power between acts.\textsuperscript{11}

When I speak of Foucault’s moral psychology, then, I do not mean an inquiry into the passions and moral deliberation carried out through a conceptual analysis of the parts of the soul like we find in Plato’s \textit{Republic} or the agencies of the psyche offered by Freud. I suggest that Foucault himself provides an entry point, although an incomplete one, for thinking about at least part of what we mean by moral psychology through his analysis of subjectivization as the observers’ narration of action and its meaning. Action for Foucault is something that unfolds in the world and its meaning is found only in its unfolding and its consequences rather than in the parts of the psyche that goes into ‘willing’ an action. Another way of putting this point is to say that Foucault’s moral psychology is one that focuses on \textit{agency} as a practice rather than the \textit{agencies} that go into acting. The agencies that go into an act are complex and contingent. The moral quality of an action that results is a function of its meaning in the world, not the special moral quality of the obligations that give rise to it. In undermining our faith in the autonomous subject Foucault undermines our faith in the very category of moral obligation. But this, as I hope to show, is not the same as undermining our senses that it is in fact sensible to talk about people making moral decisions or being motivated by moral concerns, just as we might speak of them being motivated by economic, prudential, or imaginary concerns.

Foucault provides no definable ‘theory’ of moral psychology, any more than he provides a ‘theory’ of power, the body, or any of his other major concepts.\textsuperscript{12} But as Bernard Williams


\textsuperscript{12} Foucault frequently resisted the notion that genealogy provided any ‘theory’, preferring instead to refer to it as an “anti-science” Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in \textit{Power/Knowledge}, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 83
reminds us – a reminder Foucault’s critics could stand to listen to – “an absence of theory is not a theory of absence.”¹³ My claim here is a modest and speculative one: if we read Foucault’s ethics as a critique of moral intellectualism, a reading that as I’ve argued above is invited by the appropriation of Foucault’s late work by the turn to ethos in democratic theory, then certain claims about the nature of moral motivation, practical reason, and persuasion can be reconstructed as implicit premises of this critique. These implicit premises provide suggestions on how to conceptualize a more felicitous moral psychology than that offered by both liberals and their critics. They do not provide a polished alternative. For this, I argue, we must turn to James and the pragmatist tradition in the following chapters.

Before proceeding, a final caveat is needed. My argument in this chapter will rub some readers the wrong way on the grounds that my interpretation attributes seemingly un-Foucaultian ideas to Foucault. In raising the question of moral intellectualism in Foucault’s work I am attempting to take defenders of the turn to ethos at their word that Foucault late work does indeed provide ethical lessons for late-modern citizens. Some critics will object that there is a hermeneutical violence in reading Foucault as a thinker who can teach us positive lessons about moral philosophy and democracy.¹⁴ To these critics I will concede that this is not a reading of Foucault’s authorial intentions, but this is precisely because Foucault of all people is our most stringent critic of this myth of the Author.¹⁵ The voice of an oeuvre, such as ‘Michel Foucault’ represents a fluid intertextual position fixed by legal and institutional systems such as copyright law and academic discourses, not by coherent or ‘originary’ intentions. But this is not my central

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¹⁴ For instance see the criticisms of Foucault’s “colonizers” in Gad Horowitz, "The Foucaultian Impasse: No Sex, No Self, No Revolution," *Political Theory* 15, no. 61 (1987)

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?,” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998). As he says of his own writings, “They are, in the final analysis, just fragments, and it is up to you or me to see what we can make of them” Foucault, "Two Lectures," 79
methodological justification. Even if we concede this point, that is, the point that this reading of Foucault’s texts may clash with his authorial intentions, I would hope that it would be a reading he himself would welcome, for it is precisely the strategy of reading that he often exercised when commenting on others who he believed we ought to learn something from. When his own critics charged him with unorthodoxy in his interpretation of Nietzsche, for example, Foucault could only respond, “I prefer to utilize the writers I like. The only valid tribute to thought such as Nietzsche’s is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest.” My aspiration in this chapter is to elicit similar groans and protests from Foucault’s own texts in hopes of achieving a more felicitous perspective on the moral psychology of our contemporary democratic practices.

2.3 Liberalism and Subjectivization

At the core of the liberal tradition is the notion of the subject as something pre-political. In the contract theories of Hobbes and Locke the subject is a rights-bearing agent that chooses to enter social relationships for the purposes of pursuing certain goods. In the procedural liberalism of Kant the subject is a formal postulate whose autonomy is a function of its ability to bracket out the influence of all considerations but those it chooses to accept as considerations for action. The subject as something abstract, autonomous, independent, and pre-political is the foundation of contemporary political theory. It is this foundation that Foucault proposes to sweep away. “The individual,” he writes, “is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to

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strike... The individual is an effect of power.”¹⁷ There is no singular universal subject. The history of the modern world has been a historical series of incommensurate regimes of power/knowledge that have each invested bodies in different practices of discipline and produced a different forms of subjectivity. “Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth.”¹⁸ The regimes of truth are discursive forms that determine how it is that we talk about ourselves, and therefore understand ourselves. And these regimes of knowledge, Foucault contends, are each mutually entangled with regimes of power that use this knowledge to shape and discipline conduct so as to enforce these understandings as seemingly natural and non-contingent ways of seeing the world. The desires and self-understandings of the subject that results from this matrix of power/knowledge is the expression of the norms of a regime and the subject in turn serves to reproduce and entrench these norms even in those cases where it is acting to liberate itself from them. As Foucault put it in an interview on the issue, “I don’t think there is actually a sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject that one could find everywhere.”¹⁹

2.3.1 Foucault and Critics of Liberalism

On first glance, this way of historicizing the liberal subject seems to have important overlaps with arguments raised by other critics of liberalism. More specifically it resonates with the criticisms of liberalism’s abstract rationalism levelled by communitarians and civic republicans. Communitarians argue that liberalism’s atomistic conception of the self and moral formalism results in a truncated and ultimately incoherent view of politics. Such a perspective

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¹⁷ Foucault, "Two Lectures," 98


¹⁹ Michel Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence," in Foucault Live, ed. Sylvere Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 313
imposes too stark a distinction between ethics and politics that it cannot sustain on its own terms. For example, Charles Taylor argues that the liberal idea of an impartial standard of procedural morality that accommodates diverse understandings of the good is theoretically incoherent, as any articulation of the ‘right’ always privileges certain ‘goods’ and human capacities at the expense of others. Liberalism’s rationalist standards are never truly speaking neutral, nor would that kind of neutrality be desirable from a communitarian perspective. Liberalism always presupposes an ethos it refuses to acknowledge, resulting in a failure to account for the collective goods and bonds of solidarity on which a political community depends.\textsuperscript{20}

Ronald Beiner explains this line of criticism by stressing the contradiction between liberalism’s self-conception as a theory and the facts of liberal society. “Every society has an ethos. One that didn’t would not just fail to be a moral community, it would fail to be a society at all. So liberal society does have an ethos.” According to Beiner, liberalism’s self-understanding as relying on no shared values is ultimately a chimera, and a dangerous one at that. The ethos of liberal society is organized around the central good of individual free choice. The abstract choosing of consumers is celebrated as the central value of liberal societies, at the expense of other human goods and values. In this sense liberalism is like all other social formations in that it is “a global dispensation – that is, a way of life that excludes other ways of life.”\textsuperscript{21}

However, the inability of liberal theorists and citizens to acknowledge their reliance on a certain ethos results in a moral incoherence. Beiner refers to this incoherence as the liberal paradox, “[u]nder the liberal dispensation, the ethos is – lack of ethos; individuals in this society

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ronald Beiner, \textit{What's the Matter with Liberalism?} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 22, 24
\end{itemize}
are habituated to being insufficiently habituated.”

Liberal society’s ethos-less ethos, Beiner warns, results in its fragmentation into a plurality of self-interested consumers and, at the same time, a homogenizing drive to conformity where its celebrated choice is limited to same sort of desires for mass produced commodities and clichéd perceptions of the world. The correction to these pathologies of liberalism is the need for the self-conscious cultivation of a more robust ethos oriented towards shared goods and human flourishing. Beiner argues that this need for cultivation simply cannot be satisfied by the formal rationalism of liberal thought, and of Kantianism in particular. What liberal society demands are the moral convictions that can motivate collective goods and solidarity. These sorts of convictions, however, are a scarce resource that must be grounded in actual practices and histories of concrete communities. Liberalism’s answer that rational agreement or consensus on standards of impartiality is basis enough for political community is not up to this task. “[G]ood theory,” Beiner writes, “is no substitute for good socializing, and even at its best, theory is utterly helpless in the face of bad socializing.”

Is Foucault’s deconstruction of the subject an appeal to this more familiar account of socialization? Surely the cultures and traditions we find ourselves in by no choice of our own play an enormous role in defining our wants, our norms, and our self-understandings. Every form of socialization, Foucault might respond, is itself related to a regime of power. Socialization is organized around a code of conduct that seeks to produce individuals in accordance with a norm of healthy, well-adjusted, members of the community. And this product of shaping in accordance with a norm is itself related to a whole series of disciplines and constraints that are meant to

22 Ibid., 22

23 Ronald Beiner, "Do We Need a Philosophical Ethics? Theory, Prudence, and the Primacy of Ethos," in Philosophy in a Time of Lost Spirit (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 91
shape potential community members to this end. But to say this is to say nothing very specific about what power is and how it differs from socialization.\textsuperscript{24} The concept of power, as Charles Taylor rightly said, “would lose all useful profile, would have no more distinctiveness, if we let it roam this wide.”\textsuperscript{25}

To better grasp Foucault’s argument, and to raise a point that I will develop further in a later section, we should look to the presuppositions of Beiner’s notion that individuals are socialized into an ethos. Ethos here refers to a sensibility or disposition characteristic of a moral community. It is a moral orientation shared by a community usually bound by common geography, language, or ethnicity. Although community may be constituted politically, it shares bonds that are ethical; that is, political community participates in what Hegel calls ethical life. This ethical life represents what a “living good” that has “actuality through self-conscious action.”\textsuperscript{26} As opposed to the abstract moral duties of a disembodied Kantian Moralität Hegel’s notion of Sittlichkeit is an ethos as lived sensibility that motivates action and colours political judgment of the members of a concrete historical community. On Taylor and Beiner’s account, to say that we are socialized in accordance with an ethos is to say that we are free from power because we are living authentically. In interpreting and articulating the values of our community we exercise the virtues we need to realize an important part of our human nature. Each offers a

\textsuperscript{24} Mark Bevir seemingly overlooks this point when he gives just this answer to the question of how Foucault’s genealogy of the individualism differs from socialization. Mark Bevir, “Foucault and Critique: Deploying Agency against Autonomy,” Political Theory 27, no. 1 (1999): 66-7


\textsuperscript{26} G.W.F. Hegel, Elements of the Philosophy of Right, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), § 142
“full blooded philosophical anthropology” that outlines a historical account of human nature as a perfectible creature progressing, in however stuttering a process, towards its natural end.27

Foucault would agree with their claim that it makes no sense to talk about a sovereign, pre-political liberal subject, but would object that the civic republican alternative only shifts the idea of the natural subject from the state of nature to the end of nature. Either as origin or telos, the idea of a true and universal human subject is the target of Foucault’s genealogical critique. His alternative is to dissolve the subject into a historical process rather than projecting it as an achieved state. His name for this alterative to both liberal and communitarian views of the subject is the notion of subjectivization (assujettissement). Foucault replaces the noun “sujet” with the verb “assujettissement” to designate a process of becoming, rather than an ontological given. This latter term captures powers double role of subjecting the body to an external power and the process of shaping an internal subject.28 Where Taylor and Beiner view the individual emerging from a socialization in meanings, Foucault’s account of subjectivization stresses the emergence from a network of disciplines. The background of shared meanings communitarians posit are not basic but rather one part of a system of truth and power that offers norms of health, productivity, and sexuality that a continuous network of practices of discipline subject bodies to accord with. There is no subjectivization without power understood in this double sense – as the normative application of discipline on docile bodies to interpolate an internal subject.

Reframing the issue this way we can now say something more substantive about how Foucault’s notion of power is distinct from the familiar concept of socialization. As I said above, Foucault does not provide a theory of power in the manner a sociologist or psychologist might

27 Beiner, What’s the Matter with Liberalism?, 7; Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). It should be noted, however, that Taylor proposes a much more modest and contingent view of human flourishing than that offered by the neo-Aristotelianism of Beiner.

provide a theory of socialization. Socialization, as described by George Herbert Mead for instance, is a general process of norm internalization that takes place through experiments in “symbolic interaction” that he associates with the exchange of perspectives in dialogue and the shared pursuit of games. In ‘The Subject and Power’ Foucault distinguishes the communicative relations Mead and Taylor emphasise from the relations of power that hold between partners. Relations of communication can have results in the realm of power, but they are not merely power. Instead these two types of relationships “always overlap one another, support one another reciprocally, and use each other mutually as means to an end.” Disciplinary institutions, like the family, school, the workplace, and so on, engage in both communicative relationships of meaning and dominating relationships of power in a mutually reinforcing manner. That is, in attending to power in its materiality – in its instances of effect – Foucault offers a radically different perspective on the same process that Mead and Taylor attend to at the level of theory. Looking at socialization from the bottom up through “an ascending analysis of power” that looks first at micro-practices of discipline and how they become appropriated and transformed by more global and macro forms of power, Foucault draws out the physical and normative violence that Mead’s generic talk of “symbolic interaction” or Freudian talk of sublimation too easily glide over.

This way of approaching the issue of power and socialization draws out some important insights concerning the role of norms in the development of agency. Power relates to the subject

29 George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self, and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934)

30 Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 337-338. On the interaction of these two relationships of subjectivization, and Foucault’s over-emphasis on one side at the cost of the other, see Amy Allen, "Discourse, Power, and Subjectivation: The Foucault/Habermas Debate Reconsidered," Philosophical Forum 40, no. 1 (2009)

31 Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 338

32 Foucault, "Two Lectures," 99
not as a passive “substance,” and but rather as a potential “form.” This choice of terms is suggestive. A form always adheres to some matter, and here the matter of the subject as form is the body. Foucault reworks Aristotle’s ontology of form and matter to argue that the subject is always some particular actualization or “materialization” of the body. The formative principle actualizes the latent potential of the matter, as Aristotle argues that the soul actualizes the body, or the regime actualizes the citizens. Crucially, this is not a form simply applied to a given pre-existing matter. Form “materializes” and brings something new into existence. Just as the matter of the polis which Aristotle defines as the citizen is unintelligible without a constitutional form that allocates offices and duties, the body is not simply the passive recipient of form. Rather, the subject and the body “materialize” together. Secondly, the subject as form is a subject as norm. The subject is taken as a norm or standard by which existing bodies are judged and appraised. The function of this norm is to normalize bodies and their conduct by setting standards of performance, health and moral correctness against which a classification of deviancy and perversion can be distributed. The subject is a normalizing device of moral codes. And finally, as is already obvious, the subject as form is a subject as formed. The subject is the result of practices of measurement, correction, and training exerted on the body. Power shapes the subject through its inscription on the body. A history of the subject as form, in these multiple senses then, is therefore not the “history of mentalities” of intellectual history as a history of self-


34 Judith Butler provides a provocative reading of Foucault’s notion of materialization as a reworking of Aristotle’s account of the body and soul in De Anima in Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex (New York: Routledge, 1993), 32-36

understandings, but rather what Foucault calls “a ‘history of bodies’ and the manner in which what is most material and vital in them has been invested.”  

2.3.2 Genealogies of the Subject-Body

These three elements of subjectivization come together in Foucault’s analysis of docile bodies in his genealogical study of the modern prison, *Discipline and Punish*. Graphically contrasting the spectacular public torture of Damiens at the end of the 18th century with the seemingly humane and orderly prison time-tables of the early 19th century, Foucault argues that prison reform in this period was characterized by a double process of the decline of the public spectacle of punishment and the displacement of the body of the condemned as the object of punishment. Ideas about punishment in this period present a moral transformation that substituted the aim of the painful marking and destruction of the condemned’s body to the more humanitarian objective of the corrective punishment of his soul. In the place of the sovereign’s pillories and devices of torture, new medical, pedagogical, and psychiatric experts became the administrators of this gentle punishment that seeks to understand, categorize, and correct the deviance of the individual. The aim was no longer to submit the criminal to retributive violence. Criminal justice as a humanitarian enterprise became redefined as “medico-juridical treatment” where the judgement of guilt becomes imbricated with a whole system of non-juridical experts who seek to know the truth of the convict by producing technologies of inquiry and scientific discourses of crime.

Foucault turns this seemingly progressive moment on its head in arguing that this transformation of penal justice substitutes the raw violence of public torture for a new and more

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pernicious discipline. The soul did not truly replace the body as the object of punishment. The knowable, correctable, governable soul is a result of these new means of subjecting and controlling the living, corporeal body. Foucault argues that the new scientific discourses, or knowledge, of the convict’s soul work hand in hand with a “political economy of the body” that develop new disciplines of control and technologies of power. The body is never strictly removed from the scene of punishment. Rather, it is now involved in a “political field” where it is subjected to a new capillary micro-physics of power. This power affects the body directly, “to invest it, to mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.” The result of these reforms is a whole new “political anatomy” of the body as an object of knowledge that can be controlled and dominated, but also made more productive and efficient as well. This latter point is Foucault’s most radical. This new disciplinary power does not function primarily by repressing or limiting the body’s freedom. Rather, it is a productive power that functions to make the body more efficient, more responsive, and more productive in its tasks. The soul, that knowable, trainable object of pedagogical correction, is precisely the resulting subject of these disciplines of power/knowledge. The subject which punishment seeks to correct is not only the object of this power, but more importantly its product. The soul that was meant to displace the body, Foucault provocatively inverts St. Augustine’s claim, has instead become “the prison of the body.”

The prison is of course only one site of this government of the body. The disciplines and techniques of the penitentiary represent only one moment of modern power’s political anatomy. This is a power that “explores” the body, “breaks it down and rearranges it.” Schools, factories, barracks, hospitals and other social institutions come to develop their own technologies of the body to form souls. These technologies seek to make the body ‘docile’ – subjected, used,

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38 Ibid., 25, 25, 30
transformed, as a means of improving its skills, usefulness, and obedience. These techniques break down the body into units, functions, precise gestures, and forces that can be directed and trained. They proceed from an analysis of the body as a series of functions in need of control and improvement. Foucault gives the example of the military science of *dressage* which attends to the soldier’s body as “a formless clay” whose posture, gait, stance, and habits must be mastered, corrected, and made pliable so as to render the proper air of a soldier “into the automatism of habit.” The docile body is no longer a single self, but a series of functions to be controlled and mastered. The machinery of power represented by dressage, time-tables, the division and enclosure of space all come to transform the body, and thus the self, into an object of “docility-utility.” And this microphysics of power, Foucault stresses, is not limited to the boundaries of institutions. It represents a network of techniques and discourses that reach out “to cover the entire social body.”

This is a shocking and eye-opening redescription of moral progress. To the end of shaking us out of our conceits about liberal humanism Foucault’s genealogy of the subject does a superb job. But at what price? Foucault’s view of the subject seems to correct the dehistoricized atomism of liberalism by effectively removing agency and liberty from our account of action all together. “Absolutely everything,” as Nancy Fraser puts this point, “is socially constructed on this view.” There is no force of spontaneity or resistance in Foucault’s account of the carceral society other than his occasional and vague references to the “counterattack” against regimes of power/knowledge he posits in “bodies and pleasures” (I will return to this point later on).

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39 Ibid., 138, 135, 137, 139


41 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 157
Moreover, Foucault’s account of discipline is seemingly one-sided and draws only on the negative costs of such a process, while turning a blind eye to substantial gains in the development of liberal societies. The result, writes Charles Taylor, is that Foucault’s account of discipline functions as “the basis of utterly monolithic analyses.” And finally there are the implicit and problematic normative questions Foucault’s analysis occasions. In unmasking humanism Foucault seeks to convince his readers that this rise in discipline is a lamentable or disagreeable phenomenon. But on what basis of what normative evaluations can Foucault’s rhetoric of resistance find traction? If all norms are themselves devices or means of power, how can they be leveraged against power? Jürgen Habermas objects that Foucault’s genealogical project functions on the basis of a “cryptonormativism” whereby it presumes a critical stance outside of relationship of power that it cannot justify on its own terms.

These criticisms are well known and it is commonly suggested that Foucault’s turn to the ancients and ethics in his late writings are an attempt to cast some response to them, if not actually revise the basic premises of his thinking more deeply. There has been a great deal of ink spilt to defend Foucault from these charges and to add to this spill is not my aim here. My concern, as I said earlier, is the issue of practical reason. Foucault historicizes the notion of rationality to suggest that methods of reasoning and standards of inquiry are never external to the particular games of truth whose logic they serve as. As he emphatically states, “no given form of

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42 Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," 94

43 Habermas, *Philosophical Discourses*

rationality is actually reason.” Foucault’s genealogies of the subject seem to undercut the two dominant views of practical reason. The first is the formalist view that arises from the liberal contractarian tradition. As articulated by Thomas Hobbes and others, this is a view of practical reason as an instrumental process of means-ends calculation to satisfy the natural preferences or desires of the subject by “reckoning (that is, adding and subtracting) of the consequences of general names agreed upon for the marking and signifying our thoughts.” Foucault historicizes this economic view of rationality and rejects the premise that the ends agents seek to achieve are either natural or pre-political. But he also rejects the hermenutic view of practical reason put forward by thinkers like Taylor and Beiner. Here practical reason is not merely a formal device for maximizing desires but rather an articulator of a background horizon of meanings. They orient us towards a good that is learned and social, and the means by which we deliberate about how to achieve such goods is holistic and discursive. But this too, as we’ve seen, is an approach Foucault rejects. The meanings that practical actors draw on are themselves parasitic on forms of discipline that undermine that substantive character of such norms. Even where actors believe they are acting on substantive values they are in fact repeating and enabling strategies of power. It is the question of what an alternative account of practical reason might consist of that I want to put forward as we turn to Foucault’s late writings in the next section.

2.4 Ethics and Codes


47 For a clear account of practical reason as articulator see Charles Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," in Philosophical Arguments (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995)
Foucault’s later work shifts perspectives from external relationships of power and knowledge that produce subjects to the forms of self-relationship by which the individual comes to recognize itself as a subject. Here Foucault provides resources for a more fine-grained account that asks how it is that subjects relate to the norms and discourses of truth that form them. Continuous with his middle period, Foucault argues that the possibilities for self-fashioning are always constrained by existing relationships of power and the models of subjectivity that one’s historical and social context provides. But in contrast to the middle works, the late works stress that any relationship of power presupposes a prior freedom of the self and a necessary incompleteness of power’s influence. The free self is never strictly passive but rather must come to know itself and shape itself in relation to the models of subjectivity its social context provides it with. And as self-shaping, the self is potentially free to modify or experiment with the limits of the existing models of subjectivity it is given.

2.4.1 Foucault’s Late Meta-Ethics

Foucault’s late work captures this internal aspect of subjectivization under the rubric of the care of the self, or alternatively, the arts of existence. He defines them as follows, “What I mean by the phrase are those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.” Foucault’s study of the care of the self as he outlines it in *The Use of Pleasure* is premised on a meta-ethical claim. He argues that every system of moral rules

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48 Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," 291

49 In marking out these periods it is important to remember that this not to meant to describe three different and unrelated Foucaults. Despite the fact that Foucault frequently provided conflicting statements as to the central question or concern of his work, I take this periodization as a heuristic device for mapping the progress in the tools of philosophical analysis Foucault brings to his work.
and orders relies on practices of the self by which one shapes oneself into the kind of subject envisioned by the moral system.

For an action to be ‘moral,’ it must not be reducible to an act or a series of acts conforming to a rule, a law, or a value…There is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for a forming of the self as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without ‘modes of subjectivation’ and an ‘ascetics’ or ‘practices of the self’ that support them.

Accordingly he distinguishes two aspects of moral action. The first is the explicit code of behaviour that prescribes certain actions and prohibits others. The second element is the sensibility or form of subjectivity that these codes posit. Foucault argues that every moral theory implicitly or explicitly contains both aspects, although some place greater emphasis on one element over the other. While within the history of philosophy there have been ongoing conflicts and disagreements between the claims of what he calls “code-oriented” moralities and “ethics-oriented moralities” elements of both are conceptually inseparable.50

Foucault frequently presents this distinction between code-morality and ethics-morality from the normative perspective of an analytics of power. Code-moralities like Christianity and Kantianism are represented as the more heavy-handed of the two, more complicit with authority and law and less sensitive to the possibilities of resistance and change.

With moralities of this type, the important thing is to focus on the instances of authority that enforce the code, that require it to be learned and observed, that penalize infractions; in these conditions, the subjectivation [sic] occurs basically in a quasi-juridical form, where the ethical subject refers his conduct to a law, or set of laws, to which he must submit at the risk of committing offences that may make him liable to punishment.51


51 Ibid., 29-30
By contrast, ethics-moralities that emphasize cultivating one’s own relationship with truth, are more dynamic, less totalizing, and less complicit with the demands of authority and law. These ethics rely on only rudimentary rules whose “exact observance may be relatively unimportant… Here the emphasis is on the forms of relations with the self, on the methods and techniques by which he works them out, on the exercises by which he makes of himself an object to be known, and on the practices that enable him to transform his own mode of being.”

Foucault proposes that classical Greek ethics that valued such self-cultivation speak to us today, not as a model to be followed exactly, but as an alternative to the normalizing power of codes in our moral lives. Analogously with the Greeks, Foucault suggests, liberal subjects today are in a position of struggling to make sense out of a moral life where neither religious foundations nor legal orders can provide persuasive answers.

Foucault’s recurrent celebration of ethics as an alternative to code moralities ought to warrant some suspicion. His ideal-type distinction of codes and ethics is too blunt an instrument to capture the diversity of moral theories. Moreover, there is in principle no reason to assume code moralities are more complicit with relations of power than ethics moralities are. Moral systems are essentially underdetermined when removed from their social and historical contexts. Code systems may represent a liberating transformation in specific social contexts, while ethics systems may represent entrenched relationships of domination. A relevant example here is anthropologist Mary Douglas’s distinction between restricted and elaborated language codes of parent-child interaction. Elaborated or personal codes typical of middle class families are explicit social scripts that seek to recognize and cultivate the autonomy of children through explicit rules.

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52 Ibid., 30

and explanations. Restricted codes, which by contrast are more typical of working class families, do not function through elaborated codes but rather appeal to social roles in the form of commands. Douglas’s study aims to show, in a spirit similar to Foucault, that the restricted code is not in principle more coercive than the personal variant. Each script relies on a relationship of social control between parent and child. Elaborate codes are not morally superior; rather, they are more sophisticated responses to the division of labour within the family in the conditions of greater social differentiation. The reason this is of interest here is that despite the fact that the elaborated code misrepresents itself as the gentle and civilized variants, both codes trade in domination. No one is in principle less dominating than the other.54

However, if we recast Foucault’s distinction in terms of the structure of moral theory the contrast becomes more fruitful. Moral codes can be taken to represent a rationalist approach to moral life – they provide a system of rules, based on either truth (revealed or otherwise) or reason, whose binding force ultimately rests on our ability to know them to be valid rules. The binding power of these moral codes hinges on our ability to be rationally persuaded by them, due either to their truth or their validity. The meta-ethical claim about the mutual implication of ethics and morality would then seem to suggest that the binding force of these codes never stands alone. Rather, codes rely on the supplementary motivational force of an ethical sensibility or ethos to vivify them. As philosophers of language say of rule-following, moral rules do not provide their own interpretation. Rather they rely on a certain sensibility or refined judgement as to how they should be followed, and how their demands should be integrated into one’s life. To

borrow a Kantian adage, we could say that codes without ethics are empty, ethics without codes are blind.

2.4.2 The Return of the Subject

This scheme offers a lens for re-reading the moral arguments of *Discipline and Punish* discussed above. The double process Foucault tracks in the demise of violent torture is a shift in the moral grammar of punishment. The critical edge of *Discipline* as we’ve seen is aimed at the progressive narrative of moral learning in Western Europe where crude and violent moral codes came to be replaced by more sophisticated and humanitarian codes. From the perspective of the history of ideas we can see a learning shift from a feudal moral code organized around the unquestionable sovereignty of the king to a modern one that is more resolutely egalitarian and premised on the respect and rights of each individual. Foucault’s point is that the study of history in terms of the evolution of moral codes misses something. Each of these codes requires and enforces a form of ethics; that is, a form of subjectivization, whereby a subject can organize its spiritual and moral life around a set of dictates, such as penitence, guilt, hard work, and so forth. This subterranean transformation that results in the rise of the modern soul must be analyzed not simply through the content of these codes themselves and rhetoric of the moral reformers who proposed them, but rather through a history of bodies that asks how new discourses and technologies of power came to produce the sorts of subjects these codes presume. The soul is not simply imposed on the body. Rather, it is constructed as the appropriate model of subjectivity which prisoners, children, and factory workers are disciplined into acknowledging, and therefore living, as their own deepest and inmost truth.

This way of putting the issue, namely, how does the subject relate to moral codes, opens up the conceptual space occupied by moral psychology. How is it that we deliberate about what
we do? Foucault’s genealogy pries open up this space, however, only to close it back down. The psyche that reflects on its norms and makes decisions is itself an object-effect of power. This reflective and interrogative dimension of the modern self is a consequence of the development of the modality of power described in *History of Sexuality* as pastoral power. Pastoral power is the kindly power that seeks to assure individual success and well-being by coming to know the internal psyche of the self. Foucault focuses on great deal on Christian practices of confession as a technology of this power. The pastor tends to his sheep to “ensure individual salvation in the next world” but in order to do so he must know the sins they carry in their hearts. “It implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it.”

Unlike the disciplinary power exercised on the body to break it down into an object of control and strategy, pastoral power interrogates the subject and requires a series of technologies of confession and truth telling by which the subject is itself constructed. This thirteenth century technology of confession transforms in diverse ways over the course of the enlightenment, the nineteenth-century medicalization of sexuality, psychoanalytic discourse, and finally sexual liberation. What connects these moments in the history of confessional technology, however, is the idea that in speaking the truth of our inner selves – our sin, our sex – we are mistaken to think that we are releasing something internal and private out into the public world of power. Our desires and our sex are themselves a part of this public world of power and always have been. The confessions of disclosure and the medical discourses of perversion are the means by which the subject is inscribed in the network of power relations. Sex, the West’s most prized example of the internal and private self, is itself only “the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a

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55 Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 333
deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materialities, their forces, energies, sensation and pleasures.”

In the subsequent volumes of the *History of Sexuality* where Foucault returns to the Greek practices of care of the self the depiction of the relationship between the self and truth is quite differently. Unlike the Christian hermeneutics of the self where we must confess or tell the truth of the self, the Greek practices of the care of the self, as one commentator puts it, emphasise the priority of learning about one’s self. This learning is not merely a disciplinary imposition but a genuinely reflective process on how it is that one can remake oneself in accordance with the norms and rules that one finds valuable. What Foucault charts is the history of how the subject relates to itself, that is, the history of reflection. This learning takes place through introspection, but also through discussion with a friend or master as in the Socratic dialogues. For Socrates, as for Foucault, this process of learning about the self is a genuinely critical process where we ask, How should I relate to the rules and codes that shape me? Or, to translate this question into a more familiar register of ethics, the subject of power must still ask ‘How should one live?’

The late writings keep this space of moral psychology open because here, unlike in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault is now much more explicit about the relationship between power and freedom. Power is exercised over “free subjects only in so far as they are free.” In so far as power can be said to exist, it designates the relationship of control exerted on and between free subjects. And in so far as power seeks to steer capacities and direct conduct, it must act on the kind of agent that already conducts itself and exercises its own capacities. This dependence of power on freedom can be helpfully contrasted with the case of direct violence. Violence exerts

56 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 155

57 Todd May, *The Philosophy of Foucault* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 2006), 113
itself directly on the body, to mark it or destroy it as Foucault demonstrates with the case of Damiens. It does not seek to control freedom, but rather to extinguish it in death. Power works indirectly. It does not seek to make or destroy the body, but rather it is “a mode of action upon the actions of others.” What makes power and not physical determination is that it acts upon other actions, not mere things or docile bodies. “By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized.”

Foucault’s turn to ethics is meant as a reflection on the conditions of freedom within the context of modern relations of power. The priority of freedom over power means that there is an essential gap or space between the prescriptive power of codes and the reflective self-constitution of ethics. It is within this gap that Foucault situates his analysis of the care of the self.

This talk of the priority of freedom evokes the critic’s worries concerning theoretical incoherence or performative contradiction. Has Foucault reintroduced the subject somewhere behind the act? Recall Foucault’s claim that power faces resistance from the force of bodies and pleasures. Here too we see him prioritizing freedom, but the puzzles this route brings up only reverberate again in this later formulation. On the one hand, Foucault insists that there exists no given pre-existing, pre-discursive body. In ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ Foucault claims that genealogy proceeds without foundations or timeless truths. It “refuses the certainty of absolutes” and is “without constants.”

Foucault extends his genealogical dissolution of the modern subject to the body itself. “Nothing in man – not even his body,” he writes, “is sufficiently stable to

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58 Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 342, 341, 341

serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men.” At the same time, however, Foucault constantly falls back on metaphors of ‘investment’ to describe the relationship between power and the body that seem to suggest that there exists a given body to which power is then applied, as when in the same text he describes the body as “the inscribed surface of events.” As Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, and Jurgen Habermas have all argued, Foucault himself appears inconsistent in his conception of the body, oscillating back and forth from the body as a site of construction and the body as an object of construction.

The language of strategies and logics that mark Foucault’s studies of power are meant to displace the centrality of the subject and philosophy’s humanist language of subjectivity. One unintended consequence of this way of approaching power is that it leads to a purely external and constructivist view of the body and the self that produces puzzles like this. However what Foucault’s anti-humanist perspective overshadows and what these criticisms forget is that Foucault’s studies of the subject are studies of human beings – the finite, historical, contingent lives of biological creatures who are at once embodied and reflective. This point is not one to lose sight of. To do so leads to misguided philosophical debates about whether or not Foucault is sliding in humanist prejudices through the back door. In one sense, of course he is. To study humans is to study creatures like us, even where this “us” can change a great deal across history and between cultures. But on the other hand, of course he isn’t. Foucault is not providing a foundational account of human nature or an account of what is essentially human that can serve as a normative ground of critique. This sort of view of the person is precisely what his anti-

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60 Ibid., 87-88

humanism rejects. What Foucault offers instead is what Paul Patton calls a “thin” account of the subject that is at once contingent and also a concrete expression of an existing regime of truth.

Gilles Deleuze rightly sees this point, but articulates it in the curious Nietzschean language of vitalism. Deleuze argues that Foucault’s remarks on the counterattack of bodies and pleasures ought to be read from this vitalist perspective as an expression of the will to power. In so far as disciplinary power takes life as its object, life too becomes the means of its resistance. “Is not the force that comes from outside a certain idea of Life, a certain vitalism, in which Foucault’s thought culminates?”

I think a more helpful way of parsing this is to resist Deleuze’s vitalist language of life and instead say that Foucault’s genealogies of the subject always presume a body, a self, that thinks and lives. This living is not the mechanical performance of a regime of truth, like a marionette that dances to the demands of anonymous strings. It is a living self that has its own projects and preferences that are at once shaped by relationships of power, but also free to respond to these relationships, and to oneself, in a variety of ways. Patton puts this point clearly when he argues that the subject of power is a human subject endowed with certain capacities. Hence, it is our capacity of pleasure that is governed and shaped by technologies of pastoral power in History of Sexuality, or by our own exercises in self-mastery and askesis in Uses of Pleasure. In both cases there necessarily already exists some lively capacity to do or feel something that power operates on.

Reading Foucault from this angle gives us a new perspective on his vague rhetoric of the counter-attack of bodies. Recall in Discipline and Punish Foucault described the microphysics of power as operating on the body by disaggregating it and breaking it down into a series of fine gestures and habits each one of which can be trained and shaped. This political anatomy

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approaches the body as formless clay. The account of *dressage* discussed above in particular has given the impression that Foucault offers an entirely passive, determined subject. When Foucault writes this he is writing from the external perspective of the strategy of power itself – what do these tactics presume, how do they function, what do they produce? But this perspective can be contrasted with the perspective of the body that is attacked by these powers. Are the body and its habits not complacent and docile, but rather lively and active agents? Power is only power because it is exercised as a sometimes-successful, sometimes-unsuccessful means of influencing real living people who have their own plans and projects they seek to realize. In shifting from the strategic perspective of power to the ethical perspective of the self who responds to these multiples lines of influence Foucault’s ethics foreground this latter point. He makes this point even clearer by distinguishing between power and domination. Power functions by acting “upon the *possibilities* of action of other people,” which is to say that it functions on the kinds of creatures who still maintain possibilities of response.64 Domination, by contrast, is a form of influence that closes down any meaningful possibility of response. This is the influence exerted over prisoners and slaves, or any other asymmetrical relationship where there is no real possibility for role-reversal. This sort of domination, Foucault stresses, is a limit condition for the ordinary working of power where such role-reversals remain a real possibility.

A moral psychology that begins from this point of view is what I, following Bernard Williams’ account of Nietzsche, call a minimal moral psychology. A minimal moral psychology breaks with the dominant models in two ways. Against philosophical moral psychology, it makes no assumption of unique moral faculties or articulated taxonomies of moral reasoning. A minimal moral psychology claims that an account of distinctly moral activity should add as little as possible to our accounts of other human activities. Against naturalistic moral psychology, it

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64 Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 341
proceeds without a given scientific framework. Naturalism is inevitably caught up in puzzles surrounding what truly counts as ‘natural’ phenomenon, which is ultimately an essentially contested concept. A minimal moral psychology instead points out the excess of moral content in our psychological explanations of moral agency, whether it is the “will” or the “subject”, by appealing, as Williams puts it, “to what an experienced, honest, subtle, and unoptimistic interpreter might make of human behaviour elsewhere.” This is a psychology that does not aim to proceed by demonstrative proof, but rather by suggestion and solicitation. It aims less to tell us something, than it does urges us to ask something. What do Foucault’s genealogies of the subject and his studies of the care of the self want us to ask? They ask us what it could mean to think about practical reason without the metaphysical baggage of the rationalist tradition.

2.5 Ethics as Practical Reason

Thus far I have made the argument that Foucault’s genealogy of the subject as an effect of power undercuts the claims of two dominant views of practical reason. The first is the liberal-instrumental view that posits a natural subject who acts to maximize goods and preferences. The second is the embedded or communitarian view that claims that the self is the result of socialization but that this socialization takes place through the circulation of meanings rather than power. With these two models off the table I argue that Foucault’s late works open up a conceptual space for thinking about a historical and contingent moral psychology of the subject who reflects on itself and the norms by which it is governed. Approaching these arguments form this perspective I pointed to an important meta-ethical claim that is frequently overlooked in

65 Unless it is meant to refer reductively to the terms of physics alone, in which case, Williams argues, such a psychology becomes useless.

66 Williams, "Nietzsche's Minimal Moral Psychology," 302
Foucault’s writings. A moral system involves both code or rule as well as an ethics or ethos of how the subject ought to relate to those rules. This bifurcation means that norms exist only in a process of interpretation with a free, reflective subject who must question and articulate these norms within their own practices. I then went on to review some criticisms that plague Foucault’s late work concerning its inconsistency. I argued here that the charge of inconsistency amounts to a category mistake. Foucault is not offering a theory of the free will or the free subject here any more than he was offering a theory of the determined and passive subject in the middle works. Rather, he articulates this issue of reflection from within the perspective of the human agent, a perspective we already necessarily presume in our everyday reflections on the very idea of action. To demand a deeper proof this freedom is an unnecessary and distracting debate that has turned scholarship away from the issue practical reason that Foucault is articulating in these late works.

As his studies of the transformations of the care of the self, from its Greek through its Hellenistic and finally Christian versions shows, there is not a singular moral psychology that he reconstructs as a universal model. What he does is show us how to study the changes in moral psychology as a historical phenomenon. To study moral psychology, Foucault tells us, is to study the history of the body. This is a curious and perhaps surprising conclusion but one that follows necessarily from the view of practical reason and freedom that he puts forward. This is an account of practical reason that focuses less on the practical question of what ought I to do than that on the Socratic question how should I live? And to answer this question, Foucault argues, is not simply to change one’s ideas but one’s habits and practices of living. The care of the self, he writes, “is always a real activity and not just an attitude.”

It is these actions the self takes upon the self in its process of reflection that Foucault examines. Confessionary technologies provide

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one perspective on such action. But the ascetic practices of the Romans that focused on writing and withdrawal, or the peripatetic and dialogical reflection of the Greeks provide a different way of thinking about this issue. Because my concern here is contemporary political theory and the contemporary uses and abuses of Foucault I think it is perhaps more fitting to side step his studies of antiquity and its technologies of spirituality and instead focus on Foucault’s own claims about the care of the self and how they framed his prescriptive account of a critical ethos.

Foucault’s normative affirmation of ethics as a practice of freedom is distinctively negative. In ‘What is Enlightenment?’ he provides his most direct and substantial account of what sort of ethos is needed. He turns back to a late essay of Kant’s to capture the connection between ethos and the idea of critique. Critique today ought to take the form of a “philosophical ethos” which Foucault characterizes as a “limit attitude” that seeks to experiment with present limitations to see where they can be extended or transgressed.\(^{68}\) He elsewhere describes this limit attitude as the cultivation of “the arts of voluntary inservitude, of reflective indocility.” This is a critical ethos that seeks to “de-individualize” existing forms of subjectivity “by means of multiplication and displacement” rather than through the affirmation of new shared values or common goods. Ethics is therefore an ongoing negative task of “working on our limits” so as to “free thought from what it silently thinks” and “enable it to think differently.”\(^{69}\)

Foucault calls the practice philosophical ethos transgression. This negative ethics of transgression and constant subversion has been of great influence on contemporary feminists,
queer theorists, and radical democrats. In experiments of transgressing the limits of our current norms or identities, whether through avant-garde art, or drugs, or sadomasochism, Foucault finds experiences where “the limit opens violently onto the limitless, finds itself suddenly carried away by the content it had rejected and fulfilled by this alien plenitude that invades it to the core of its being.” The play of such transgressive practices that unmask and subvert all categories of identity has become theorized as its own political task, as an emancipatory game of destabilizing existing forms of domination and oppression. A radical politics of “unrealization” disrupts the self certainty and narcissism of identities that take themselves to be representatives of a natural order of interests or desire or gender, at the expense of different others who are coded as perverts, deviants, or evil.

Here we have an expression of Foucault’s normative or prescriptive ethics that I have bracketed from the descriptive ethics and moral psychology I described earlier. In bringing the two strands of Foucault’s thinking back together a tension between them becomes apparent. Where his prescriptive ethics focuses on transgression as negative practice of un-doing the self, his moral psychology stresses action as a creative process of re-doing the self. As Mark Bevir puts this point in another context, the seductive qualities of Foucault’s notion of transgression only make sense if premised on a view of the self as an agent who is capable of innovation and

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72 The *locus classicus* of this sort of argument is the account of performative subversion in Judith Butler, *Gender Troubles: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Since the publication of this text, Butler has moved away from her conception of the infinite performativity of identity in many ways and towards a more sophisticated conception of human interdependence. On politics as subversion see also James Tully, "Political Philosophy as Critical Activity," *Political Theory* 30, no. 4 (2002)

creativity.\textsuperscript{74} Along with Bevir, I think both Foucault (sometimes) and contemporary political theorists (more often) have missed pendant for chain by grasping at the language of negative transgression instead of positive capacity for creative re-making. The unmaking of identity is not possible as an end in itself. To come back to Foucault’s account of subjectivation recall the Aristotelian notion of matter and form, where there is no matter without form, just as much as there is no form without matter. To simply refuse identity would be to do without form, that is, to return to mere body without subjectivity. One only abandons one form of subjectivity by taking up another. Desubjectivization always and only proceeds through resubjectivization.\textsuperscript{75} This latter constructive moment of reformation and reconstitution in new and novel ways is the practice Foucault captures in his turn to ancient ethics. It was the concern with aesthetic self-making that drew Foucault to the ancients as a means of thinking what desubjectivization could mean. Resistance is not a matter of destroying or deconstructing codes. Rather, it is the cultivation of new ethical selves.

Crucial to this challenge is Foucault’s emphasis that this ethics is an embodied practice, not simply a discourse or an interpretation. The self is stylized not through discursive exchange and reasoned proof. Rather, the ethical self is the result of experimental practices he calls technologies of the self. These are technologies by which “individuals… effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conducts, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”\textsuperscript{76} These technologies are

\textsuperscript{74} Bevir, ‘Foucault and Critique’


\textsuperscript{76} Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 225
practices and rituals ethical subjects enact to transform themselves in relation to the forms of subjectivity their codes demand of them. Ethics then is not a matter of defining new values or discovering motivating supplements to moral formalism. Ethics is an art of living that includes obeying rules and social expectations, but is by no means reducible to simple conformity alone.

Foucault’s claim that the re-doing of the self is an aesthetic achievement has numerous implications. First of all, it suggests that the self is something made by a skilful artist. It is not simply the result of happenstance and history, but rather is a carefully and intentionally constructed object. It bears witness to the vision of its maker. Secondly, this work of art cannot simply be a process of imitation or rule-following. While an artist may appeal to rules of proportion and techniques of representation in the making of her product, an aesthetic object is never simply the result of fidelity to formal rules. Rather, its quality of beauty depends on the skilfulness of the artist in applying these rules in the right way, and of knowing when to break with proper rules of style as well. And finally, this is to say that the self as a work of art is something original. It is not a reproduction or imitation, but something novel and unique. Nietzsche outlines these multiple implications of the idea that the self is a work of art in his notion of giving style to one’s life. In *The Gay Science* he writes,

> One thing is needful. – To ‘give style’ to one’s character – a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses that their nature has to offer and then fit them into an artistic plan until each appears as art and reason and even weakness delight the eye. Here the great mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of first nature removed – both times through long practice and daily work at it… In the end, when the work is complete, it becomes clear how it was the force of a single taste that rules and shaped everything great and small –
whether the taste was good or bad means less than one may think; it’s enough that it was one taste!  

Foucault embraces this Nietzschean notion of giving style to one’s character not as an aesthete rejection of moral principles – a charge both he and Nietzsche are often tarnished with – but rather as a challenge for crafting an ethics of how we can live the moral principles and rules freely rather than slavishly.

The aesthetic and experimental view of practical reason this account gestures towards is one that takes ordinary and basic practices, habits, as the object and subject of ethical reflection. Importantly these habits are not merely the passive clay of dressage. They are, as I put this point in the introduction, a lively conception of habit as an unfinished and lively assemblage of the self’s capabilities. Practical reason as a reflection on the questions of ‘How ought I live?’ is a reflection on how to break and remake our habits as our own, rather than as the passive and unchosen effects of the culture and regimes of power that have made and shaped us. This is an agent-centered vision of the ethical life rather than an act-centered one that shifts the explanatory focus of what ought I do? to the more basic question of who am I? To translate this back into the terms of practical reason we can say for Foucault that there are no external reasons; rather, all reasons are internal ones. There are no reasons that are binding on us external of some given interests and values we hold in light of who we understand ourselves to be: that is to say, there are no uniquely moral reasons. Statements of external reasons are not properly reasons at all. They are rather commands. Practical reason, by contrast, is concerned with the heuristic process of interpreting which reasons are properly reasons for me. This ethical self-


understanding, however, must in turn be situated in a practice of aesthetic reinvention that is first and foremost embodied.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Foucault’s late ethics provide a novel and under-appreciated perspective on the issue of moral psychology and practical reason. His account of the subject and of capacities point towards a moral psychology that is at once minimal in the senses that it avoids building too much moral content into our descriptions of action, but at the same time is substantial enough to maintain some space for critical reflection and self-direction in our psychological explanations. Reading Foucault against the grain in this way provides a preliminary response to the problem of indeterminacy raised in the last chapter: how can we say anything meaningful about the language of ethos? By pinning Foucault’s historical and comparative studies down under the rubrics of moral psychology and practical reason we can now offer a more concrete account of what exactly we mean to emphasise with the rhetoric of ethos. Rather than an ‘other’ of reason it means to figure a reconceptualization of reason as in experimental and aesthetic practices of self-transformation.

But with this said, we have still said little about the second, and I think more worrisome objection to the turn to ethics: namely, the problem of depoliticization. How are these aesthetic practices of practical reasoning related to common projects of political concern? One way of phrasing this worry is to suggest that this minimal moral psychology may be too minimal for the purposes of politics. While Foucault provides a greater space for cognitive reflection and self-understanding than his critics frequently charge, his account of the material self seems to leave little role for the emotional and imaginative depth that we might hope for in an account of
agency. What emotions, passions, and feelings drive citizens to experiment and live on as we do? What affects do we draw on to guide our political practices? Ian Hacking rightly observes that “he has given no surrogate for whatever it is that springs eternal in the human breast.” Without such a surrogate, we might worry, how can we become empowered to enact our agency in the political world? In the next chapter I take up these issues by taking a different approach towards a minimal moral psychology in shifting from Foucault’s account of the genealogical self to the psychological self of William James.

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Chapter 3: The Pragmatist Enchantment

“Nature is but a name for excess”
- William James, A Pluralistic Universe

3.1 Introduction

The last chapter closed with the rough outline of the minimal moral psychology prefigured in Michel Foucault’s vision of an ethics of the history of bodies. There we saw that a minimal moral psychology is one that situates ethics between a strong conception of human nature and a constructivist view of the subject as merely a passive effect of power. In this chapter I turn to the speculative and psychological writings of Charles Sanders Peirce and William James to further develop the notion of habit alluded to at the end of Chapter 2. Both Peirce and James articulate a novel conception of habit as an active force in agency. The pragmatist emphasis on process and experience accords neatly with Foucault’s emphasis on subjectivity as a process of subjectification rather than a static metaphysical given. But more important than the theoretical parallels between these two traditions is their similar ethical and political concerns. I turn the clock back to the late nineteenth century in this chapter to capture a moment of crisis analogous in many ways to the crisis of agency familiar to late modern citizens today (see Chapter 1). Peirce and James both sought conceptual innovations in philosophy and psychology as a way of rethinking the category of agency. The result is a sophisticated and radically revisionist view of the nature of habit.

This chapter provides a contextual reading of this re-invention of habit in the context of the social consequences of the Darwinian revolution in America between 1865 and 1890, the year James published The Principles of Psychology. Scholars of American political thought have long held that the pragmatism developed by Peirce and James was indebted to Darwin’s naturalism in many ways. Intellectual historian Louis Menand makes the claim that the
publication of *On the Origin of the Species* was second only to the gruesome experience of the Civil War in the fashioning of pragmatism.¹ John Dewey defined pragmatism as the consequence of Darwinism when he wrote that Darwin’s influence on philosophy was having “conquered the phenomena of life for the principle of transition, and thereby freed the new logic for application to mind and morals and life.”² Richard Rorty reiterates this point in stating that “[p]ragmatists are committed to taking Darwin seriously.”³ In this chapter I argue that Darwinian evolution held an essentially contested role in the pragmatism of Peirce and James. Pragmatism represents not only an *application* of Darwinian naturalism to philosophy but also a philosophical *response* to the ethical and social consequences of Darwinism. And at the centre of this response was the concept of habit as a means of sustaining a faith in our active power as agents in the face of what James called the melancholic sadness of nineteenth century naturalism.

The first ambition of this chapter is to rearticulate the dynamic and unruly conception of habit developed by the early pragmatists. Related to this aim is a second. Both James and Peirce believed that a discussion of habit and action is inseparable the concerns of metaphysics. While they both developed an action-affirming philosophy of habit in the way I have suggested above, they each did so on the basis of very different metaphysical premises. For Peirce, like many other nineteenth century thinkers such as Friedrich Wilhelm von Schelling, Pierre Maine de Biran, Félix Ravaisson, and Samuel Butler, the concept of habit is the central ballast of an evolutionary

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idealism that posits the world as moving from a state of pure chaos to one of absolute order. For James, by contrast, habit represents a model of loose order and continuity appropriate for the contingent and surprising account of nature presented by Darwin. Another way of putting this point is to say that Peirce and other thinkers understood the value of habit to reside in its ability to resist the full implications of Darwinian science. Against the seemingly random progress of evolution, they followed Lamarck in positing inter-generational and inter-species continuity in terms of a history of habit.

In what follows I offer detailed reconstruction of the scientific and metaphysical disputes concerning habit that went on during this era. The reader will surely be curious what implications, if any, these disputes hold for the concerns of politics. I ask the reader to bear with this presentation as it lays some necessary groundwork for understanding the political thought of William James presented in the following chapters. It does this in two ways. First, through a study of the social and intellectual context of James’s psychology we can come to understand both the origins and the originality of his late theory of pluralism. And second, this link between habit and metaphysics reappears in James’s political writings as a concern for ontological assumptions that contrasting figurations of moral psychology and political community always

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already presume.\(^5\) James’s psychological approach to public affairs, as we shall see, is always both political and metaphysical.

This argument has five steps. In the first (3.2) I offer a historical reconstruction of the personal and cultural challenges that weighed on the intellectual life of the Gilded Age. I offer a story here of James’s nervous breakdown in the early 1870’s in its intellectual context. Working my way through James’s diaries and letters I show that it was the mastery of habit that empowered the young James to convene the power to will. In the next section (3.3) I offer an account of the basic contours of the pragmatist understanding of habit as a rule for action. Here I summarize the classical statements of pragmatism offered by Peirce in ‘The Fixation of Belief’ and ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’. My intention is to present a clear conceptual account of habit and how the pragmatists understood it to displace the traditional philosophical concepts of interiority and the mental. This schematic work done, the following two sections chart the contrasting ways that Peirce and James came to understand the relationship between this definition of habit and the ethical stakes Darwinian science. In (3.4) I show how the evolutionary theory of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck offered an attractive means to Peirce of preserving enchantment and meaning through science. At the core of this project is the marriage of the pragmatist account of habit and a form of objective idealism. This culminates in (3.5) with a close study the chapter on ‘Habit’ from James’s magnum opus, The Principles of Psychology. Where his psychic crisis of the 1870’s might suggest that James would be attracted to the re-assuring varieties of neo-Lamarkianism available to him, I show how James offered a novel way of affirming what George Levine calls “the life-enhancing energies of Darwinian explanation” as way of sustaining

\(^5\) In what follows I use the term ‘ontology’ to denote a particular branch of the broad area of philosophical speculation traditionally defined as metaphysics.
freedom and meaning in the modern world. James found the persistence of chance and spontaneity in nature as an occasion for sustaining a therapy of the will. It was through an embrace of the sources of enchantment in the modern world that James found the ethical strength to carry on the in face of psychic crisis. And it was his ability to interpret the category of habit in these new Darwinian terms that is at the centre of this project. I conclude (3.6) by responding to the possible challenge that this account of science and enchantment overlooks the theistic ambitions of James’s project. Against this charge I argue that James’s naturalistic enchantment is a condition for his theism, and not his theism the justification for his naturalism.

3.2 Darwin, Modernity, and the Culture of the Sick Soul

The cultural impact of the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859 was delayed in the United States. The reception of *Origin* was overshadowed by the cultural and class conflicts that culminated in the Civil War. It was only after the end of the war 1865 that the intellectual challenge of Darwin and the sophisticated debates that had been going on in Britain for over a decade reached American shores. Before the healing of the wounds of the war could even begin, both scientific and popular publics in the United States were faced with what they thought to be three traumatic consequences of the new science: the *disenchantment* of nature as a place of eschatological purpose, the *determinism* of natural forces in the evolution of the human

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species, and the normalization of conflict as the engine of social evolution. While Darwin himself did not see these consequences following directly from the arguments he put forward in *Origin* and later in *Descent of Man*, the popular perception of these consequences reverberated widely.

The religious reaction to Darwin in America is a complicated story that merits more attention than I can give it in any detail here. While many conservative theologians vociferously objected to Darwin’s seemingly sacrilegious conclusions, liberal Protestants found ways to reconcile Darwin’s model of natural selection within an eschatological view of history. Alongside the religious reckoning with evolution was an influential philosophical response. The most popular and widely circulated version of evolutionary theory in the United States during the last third of the nineteenth-century was the synthetic philosophy of Herbert Spencer. Spencer was the man who coined the term “survival of the fittest” and came to symbolize Social Darwinism in the United States, despite the fact that his understanding of evolution was premised on the marriage of a Mathus’ view of population control and Larmarkian mechanisms rather than Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Like the liberal theologians, Spencer provided a novel solution to the tension between eschatology and evolution. Furthermore, Spencer provided a theory of evolutionary conflict that elegantly buttressed the competitive individualism of American society. Evolution proceeded through a process of growth in nature from patterns of simplicity to complexity whereby organic systems seek to sustain a state of equilibrium. The determining factor of this evolution was the environment. Organisms seek to evolve in response

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to environmental pressures. And societies, Spencer insisted, are “social organisms” whose evolution is in every way analogous to biological organisms. The result of this analogy, Spencer concluded, was that the perfection of societies was a natural evolutionary process which social planning and legislation, as in the form of poor laws and protection of the vulnerable, could only distort.

Spencer’s synthetic philosophy combined natural conflict and determinism while at the same time holding out this vision of evolution as compatible with Christianity. While this compatibilism may have assuaged many, it did nothing for the young William James. Spencer’s psychology and social theory were regular whipping posts for James. He thought Spencer’s arguments sloppy, self-serving and ultimately amounting to nothing more than “the vague Asiatic profession of belief in an all-enveloping fate.” The Enlightenment dream of a wholly explainable world, that Spencer’s totalizing theory of evolution represents, has the tragic consequence of reducing the human to just one more cog in a determinist machine. James captures the sadness evoked by a naturalistic world in a moving passage of *Varieties of Religious Experience*,

For naturalism, fed on recent cosmological speculations, mankind is in a position similar to that of a set of people living on a frozen lake, surrounded by cliffs over which there is no escape, yet knowing that little by little the ice is melting, and the inevitable day drawing near when the last film of it will disappear, and to be drowned ignominiously will be the human creature’s portion. The merrier the skating, the warmer and more sparkling the sun by day, and ruddier the bonfires at

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10 William James, “Great Men and Their Environment,” in *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover, 1956), 237-8
night, the more poignant the sadness with which one must take in the meaning of the whole situation.\textsuperscript{11}

But more than philosophical disagreements, it was precisely what made Spencer so attractive to his throngs of American readers that made him so disagreeable to James: the synthetic philosophy represented, as Richard Hofstadter puts it, “an age of steel and steam engines, competition, exploitation, and struggle.”\textsuperscript{12} Evolutionary theory represented the ideological articulation of the American industrialism. Rather than theological longing it was the overwhelming feeling of powerlessness in a complex society that so struck James and others. The naturalism of the evolutionary revolution was simply one more nail in the coffin.

Despite his mature repudiation of Spencer, the young James felt the unbearable weight of Spencer’s arguments. Influenced also by his studies of physiological psychology in Germany in 1860’s James had become increasingly overwhelmed by the seemingly totally mechanical character of human experience. He expressed this difficulty with disenchanted materialism in a letter to Thomas Ward in 1869, “I’m swamped in an empirical philosophy. I feel that we are Nature through and through, that we are wholly conditioned, that not a wiggle of our will happens save as the result of physical laws.”\textsuperscript{13} Determinism in evolution and materialism in psychology seem to drain the world of its vitality. And yet James felt that this vision had to be incomplete in some way. He continues the letter, “... and yet, notwithstanding, we are en rapport with reason. – How to conceive it? Who knows?” James’s struggle with this question would ultimately plunge him into a life-changing depression the following year. His mature


\textsuperscript{12} Hofstadter, \textit{Social Darwinism in American Thought}, 35

\textsuperscript{13} WJ to Thomas Ward, March [?], 1869 in Henry James, ed., \textit{The Letters of William James}, vol. I (Boston: Atlantic Monthly, 1920), 152-3
philosophical and psychological arguments, as we will see, are inextricably linked to this experience.

I raise this point because James’s own struggle with Darwin, Spencer, materialism, and determinism is evocative of a greater cultural crisis of the age. James’s philosophical arguments are not merely a point in his own recovery but importantly tough medicine for this wider cultural ailment. The intellectual historian George Cotkin captures the popular sentiments common among James’s intellectual circle in late nineteenth century New England with the cultural trope of Hamlet.\textsuperscript{14} Hamlet served as a cultural commonplace to express the dangers of indecision, powerlessness, and madness that so struck James and others. Hamlet’s inability to avenge his father’s murder, and his own tragic demise, evoke the inability to be responsible for the overwhelming force of fate in human affairs. The tragic fate that crushes Hamlet became a marker for the individual crises of James’s milieu. In clinical circles, this Hamlet-like sentiment was given the diagnosis of neurasthenia, the depletion of nerve-energy.

Neurasthenia, or Americanitis as it was also called, was a common catch all to address an incredibly wide set of emotional problems ranging from depression, to stress, and fatigue.\textsuperscript{15} This national condition was originally diagnosed by George M. Beard in his \textit{American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences}. Beard argues that the mental lethargy and fatigue of Americans is a result of the social conditions of American modernity itself. It uniquely strikes America due to

\textsuperscript{14} George Cotkin, \textit{William James, Public Philosopher} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 40-72

\textsuperscript{15} The coinage of ‘Americanitis’ is sometimes (falsely) attributed to James. The pharmaceutical company, Rexall, temporarily sold what they called an Americanitis Elixir to cope with what one advertisement at the time described as “the peculiar nervous conditions resulting from the continuous rush and tension under which Americans life.” The neologism is falsely attributed to James in Andrea Tone, \textit{The Age of Anxiety: A History of America’s Turbulent Affair with Tranquilizers} (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 10. The coining of the term ought to properly be attributed to Annie Payson Call, a British psychologist whose 1891 book \textit{Power through Repose} was reviewed by James. On Payson and James see Robert D Richardson, \textit{William James in the Maelstrom of American Modernism} (Boston: Mariner Books, 2006), 311
its technological advancement over other developed countries. Among the questionable pathogens leading to this national nervous bankruptcy are the new industrial conditions of labour introduced by steam power, the contraction of space and time by the printing press and the telegraph, the insatiable hunger for technological mastery driven by modern science, and the instability of traditional gender and social roles occasioned by American liberty and “the mental activity of women.”  

Drawing on his medical training and research in psychology James expands on Beard’s diagnosis by stressing force of habit on energy depletion. In his presidential address to the American Philosophical Association in 1906 he called this condition habit-neurosis. “There seems no doubt that we are each and all of us to some extent victims of habit-neurosis.” Habit contracts the space of experience and our feelings of liveliness. It is anathema to willing, promoting an anesthetizing of experience where willing represents its vitality. A life of habit is a life of coasting through the world. It leaves us feeling as if some invisible force constrains our full potential, our “highest notch of clearness and discernment, sureness in reasoning, or firmness in deciding.”

More telling than James’s clinical remarks on neurasthenia is his literary depiction of the healthy and the sick soul in Varieties of Religious Experience. There, James begins by celebrating “the once born” optimism of the healthy minded person. Such souls “live habitually

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17 Habits too play an important role in Beard’s account. He identifies habits among the secondary and tertiary causes of nervousness, but stresses that habituation can only have this effect within the context of the primary cause of modern civilization itself. See for instance his account of the different psychical costs of American and Chinese drug habits at 305-309.

on the sunny side of the misery-line” without any trace of “morbid compunction or crisis.” Against the sunny disposition of such optimistic souls James contrasts the “sick soul” of those who feel the affliction of sin, evil and loss in the world. James seems to hold up the sunny disposition of the healthy minded as a model to emulate, but he finds the more profound religious sentiment among the melancholy of the sick souled. It is those souls who “cannot so swiftly throw off the burden of the consciousness of evil, but are congenitally fated to suffer its presence” who more truly see the foundationlessness of human existence. And it is among these souls who live “in darkness and apprehension” that James identifies himself.19

The more profound experience of the sick-soul is the one that moves James because it is his own condition that he is describing. In Varieties he cites an unnamed French sufferer as the source of his most chronic example of the sick soul. What he does not acknowledge, however, is that the haunting example of “panic fear” he describes is in fact his own.20 James suffered a deep bout of melancholia sometime between his return from Europe in 1870 and his reported recovery in 1872. Biographers speculate about the exact cause of the collapse of 1870 but what concerns us here is James’s own understanding of his sick soul.21 He reflects on this issue openly in a diary entry from February 1st, 1870,

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19 James, Varieties, 152, 94, 152

20 James admits that this is a story of his own experience in a letter to Frank Abaust, June 1, 1904 in Ig纳斯 K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, The Correspondence of William James, vol. 10: July 1902-March 1905 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 619

21 Ralph Barton Perry explains the breakdown as James’s own sense of the weight of the philosophical problem of determinism while more recent biographers have sought a deeper psychological explanation. Robert Richardson places stress on James’s affections for Millie Temple and her sudden death, while Howard Feinstein and George Cotkin point to a psychoanalytic account of James’s inability to escape from the authoritarian role of his father Henry James Sr. Compare Ralph Barton Perry, The Thought and Character of William James, vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1935), 320-322; Richardson, William James in the Maelstrom of American Modernism, 94-123; Howard Feinstein, Becoming William James, rev ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 182-223; Cotkin, William James, Public Philosopher, 1-39.
Today I about touched bottom, and perceive plainly that I must face the choice with open eyes: shall I frankly throw the moral business overboard, as one unsuited to my innate aptitudes, or shall I follow it, and it alone, making everything else merely stuff for it? I will give the latter alternative a fair trial.22

By “moral business” James means a belief in the freedom of the will. James describes his collapse as a crisis of confidence in his powers of agency. This was a period of his life where he felt himself constitutionally incapable of finding the resolution to make a decision and stick with it. Hamlet’s soliloquy could just as much have come from James’s own lips,

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought;
And enterprises of great pitch and moment,
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.23

James famously attributes his cure of this crisis to his encounter with the writings of Charles Renouvier. He writes in his diary on April 30th, 1870,

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier’s second ‘Essais’ and see no reason why his definition of Free Will – ‘the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have thought otherwise’ – need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate I shall assume for the present – until next year – that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.24

In positing the belief in free will as itself the first act of free will James has provided the groundwork for what will later become his most famous doctrine, the will to believe. If we can

22 Ralph Barton Perry, The Thought and Character of William James, paperback ed. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996), 120


24 April 30, 1870, in James, ed., The Letters of William James, 147
only find the courage to act as if we are free, the ultimate status of the will as free or determined becomes marginalized as merely a speculative problem. James’s discovery of his freedom to will was nothing short of a conversion, not unlike that of the sick-souled into what he called in *Varieties* the “twice born.” The sick soul is the more profound soul because it is open to the transformation of being born again. It is only the soul that has travelled through the darkness of melancholy and evil, James argued, that they can find the salvation James describes as “the loss of all worry, the sense that all is ultimately well with one, the peace, the harmony, the *willingness to be.*”

The once born optimist has only a facile happiness. It takes hitting bottom, James argues, to understand the depth and beauty of existence.

This is a familiar narrative of James’s collapse and recovery that I have reconstructed here. James’s therapy of willing and his later doctrine of the will to believe have been criticized as the simple-minded belief that we can make things true just by believing it. However, both the received narratives and its critics overlook one important element of James’s account. In that same diary entry from April 30th James follows his remark about his first act of free will with the remark, “I will see to the sequel.” More important than the will to believe in one’s freedom is the cultivation of habits of free action. “Not in maxims, not in *Anschauungen*, but in accumulated *acts* of thought lies salvation.” It is the shoring up of habits of courage and confidence through actions that James plans to “consequently accumulate grain on grain of willful choice.” James does not simply assert his freedom in the face of all the evidence to the contrary. He makes a project to become free “grain on grain” through the transformative power of habit.

25 James, *Varieties*, 228


This conclusion brings us to a puzzle. How can habit become a means of freedom? Habit, as James himself defines it, is as a force of passivity and neurosis, not willful freedom. Ralph Waldo Emerson puts this point clearly with his criticism of consistency. To be consistent in action, that is to act habitually as one has in the past, is a “terror that scares us from our self-trust.” The self-trust James seeks in the confidence to will, by contrast, is the aversion of habit and consistency. Habit alone is a dead weight of custom and convention. Emerson’s criticism relies on an ordinary conception of habit as something passive and mechanical. To understand how James reconceptualizes habit as a force of will and agency we need to look to philosophical premises of his pragmatism.

3.3 From Belief to Habit

On August 26th, 1898, William James introduced an audience at the Philosophical Union at the University of California at Berkeley to a philosophical principal proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce called pragmatism,

Pierce’s principle, as we may call it, may be expressed in a variety of ways, all of them simple… The soul and meaning of thought, he says, can never be made to direct itself towards anything but the production of belief, belief being the demicadence which closes a musical phrase in the symphony of our intellectual life… But when our thought about an object has found its rest in belief, then our action on the subject can firmly and safely begin. Beliefs, in short, are just rules for action; and the whole function of thinking is but one step in the production of habits of action.29


James’s speech marks the first public statement of “pragmatism” as a philosophy.\footnote{Richard Bernstein, \textit{The Pragmatic Turn} (New York: Polity, 2010), 2} James tells his audience that this philosophy is the heir to the discussions and debates that took place amongst a group of friends in Cambridge during the 1870’s. Called the Metaphysical Club, James’s circle of friends came together to discuss matters ranging from philosophy to biology to law. Central to their discussions was the influence of two towering figures of the Anglo-nineteenth century. The first was the Scottish psychologist Alexander Bain. Pragmatism’s turn towards consequences was driven by Bain’s functional redefinition of belief as a rule of habit we are prepared to act on, rather than a spiritual or mental state.\footnote{Alexander Bain, \textit{Emotions and the Will} (London: J.W. Parker, 1859)} The second figure was Charles Darwin. Darwin’s theory of natural selection provided a radical redescription of nature as oriented towards the sole purpose of survival.\footnote{Charles Darwin, \textit{On the Origin of Species}, ed. Jim Endersby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)} Chauncey Wright, the eloquent proponent of Darwin in the Club, most boldly stated this elective affinity between Bain’s definition of belief-habit and Darwin’s theory of natural selection when he remarked that Bain’s contribution to philosophy was to remove belief from the sphere of intellect and transplant it to that of willing and behaviour. Transplanting belief to the sphere of experience brought to the forefront the evolutionary continuity between the mind and forms of animal behavior where “our knowledges and rational beliefs result, truly and literally, from the survival of the fittest among our original and spontaneous beliefs.”\footnote{Chauncey Wright, "The Limits of Natural Selection," in \textit{Philosophical Discussions} (New York: Henry Holt and Sons, 1971), 116n} With this new vision of nature the Metaphysical Club proposed that belief and truth were themselves only instruments for action in an indeterminate environment. Peirce’s idea that James refers to was first presented as a paper to the Club and subsequently
articulated in a series of articles published in *Popular Science Monthly* between 1877 and 1878. In this section I review the basic premises of Peirce’s seminal articles ‘The Fixation of Belief’ and ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’ to articulate the basic pragmatist conception of habit.

Belief, as Bain defined it, is a rule for action rather than interior mental state. Peirce himself remarks that “pragmatism is scarce more than a corollary” of Bain’s definition.\(^{34}\) In beginning his study of method with the definition that “belief is of the nature of a habit” Peirce asserts three basic premises that culminate in pragmatism.\(^{35}\) They are that belief is a future projection based on past experience, that it settles an irritating feeling of doubt, and that it results in an action.

All beliefs begin as settled opinions based on past experience. In processes of inference, for example, it is the inductive “habit of mind” that leads us from a premise to a conclusion.\(^{36}\) He calls it a habit because the belief presumes a rule-like generality that like cases will result in like conclusions. I believe that water will quench thirst, I do not believe merely that it will quench only my thirst, or only do so once, but rather that water will quench thirst as a rule over diverse cases. I say rule-like because Peirce understood all rules to be probabilistic. Drawing on his own laboratory experience as a practicing scientist, Peirce argued that no ideal instantiation of a rule occurs. What we have are different particular instances that only more or less accord with the rule.


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 112
The second premise Peirce puts forward is that belief functions to alleviate a distressing feeling of doubt. Belief and doubt are not intellectual acts like Descartes and the rationalist tradition assumed. Peirce rejected the Cartesian project of founding knowledge on doubt on the grounds that Descartes failed to understand that doubt is an affective state of distress. The willful doubt that Descartes proposes as a method of science is not real doubt but rather ‘paper’ doubt. Real doubt is an affect of irritation we experience when a belief breaks down. We naturally dislike the feeling of doubt and seek to re-establish our beliefs to relieve ourselves from distress,

Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves from and pass into the state of belief; while the latter is a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change into a belief in anything else.\(^{37}\)

Our beliefs then are latent, background rules of action that only come into question when we experience some frustration in their exercise. Belief is a habit in this sense as “thought at rest.”\(^{38}\)

Finally, all beliefs result in specific actions. It is only by the different modes of actions that we perform that there is any ground for distinguishing our different beliefs. By contrast, no action in particular follows from doubt. Doubt is a feeling of disruption in the habitual order of action. But while doubt does not lead to any particular action it does prompt inquiry. Inquiry is Peirce’s name for the process of moving from the distress of doubt back to the calm of belief. When our habits are upset by some unanticipated surprise or consequence, we are thrown into a state of doubt where we can no longer act. In ‘Fixation’ he argues that of all the methods of inquiry it is only the beliefs fixed through the fallible and cooperative methods of science that will become resistant to further doubt.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 114

This way of operationalizing the concept of habit results in the account of the pragmatic maxim James refers to,

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.39

The rigorous application of this principle is meant to resist the fuzzy thinking of philosophy by attending to the consequences that follow from ideas rather than the content of the ideas themselves. Philosophical disagreements, as to whether the soul is truly free or determined, or whether communion wine really is the blood of Christ or not, are only pseudo-disagreements in words, not real disagreements measured in consequences. In a spirit that would be recapitulated by the young Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus*, Peirce’s maxim was meant to clear away the philosophical confusions that inhibited the more fallibilistic and experimentalist pursuit of knowledge.

Peirce’s theory of inquiry seems to offer an eloquent example of Wright’s view of the natural selection of beliefs. However, natural selection was not the only theory of evolution seen to be consistent with the idea of belief as habit. The Lamarckian account of the inheritance of acquired characteristics provided what Peirce and other thinkers considered an attractive alternative theory of habit that stressed the continuity of mind across nature in contrast to the apparent contingency of Darwin’s universe.

### 3.4 Habit Evolves

Before proceeding I want to clarify the contrast I am drawing by outlining the rough contours of the Darwinian and Lamarckian theories of evolution. What I offer here is an ideal type account

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39 Ibid., 132
of each to guide the reader through the argument of this section.\textsuperscript{40} Fifty years before the publication of Darwin’s \textit{Origin} Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s \textit{Zoological Philosophy} put forward the hypothesis that different forms of life had been produced successively, beginning with the spontaneous production of simple life forms and evolving over time into progressively more complex forms.\textsuperscript{41} How this evolution takes place is grounded in two theses: the physiological thesis of use and disuse and the hereditary thesis of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. According to the first thesis an organism adapts to its environment by using certain physiological features and abandoning others. To take Lamarck’s famous example, due to the scarcity of low-hanging food the giraffe had to stretch its neck to reach the treetops where richer sources of nutrition could be found. As a result of the repeatedly stretching its neck its physiology transformed to accommodate this adaptive need. That is, an organism’s attempt to adapt to its environment requires the production of certain habits which over time transform the physiology of the organism itself. Lamarck’s second thesis is that these physiological transformations are inherited over generations. Because early generations of animals had to stretch their necks to reach high foods, their necks grew, and over generations of stretching and inheritance the long neck became part of the physiology of the species. By different patterns of use and disuse solicited by different environmental constraints the differentiation of species proceeds. What is important to stress here is that evolution for Lamarck takes place as a teleological response to environmental challenges. An organism lifts itself by its own bootstraps, so to speak, to transform itself to accommodate its environment.

\textsuperscript{40} This reconstruction is indebted to magisterial exposition of these arguments in Stephen Jay Gould, \textit{The Structure of Evolutionary Theory} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

The central argument of Darwin’s *Origin* can similarly be summarized by two basic theses. The first thesis is fortuitous variation. In heredity there is a general resemblance between parents and off-spring, but there is also a certain degree of accidental variation or ‘sporting’. The combination of continual variation over generations, combined with the inheritance of these variations, results in the pluralization of species over time. Darwin’s second thesis is natural selection – the mechanisms that constrains the otherwise unlimited variation of species. Fortuitous variation left to its own devices will result in an unlimited number of species. Natural selection is a mechanism of constraint that explains why only a limited number of species manage to survive in a context of conflict over scarce resources. Species that become successful in reproducing owe their advantage to the accidental hospitality or hostility of the environment they find themselves in and the ability of the population in this milieu to compete for survival. To explain what this means we need only to think again about Lamarck’s giraffe. According to Darwin, the giraffe grew a long neck not because it needed to survive, but because some earlier ancestors of the giraffe fortuitously gave birth to animals with longer necks. In the environmental context of the African plains where food was predominantly found high in the treetops, it was only animals that were lucky enough to have such long necks that could survive. The short necked animals that could not find reliable sources of nutrition or protect themselves from predators simply starved off or were killed. The sole engine of evolution on Darwin’s account is chance variation and selection, not need and adaptation.

To distinguish these two theories further it should be noted that Lamarckianism stresses the harmonious continuity of nature while Darwinism underlines the discontinuities,

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42 Conventionally, Darwinian evolution is defined by three theses: fortuitous variation, natural selection, and the dissociation between reproduction and resource production. I bracket out this last point for the sake of presentation here as the pragmatist have relatively little to say about the dissociation thesis. I thank Dan Newman for this point.
contingencies, and dead-ends that make up most of natural history. Where pragmatists like James celebrated the contingency and spontaneity in nature offered by Darwin, Lamarck’s account of inheritance provided many nineteenth-century thinkers a model for thinking about how mental or spiritual life might carry on across generations. Working on the basis of analogy, they argued that habit’s ability to transform thinking and attention into something automatic and mechanical – what Peirce called its quality as “thought at rest” – suggests that what appears thoughtless and automatic in nature may in fact be the bearer of thinking and attention. A result of combining this argument from analogy with an evolutionary theory of the inheritance of habit was an idealist account of evolution that posits the continuity of mind or spirit throughout all of nature. For instance, the British author Samuel Butler provides a provocative version of this combination of Christian metaphysics and Lamarck in his 1878 treatise Life and Habit. Beginning from the example of the unreflective performance of complicated motor skills, like playing a piano, Butler explains the prevalence of natural instincts and physiological processes in infants is evidence of prior learning. And the prior learning of infants, Butler concludes, points towards the existence of an inter-generational memory,

In this way, then, I conceive we can fairly transfer the experience of the race to the individual, without any other meaning to our words than what they would naturally suggest; that is to say, that there is in every impregnate ovum a bona fide memory, which carries it back not only to the time when it was last an impregnate ovum, but to that earlier date when it was the very beginning of life at all, which same creature it still is, whether as man or ovum, and hence imbued, so far as time and circumstance allow, with all its memories.

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44 Butler, Life and Habit, 130
At the core of such attempts by Butler and others to construct an evolutionary metaphysics, however, is a creative misreading of Lamarck. Lamarck argued that animals need to adapt to environment for survival, however his metaphysical readers – and even Darwin himself – interpreted this *needing* to adapt as *wanting* to adapt. Lamarck, they thought, offered an account of willed evolution.\(^{45}\)

This connection between neo-Lamarckianism and idealism is evident in Peirce’s later writings on evolution. Peirce came to reject what he considered the implicit nominalism of the arguments of ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’.\(^{46}\) To better account for how the probabilistic pronouncements of the method of science could be true of the world Peirce developed a metaphysical theory of the probabilistic nature of the universe itself. He called this position tychism. According to tychism, the natural world is only approximately rule-bound and chance exceptions to rules occur. It insists that there exists “an element of lawlessness in the universe” more basic than the seeming regularities of nature.\(^{47}\) The chance and indeterminate process of fortuitous variation struck Peirce as a clear example of this lawlessness. Beginning then with the first thesis of Darwinism at hand, that nature proceeds through unpredictable and chance occurrences, Peirce takes up an epistemic version of Darwin’s question of how order and regularity might emerge in such a world of chance. Whereas Darwin found the mechanism of

\(^{45}\) As James summarizes Lamarck’s argument in his *Principles of Psychology*, “Lamarck’s statement is that animals have *wants*, and contract, to satisfy them, *habits* which transform themselves gradually into so many propensities which they can neither resist nor change.” William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. II (New York: Dover, 1950), 678. Italics original. Hawkins attributes this common misinterpretation by his English readers as a result of an ambiguity in the French word *‘besoin’*. See Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945*, 39n2


natural selection to explain the relative order of species, Peirce turns to Lamarck and the concept of habit to explain how the converging opinion of a scientific community can accord with nature’s own convergence from chance to a state of fixity and order.

While Darwin’s thesis of fortuitous variations presents an attractive starting point for Peirce, the thesis of natural selection results in an embrace of contingency that denies the creative role of God’s love in nature. Peirce’s rejection of strict tychism is in part driven by a religious conviction. Another reason is a fear of the social consequences of such a doctrine. Social Darwinism, both in its tychist and more determinist versions like Herbert Spencer’s, accords too conveniently with the aggressive individualism of American society. Unlike the New Testament’s message to love they neighbour, social Darwinism promotes a “Gospel of Greed” that teaches to trample the neighbour for one’s own self-interest. Accordingly, Peirce turns explicitly to Lamarck’s theory of inheritance to account for continuity in nature which can hold out the conceptual space for the effective role of Christian love. What Peirce finds in Lamarck is an account of inheritance that stresses purposeful continuity across change as a process of habit-taking. The physiological character of the giraffe is the result of its taking on certain habits. However, the force that drove them to develop long necks in the first place was the “straining of endeavour” of the species in its attempt to reach some goal, namely eating the high foods. Their necks then are the signs of prior intelligence, and the inheritance of this trait over generations represents the continuity and further growth of this intelligence. Peirce concludes that Lamarckian evolution as “evolution by the force of habit” is the sole theory that “coincides with the general description of the action of love.”

Peirce was convinced that the only justifiable metaphysics for this probabilistic universe was objective idealism. Against both mechanical theories of nature and varieties of mind-body dualism Peirce proposed the radical view that matter is itself merely “effete mind.”\textsuperscript{49} Peirce hoped that this vision of evolution would underpin the epistemic claims of this theory of method.\textsuperscript{50} Recall that scientific inquiry begins from an experience of doubt and disagreement and converges over time towards an agreed upon hypothesis that will resist all further doubt. Because this vision of inquiry is regulative, no final statement of truth or law is ever available. Instead there are only the falliblistic commitments to the beliefs and rules that have proven true thus far. Similarly, the universe begins in a state of pure indeterminacy and evolves towards a regulative state of real laws and order. Pierce describes the seemingly only approximate rules and laws of the actual universe that fall between pure chance and pure law as habits,

Uniformities in the modes of action of things have come about by their taking habits. At present, the course of events is approximately determined by law. In the past that approximation was less perfect; in the future it will be more perfect. The tendency to obey laws has always been and will always be growing. We look back toward a point in the infinitely distant past when there was no law but mere indeterminacy; we look forward to a point in the infinitely distant future when there will be no indeterminacy or chance but a complete reign of law. But at any assignable date in the past, however early, there was already some tendency toward uniformity; and at any assignable date in the future there will be some slight aberrancy from law.\textsuperscript{51}


\textsuperscript{50} Contemporary Peircians are generally of the opinion that the theory of inquiry can be retained without Peirce’s metaphysical baggage, which is dismissed as the excesses of an over-ambitious philosophical system builder. For an example of this chastened Peirce see Cheryl Misak, \textit{Truth and the End of Inquiry} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). For a dissenting opinion see Susan Haack, "The Legitimacy of Metaphysics: Kant’s Legacy to Peirce, and Peirce’s to Philosophy Today," \textit{Philosophical Topics} 36, no. 1 (2008)

\textsuperscript{51} Peirce, "A Guess at the Riddle," 277
Peirce took this transition from indeterminacy to law to represent the evolutionary course of the universe as well as more local forms of biological and cognitive evolution. “[A]ll things have a tendency to take habits.” At first gloss we might read Peirce’s reference to probabilistic laws as habits as an analogical claim. Like habits, natural laws are relatively fixed but revisable structures of expectations based on past experiences. Peirce is making an even stronger claim, though, that these laws are habits in the sense that they are the latent and intuitive beliefs of some cosmic intelligence. Not only laws and rules but the matter they refer to have reality only as “mind hide-bound with habits.” There exists continuity between the minds that make up scientific community, their fallible but convergent judgments, and the world itself as one cosmic process Peirce calls synechism. The agent of the evolution of the cosmos from a state of chance to law is God’s love. This last aspect of Peirce’s evolutionary cosmology is his agapism. According to Peirce’s agapist theory of evolution the original chance of the universe can only beget order through the motor force of “creative love” driving the process in a purposeful direction of greater order and rationality.

Peirce’s evolutionary arguments, his so-called Monist papers, appeared in print between 1891 and 1893. Throughout them he makes frequent allusions to James’s 1887 article on habit, subsequently re-published as chapter four of *The Principles of Psychology*. James and Peirce shared an understanding of the phenomenology of habit as a structure greater than chaos but weaker than law. But Peirce’s borrowing from James is strange as it seems to over-look how James himself used this concept of habit to empower a different sort of response to the social and

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52 Ibid.


54 Peirce, "Evolutionary Love," 362
religious threat of Darwinism that haunt Peirce’s writings. For James, the attempt to effectively prove or disprove the presence of divine love in nature is a nonstarter. There exists no final justification for either absolute determinism or spiritual pantheism. Each is only a faith that informs how we might act in the world. Rather than trumping science, James’s philosophical approach is to ask, can our faiths be justified? That is, can we reasonably hold the position that there is something unfinished, non-mechanical, and spontaneous about nature? If it can be asserted that there is even an element of indeterminacy in nature, no matter how small, faith in our powers of will is a reasonable construct indeed. In putting the questions this way James resists the urge to look behind Darwin towards Lamarck, or away from science towards religion. Each of these responses seeks to reinstate a form of idealism. Rather than idealism James sought the spectator’s mood of enchantment that might be sparked by a consideration of the sheer contingency and spontaneity of Darwin’s account of nature itself.

3.5 Enchanted Darwinism and the Therapy of the Will

Thus far I have made three claims. The first is that the psychological breakdown William James suffered between 1870 and 1872 was an exemplary case of the culture of neurasthenic illness in Gilded Age America. The second claim is that this Hamletian culture of powerlessness and indecision was in many ways a response to the loss of confidence in the power to will in the face of both the industrial transformations of society and the disenchanting influence of evolutionary science. The third claim is that Alexander Bain’s conception of belief as habit provided a conceptual tool for salvaging the language of agency in this modern context. It is at this point that major differences between Peirce and James occur. For Peirce the phenomenon of habit grounds an idealist vision of nature. Peirce turned to Lamarck and habit to sustain idealism
within the broad context of evolutionary science without admitting the deep tychist contingency of nature Darwin’s arguments introduce. James, by contrast, takes an even more radical view of habit. Instead of using habit as a way of defending a spiritual idealism contra Darwin, James saw habit as a way of theorizing the enchantment of nature presupposed by Darwin. Indeed, James understood Darwin’s theory of deep contingency as a way of resisting the determinist conclusions of both Spencer and theistic Lamarckians. In a Darwinian universe, nature is an unfinished, open place of surprise. Reinstating habit as a part of this nature, for James, is a way of sustaining a mood of enchantment. In this section I look to James’s *Principles of Psychology* to demonstrate how he reinterprets reductive materialist psychology as itself an occasion for surprise and chance as the basis of human willing.

### 3.5.1 Habit, Plasticity, and the Material Brain

Chapter IV of James’s *Principles of Psychology* entitled “Habit” has received insufficient attention by scholars. Philosophers and political theorists have understandably focused primarily on his famous chapters on the stream of consciousness and willing, leaving the rather curious chapter on habit as the fare of literary scholars. This is an unfortunate oversight because in overlooking habit scholars overlook the ethical character of James’s entire text. Gerald Myers gestures towards the full implications of this text when he notes that it is the counterpart of the much better known chapter ‘Will’, but the links between the two have yet to

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be fully drawn out.\textsuperscript{57} ‘Habit’ was the most frequently republished and anthologized chapter of the \textit{Principles} during James’s lifetime.\textsuperscript{58} One reader of the \textit{Principles} went so far as to lament to James that this chapter was in fact “too popular” for an otherwise rigorous and scientific text.\textsuperscript{59}

The quip is understandable once we grasp the strangeness of the text. The \textit{Principles} is intended primarily as a physiological study of “the manifestation of mind.”\textsuperscript{60} The bulk of the material collected within the two volumes covers recent findings in neuroscience, clinical studies of mental phenomena like attention and memory, and introspective reconstructions of consciousness as a streaming, unfolding process. That is to say, the \textit{Principles} is a rigorous scientific treatise that was well suited to serve as the standard textbook for the training of psychologists in America well into the early decades of the twentieth century. The short chapter on habit stands out in this context for James’s willingness to theorize what Philip Fischer calls a broad ontology of habit.\textsuperscript{61} The chapter opens with the surprising claims that all living creatures are merely “bundles of habits” and proceeds to unpack this claim through a series of ontologically distinct stages. The first concerns the habits of inanimate matter. The study of habits begins as “a chapter in physics” rather than psychology.\textsuperscript{62} Describing the laws of nature in terms of the habits of composite entities and their material plasticity gives way to an account of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{57} Gerald E. Myers, \textit{William James: His Life and Thought} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988)
  \item \textsuperscript{58} It was in fact sufficiently popular that Henry Holt and Sons thought it profitable to republish the chapter as an edifying single bound volume in 1914.
  \item \textsuperscript{59} Joseph Delboeuf to WJ, May 5 1887, cited in Ralph Barton Perry, \textit{The Thought and Character of William James}, vol. II (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1935), 725
  \item \textsuperscript{60} William James, \textit{The Principles of Psychology}, vol. I (New York: Dover, 1950), 104
  \item \textsuperscript{62} James, \textit{Principles 1}, 104. Physiological psychology was commonly referred to as “psycho-physics” in the latter half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} Century. On the rise of the so-called New Psychology and James’s place within it see Menand, \textit{Metaphysical Club}
\end{itemize}
the habits of animate nature. These are the habits of increasingly complex systems of reflex discharges. The dialectic synthesizes the animate and the inanimate to address habit as a category of sociology. And finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the habits and ethics of the moral individual.

At the centre of this study is the material phenomenon of plasticity. Plasticity is a function of malleable compounds of matter. Like Peirce, James begins with the claim that “[t]he laws of Nature are nothing but immutable habits” of matter itself.63 The basic buildings blocks of the universe – particles of matter as James calls them – are themselves unable to take on habits. It is only when they come together into assemblages or “bundles” of matter that plasticity occurs. Plasticity is a function of a structure that is at once malleable enough to yield to new impressions but strong enough to maintain its shape once transformations occur. Peirce elucidates this point in a comment on James’s account of plasticity. He distinguishes plasticity and elasticity. Plasticity is a mark of a low limit of elasticity.64 Elasticity denotes the property of matter to retain its shape when subjected to the resistance of outside force, like how a tree branch bows in the wind but returns to previous position when the wind dies down. Assemblages of matter are plastic because their structures yield where force becomes too strong, unlike the branch that snaps in an unyielding storm. James conjectures that matter is plastic in this way because its structure is always on a fragile compromise of “inward tensions” of the particles that make it up and the “outward forces” of its relationship to other assemblages.65

63 James, Principles I, 104


65 James, Principles I, 104
James brings these considerations into focus when he explains the habit-taking properties of the human brain. James understood the brain to function on the model of a reflex arc. Nervous impressions upon the brain result in a release of electrical impulse across the cortex’s surface which result in the body’s reflex action. All affection of the brain’s neural matter, James argues, results in an action. The physiological explanation of this arc centers on the conduct of electrical currents in the brain. When currents seek to “find a way out” of the brain and back into the motor functions of the body they leave a “trace” of their path across the cortex. Drawing on this metaphor of consciousness as a flowing stream, James describes the effects of this arc in terms of liquid. Nerve energy is like water that runs across a surface. The longer and more often a stream cuts across a stone, the gentle friction of the water eventually smoothes out the stone and a channel begins to form precisely along the path the water follows. The same physical process takes place in the brain as electrical current passes through its soft tissue. The brain takes on new paths as its structure yields to repeated circulations of nerve energy. To underline the physical basis of this process, James describes the development of paths as seemingly “grooved out of the brain” itself. The grooves serve as the “natural drainage-channel” of thinking.66

When these paths become grooved in the brain habits occur. These paths develop into complex systems of discharge in the brain that simplify motor activity through the emergence of concatenating series of actions. Where complex motions are repeated frequently they leave their mark in the brain such that only the first impression is needed to enact the whole series. James explains,

66 Ibid., 107, 126, 108
[H]abit soon brings it about that each event calls up its own appropriate successor without any alternative offering itself, and without any reference to the conscious will, until at last the whole chain, \( A, B, C, D, E, F, G \), rattles itself off as soon as \( A \) occurs, just as if \( A \) and the rest of the chain were fused together into a continuous stream.

The result of neural plasticity in action is the increase in ease and the decrease of conscious attention and effort. A whole repertoire of embodied know-how develops without the conscious awareness of know-that. “Which way does my door swing?” James asks. “I cannot tell the answer; yet my hand never makes a mistake. No one can describe the order in which he brushes his hair or teeth; yet it is likely that the order is a pretty fixed on in all of us.”

James’s surprisingly lyrical account of neural plasticity might be a consequence of the nineteenth century’s ignorance of the chemical/electrical nature of neurons and synapses. But despite the antiquated feature of James’s science his central claim that “our nervous system grows to the modes in which it has been exercised” is the basic premise of what contemporary neuroscience calls the brain’s Hebbian plasticity. Hebbian plasticity refers to the research of Donald Hebb that serves as the basis of contemporary theories of memory and learning. Hebb demonstrated that there occurs a metabolic transformation in one or both cells when the presynaptic and postsynaptic terminals of a pair of neurons are consistently or repeatedly fired in sequence. The result of sequential neural activity results in a strengthening of the efficiency of transmission between terminals when they are fired. This means that groups of neurons that receive repeated stimulation form efficient circuits within the brain. As Hebb summarized his discovery, “Cells that fire together wire together.”

\[ ^{67} \text{Ibid., 114, 115} \]
\[ ^{68} \text{Ibid., 112} \]
\[ ^{69} \text{On Hebb and plasticity see Joseph LeDoux, } \textit{The Synaptic Self} \text{ (New York: Penguin, 2002)} \]
If the brain is an organ that physically stores and repeats past patterns of impulse discharge in this manner, then the problem of determinism might seem more pressing than James makes it out to be. Thinking and acting appear to be an almost entirely automatic event. The habituated brain appears as to be a mechanical system of paths and sluices. We appear fated to repeat the acts and thoughts we performed in the past. But it is precisely here that Darwin’s lesson about spontaneity points to a way out. Nervous energy, like the matter it scoops and carves, has an unruly spontaneity to it. The traces it produces are only probabilistic tendencies to recur, not precise tracks to follow. The play of nutrition is subject to “accidental changes” that blocks an existing path and makes “currents shoot through unwonted lines.”

70 Like the Roman poet Lucretius’s atoms in the void, the matter of the brain is subject to quirky and mobile swerves. While James acknowledges that “all this is vague to the last degree” he asserts that it is an undeniable – and inexplicable – fact of the matter that “a new path may be formed by the sort of chances that in nervous material are likely to occur.”

71 The plastic brain is a loose and spontaneous structure of action that remains both unfinished and uncontrollable as a consequence of the fortuitous variation of nature itself.

3.5.2. Habit and the Question of Free Will

In the last section we saw how James draws on Darwin’s tychist vision of the spontaneity of nature to articulate a vision of habit as a loose consequence of neural plasticity. In situating the materiality of the brain within this unfinished vision of nature James outlines what he considers to be a tychist naturalism that denies the final determinism of thinking and action. This task, however, only goes so far as it demonstrates that determinism is not absolute. If human

70 James, Principles 1, 109

action is subject purely to the unpredictable play of chance it still lacks conscious self-direction. A wholly spontaneous nature is in some sense just as unappealing as a wholly deterministic one in the sense that neither has a place for the effective force of our wills. What it lacks is an account of how consciousness plays a role in this drama as “a fighter of ends.” Having provided a preliminary overview of the physiological arguments of the ‘Habit’ chapter I now turn to its ethical remarks and its place in James’s recovery of the will.

To bring out the novelty of James’s conception of willing we need to contrast it with a more familiar view. Kant provides a useful touchstone here. Kant defines the will as “nothing other than practical reason.” This definition involves three claims. First, the bearer of a will is essentially a rational being. Second, the will is an autonomous source of motivation. And third, the will is free in so far as it acts in accordance with the dictates of practical reason alone. This inward capacity for rationality, autonomy, and universality are not features of an empirical human psychology but rather moral postulates that must be introduced if the doings of empirical, finite human beings are to be judged by the standards of morality. The moral will is a pure will that acts in accordance with universal standards of moral reason, not the subjective and heteronymous influences of custom and private predilections.

Philosophers like Kant who go in search of inward spontaneity behind the doings and sufferings of human action itself “turn their back on its real citadel.” The will is “but a collective name” for a whole complex of physiological and cognitive processes that go into the

72 James, Principles 1, 141


74 James, Principles 2, 518
Rather than trying to pick out any one faculty or process as the cause of our freedom, James instead attends to the distinction in feeling between different kinds of actions. He employs Peirce’s cycle of belief-surprise-doubt-inquiry-belief to describe willful actions as those acts where the distress of doubt or conflict have required us to employ attention and effort in our actions. Habitual action is performed fluidly and inattentively. Willful action is action performed with a feeling of effort and attention. What distinguishes the two is not a difference in kind but in how they respond to the feelings of conflict that require us to think. Only where we experience the discomfort of confusion and doubt do we will by “ATTEND[ING] to a difficult object and hold[ing] it fast before the mind.”

James’s proffers the case of getting out of bed in the morning as an example of willing. He imagines lying in the comfort of a warm bed on a cold morning lacking the resolve to get dressed and make a meeting on time. He thinks to himself “I must get up, this is ignomious” but still the morning is too cold and the bed is too “delicious” to find the resolve to act. James here describes a conflict between impulses. The question he asks is “how do we ever get up under such circumstances?” Reflecting on his own experience he says that there was no conscious act of willing or motive force of the soul that draws him out of bed. What happens is instead a “fortunate lapse of consciousness” where we “suddenly find that we have got up.” All that goes on is that an idea strikes him:

‘Hollo! I must lie here no longer’ – an idea which at that lucky instant awakens no contradictory or paralyzing suggestions, and consequently produces immediately its appropriate motor effects. It was our acute consciousness of both the warmth and the cold during the period of struggle, which

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76 James, *Principles 2*, 561
paralyzed our activity then and kept our idea of rising in the condition of wish and not will. The moment these inhibitory ideas ceased, the original idea exerted its effects.  

James’s language of ideas and wish may intonate a conscious subject behind the act. But we ought to attend more carefully to his language. It is the feelings of conflict and distress that exert effects. Ideas are already at work in the body virtually as habit and seek to produce actions and consequences. Where the ideas are in conflict no one is powerful enough to affect the body. It is only where were once “inhibitory ideas ceased” that action can take place. The will is at work in this scenario not as a first cause but instead as what James calls “permission” to the affective drive of habits, motor-effects, and ideas already at work in the body.  

When we feel effort in the exercise of a habit, we feel the experience of freedom.

With this deflation of the will to a collective name and feeling James avoids the skeptic’s dichotomy of freedom or determinism and instead asks how we can take control of this circuit of habit and freedom to consciously shape the habits we follow. James’s concern is the threat of two pathologies of the will. Where we never feel inhibition to our ideals our “associative processes are so extravagantly lively” and we act impulsively without reflection or hesitation. James calls this the explosive will and warns that its lead to a form of mania. Also, we can experience too much inhibition of our will and never find the resolve to act on any idea but instead dwell in a persistent state of conflict and indecision. This is the abuliac will and at its extreme it becomes a form of melancholia. The discussion of abulia is James’s shorthand for his

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77 Ibid., 524-525
78 James, Principles I, 118
79 James, Talks to Teachers, 813
own mental crisis and the culture of neurasthenic illness he knew all too well.\textsuperscript{80} The psychological and physiological arguments of the \textit{Principles} slide over into a psychiatric tone as the text culminates in an ethical challenge to abulia.

The abuliac’s ailment is his deficit of willful habits. As disagreeable as some habits may be, James considers even the worst habits preferable to the condition of being without habits. Echoing Nietzsche’s claim in \textit{The Gay Science} that “the most intolerable, the truly terrible, would of course be a life entirely without habits”,\textsuperscript{81} James writes:

There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual, but indecision, and for whom the lighting of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of express volitional deliberation.\textsuperscript{82}

On a very ordinary register, to be without habits would be disabling. The thousands of deliberative decisions we would have to make every moment of every day would overtax our cognitive capabilities. Such a person would be incapable of action. To suffer from constant indecision is to suffer a failure of agency. James describes the mental costs of this inability to act as the total anesthetization of experience. “At such times,” he writes of abuliaes, “we sit blankly staring and do nothing. The objects of consciousness fail to touch the quick or break the skin.”\textsuperscript{83}

The concern underlying James’s depiction of the habitless man is not simply clinical but also ethical. In a less chronic condition, the habitless man may be able to act but lacks resolution

\textsuperscript{80} We might similarly analogize James’s account of the explosive will to his depiction of Governor Roosevelt discussed in Chapter 4


\textsuperscript{82} James, \textit{Principles 1}, 122

\textsuperscript{83} James, \textit{Principles 2}, 546
of the will. To make a decision requires not only deliberative reasoning but a moment of resolution where deliberation must translate into action. The habitless man’s ideals and sentiments never translate into action because he lacks discipline. Such a person will often say one thing but do another for he will seldom stand by his word. James gives the example of Rousseau as such a contemptible “nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer” who famously outlines the proper education of children in accordance with nature in Émile, only to leave all of his own children at the orphanage doors. He suggests that excessive novel reading and theater going will “produce monsters of this line.”

James frequently invokes Rousseau as the poster-child of Romantic sentimentalism, but he overlooks how they share a concern with the same question of moral decisiveness. Habit too is at the heart of Rousseaus’s republicanism. To act in conviction of the claims of the general will requires a decisiveness that cannot be called upon every moment a citizen acts. Rather, it requires a disciplining of the private will into an achieved unreflectiveness about its desires and obligations. On the Social Contract captures this deep psychic foundation of moral agency with its claim that the true republic’s law “is graven not in marble or in bronze, but in the hearts of the Citizen; which is the State’s genuine constitution… imperceptibly substitut[ing] the force of habit for that of authority.” Freedom is not equivalent to a founding document or a juridical order, but is an ethos carried out through the shared moeurs of the people.

It is precisely this question of how to put our hearts into our decisions, or the decision into our hearts as Rousseau’s metaphor would suggest, that drive James’s concern with habit and agency. Habits are what make us agents. Agency too requires a free responsiveness but also a

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84 James, Principles 1, 125, ibid

discipline. We exert agency when we respond to reasons in a way that leads to action, rather than merely mechanical reaction. But we are inundated with a constant flood of reasons, so many in fact that most have to be closed off or shut down if we are to have any capacity for agency at all. Habits are a psychological buffer to this constant flow of reasons, desires, and suggestions that claim to steer our action. Without them we would have an experience of powerlessness that James characterizes as the loss of the world and ourselves. To become effective agents of our ideals we must cultivate habits in their service. Less crucial than the development of original ideals to live as individuals is the need for motor effects to realize them.

3.5.3 Willful Aesthetics

In the end, the existence or non-existence of the will is “insoluble on strictly psychological grounds.” For James it is an ethical imperative to posit the efficacy of will, but an ethical imperative that is grounded in Darwin’s enchantment of nature as something unfinished and open-ended. Because we can feel free and can feel the melancholic power of the abuliac the question that animates James’s psychology is the ethical one of how we can feel more of the former and less of the latter. To this end both the chapters ‘Habit’ and ‘Will’ end with an outline of what James calls a “hortatory ethics.” This is not an ethics of codes and commands but rather one of practices of self-transformation that take the plasticity of the self as their material. Like Foucault’s ascetics of the self we saw in Chapter 2, James stipulates technologies of the self that reshape our habits so as to “make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy.”

James proposes three maxims of self-mastery he draws from Alexander Bain. They are: to always launch a new habit with as strong an initiative as possible, to never suffer exceptions

86 James, Principles 2, 572
87 James, Principles 1, 127, 122
until the habit has taken root in our lives, and to seize every opportunity to act on the habit we wish to gain. These are all practices by which one “envelop[s] your resolution with every aid you know.” Not dreaming of a new self, or simply desiring a character, but in disciplined practices of self-control we exert the free effort to cement the plastic responses of the self that we might become. Again like Foucault, James’s outlines here an aesthetic practice that locates freedom not in the absence of habit and discipline, but in the artful reconstruction of the material, embodied self. Because this material is always unfinished and plasticity remains supple, we need only the resolve to experiment with such practices so to “free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently.”

James’s ethics, however, raise a familiar question we saw in the last chapter: why resist? If the self is the passive effect of past practices and discipline, how do we find the resolve to shape a new self in the way James suggests? It was after all a crisis of conviction of being all-too-habituated and determined that drives James’s project. To answer this charge it is worthwhile to conclude with some connections between the Principles chapter on habit and James’s crisis writings of 1870. There it was Renouvier’s argument that belief in freedom can itself be willed that gave James the resolve to act. But it was habit, and Bain’s asceticism, that consolidated this cure. Writing of the influence of Renouvier in that same diary entry he says, “Today has furnished the exceptionally passionate initiative which Bain posits as needful for the acquisition of habits.” He then goes on to describe the discipline with which he will follow this initiative through the practice of reading empowering books while avoiding skeptical and determinist

88 Ibid., 123
90 James, ed., The Letters of William James, 148
treatises. By rescripting the self through such disciplined practices James will “accumulate grain on grain of willful choice” until he has refashioned himself into the steely character he describes at the end of ‘Will’ as the heroic mind who “can stand this Universe… He can still find a zest in it, not by ‘ostrich-like forgetfulness,’ but by pure inward willingness to face the world with those deterrent objects there.”

James was fortunate enough to find Renouvier’s *Essais* to provide him with the “exceptionally passionate initiative” to reshape his habits of will. But he is aware that philosophical therapy will not provide the same edification for everyone. Rather than proposing a public education in philosophy James instead takes up precisely one of the most common sources of disempowerment – the evolutionary disenchantment of the world – and turns it on its head. Darwin’s nature is one that is unfinished and open where sporting variation refuses the final closure of philosophical systems or deterministic social sciences. By stressing this aspect of nature James invites his readers to find nature in its mystery and complexity itself a source of passionate initiative to discover their own courage of will.

### 3.6 The Miracle of Habit

This chapter has provided a contextual and philosophical account of the pragmatist conception of habit. Drawing together both personal reflections of the young William James with the programmatic philosophical statements of Peirce and the psychological studies of James’s textbook, I demonstrate how the pragmatist conception of habit, both in its Lamarckian and Darwinist variants, was used to preserve the efficacy of willing and the enchantment of nature. Focusing particularly on the connection between James’s mental illness and the culture of

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91 James, *Principles 2*, 589 Italics original.
neurasthenia I show how James’s own ascetics of self-recovery served as a model of cultural criticism that seeks to preserve the enchantment of nature not by turning its back on Darwin but rather by pushing the tychist elements of Darwin’s theory to their limits. This imaginative use of psychological and biological arguments in the service of individual confidence is James’s enchanted Darwinism.

The most vivid depiction of James’s enchanted Darwinism is found in a letter he sent to his wife Alice from a trip to England. He writes from London,

> The best thing I saw in Brighton, and a thing the impression of which will perhaps outlast everything else on this trip, was four cuttle-fish (octopus) in the Aquarium. I wish we had one of them for a child – such flexible intensity of life in a form so inaccessible to our sympathy.\(^{92}\)

This letter is fascinating because it is not the historical grandeur of London or its museums or culture that moved him but rather the miraculous strangeness of the octopus. James is at once struck by the curiousness of the creature but also sees his own deep connection with it as part of nature. He wishes he had had one as a gift for a child, or maybe we means he wishes he had one as a child of his own. This is an extravagant statement but may be profitably read as James sense of joyful attachment to a spontaneous and curious world where such miracles can indeed exist. His longing to be close to it is perhaps a love of the ultimate inaccessibility of things. Where feeling like “nature through and through” as he wrote in 1869 was an expression of crisis, here it is the highest excitement and freedom.

This chapter has focused on the personal and psychological aspects of James’s arguments. In the next chapter I move on to how these lessons shaped James’s political involvements and his attempts to reinvigorate political agency in the face of what he calls the “bigness” of modern society. But before moving on there is one pressing question to answer.

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\(^{92}\) WJ to Alice James, July 29, 1889 in James, ed., *The Letters of William James*, 287
Have I not overlooked something crucial about James? In stressing his enchanted naturalism I may be thought to overlook the essentially theistic character of James’s thinking. Like Peirce, he wants to recover a place for the divine as an alternative to naturalism. In what sense can I be correct in saying that it was Darwin that James turned to for passionate inspiration when he writes that, “[e]very sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity for handling life’s evils, is set free in those who have religious faith”?93

James did indeed think a religious faith was necessary for the “strenuous” mood that the moral life demands, but his tychism is the guarantor of his theism, not theism the guarantor of his tychism. We can have faith in God precisely because the tychist constitution of the world does not close this possibility out forever. The inexhaustibility of chance is the warrant of religious belief. This claim, his enchantment story, has deep consequences for James’s theology. James’s God is not himself omnipotent and omniscient. Because of the primacy of chance God himself must be made finite. As he puts this point in his late lecture *A Pluralistic Universe*, “[t]he God of popular Christianity is but one member of a pluralistic universe… God is an essentially finite being in the cosmos, not with the cosmos in him.”94 Darwinian explanation as James understands it does not exclude the place of the divine in nature but rather preserves it by barring any total and closed perspective on a complex, evolving cosmos.

His tychism and his theism, however, dovetail elegantly if we think of his account of habit as a miracle. In calling habit miraculous I mean to evoke that sense of the term used by Hannah Arendt to denote “the sheer capacity to begin, which animates and inspires all human

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activities and is the hidden source of production of all great and beautiful things.\textsuperscript{95} She explains that the human capability to begin a new is a miracle not due to its divine origins but by its unexpected power of interrupting the mechanical and automatic processes of life. James situates this miracle faculty in nature itself as something that interrupts its own order as an unruly element of surprise at the heart of all things and it is our role as nature that makes the capacity to perform miracles of willing a human power as well. Arendt thought this power to begin, however, was something political and not the power of an independent will. The miracle occurs within the public context of plurality. In the next chapter we will see how James provides a different way of thinking about this miracle’s relationship to the political by situating it in the context not of a plurality of men but the imagined pluralism of the universe itself.

\textsuperscript{95} Hanna Arendt, "What Is Freedom?," in \textit{Between Past and Future} (New York: Penguin, 1993), 169
Chapter 4: Docility in America

“Habitual inattention must be reckoned the great vice of the democratic spirit”

- Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America

4.1. Introduction

William James’s therapy of the will, as we’ve seen in the previous chapter, drew together a radical interpretation of Darwin and an ethics of ascetic re-habituation as a palliative to the Gilded Age’s culture of pessimism and crisis of conviction. James’s therapy was very much a personal experiment in cultivating spontaneity. That chapter closed with the question of how such an individualistic and deeply personal ethics might relate to the public and collective field of politics. As I put this question in the introduction of this dissertation, is such a turn to the ethics of self-cultivation and imagination a turn away from politics? This chapter moves from the personal to the political by taking James’s moral psychology as a lens for studying his interventions as a public intellectual. In particular, I argue that James offers a therapeutic response to the democratic vice of docility. Like the dull force of habit and custom that constrains individuality and free agency, docility represents a collective form of passivity that undermines the active and participatory ambitions of democracy. Drawing a contrast between James’s pluralist response to docility with the nationalist responses of both Tocqueville and Roosevelt, I make the case that rather than a turn away from politics, James’s speculative and personal practice of public philosophy serves as a novel political therapy that aims to empower both individuality and democratic community without sacrificing one in the service of the other. In drawing out the connections between James’s pluralism and his political activism in the
1890’s this chapter aims to give political substance to Horace Kallen’s quip that James is “the first democrat in metaphysics.”

Docility is a particularly pernicious democratic vice. In any regime other than democracy, the people’s docile obedience is a virtue. Docile subjects wilfully satisfy the preferences of elites, they do not challenge authority, and they preoccupy themselves with the pursuit of private desires far from the sphere of political life. It is solely in democratic regimes where active citizen participation is held at a premium as an expression of liberty and equality that docility becomes a vice. But democratic regimes are doubly unique in the sense that while docility poses one of their gravest vices, they also seem uniquely fitted to produce just that. Since Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* it has been a common fear that the egalitarian core of democratic culture perversely functions to unleash a deracinated individualism that threatens to undermine democratic culture itself. “As each class comes closer to the others and mixes with them,” Tocqueville observes, “its members become indifferent and almost like strangers among themselves.” Democracy’s tendency to produce individual withdrawal into self-interest and material advantage leads it gently down the garden path to the toxic combination of a complacent citizenry and centralized state power that Tocqueville called democratic despotism.

William James shared Tocqueville’s worries about docility. Complacency, anomie, and the unrelenting “bigness” of American society at the turn of the 20th century struck James as

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forces throttling the very life out of democratic culture. Yet despite their shared diagnosis, James provided a radically different response than Tocqueville, or for that matter from almost every other critic of democratic docility since then. While Tocqueville argued that what was needed to curb fragmenting individuality was the mediation of individuals and society through civic associations and shared values – most notably, the shared foundation of Christian *moeurs* – James argued that the problem with docility is not an excess of individuality, but rather a persistent lack of it. Individuality, on James’s view, is not strictly speaking an alternative to commonality. To put the issue of docility this way – individualism or community – would strike James as merely a political iteration of what he called the most “common vice of the human mind;” namely, “its disposition to see everything as yes or no, as black or white, its incapacity for discrimination of intermediate shades.”

James worried that attempts to cure democracy of docility through such an either-or approach could not help but reinforce the vice itself. Between fragmenting self-interest and thick bonds of community, James proposed a pluralistic conception of citizenship that thrives on a careful balance of connection and disconnection that he described alternatively as “manyness-in-oneness,” “much-at-once,” and “mere withness.”

This political response to Tocqueville and what I propose to call the Tocquevillian thesis is grounded in James’s reinterpretation of Darwin we saw in the last chapter. There it was the inexhaustibility of chance and spontaneity in nature that served as a source of enchanted inspiration for James’s ethics. In this chapter I shift from James’s interpretation of Darwin in the 1880’s to his own positive account of nature he put forward in his 1908 lecture series published as *A Pluralistic Universe*. These lectures present James’s most sustained reflections on what he

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described as “the most central of all philosophic problems”, the relationship of the one and the many.\(^6\) Like his account of Darwin’s nature, a pluralistic universe is an ambitious but ultimately contestable view of the cosmos that seeks to contest the deterministic and mechanical views of a “block universe” where agency and freedom have become meaningless.\(^7\) While I aim to draw some parallels between the inspirational role of nature and James’s mature pluralism, this chapter builds on the last by arguing that James’s philosophical speculations about the always incomplete and unfinished relationship between the parts and the whole are at the heart of his vision of democratic individualism as an individualism that is at once anarchistic and skeptical of the nation-state, but also at the same time constitutively related to others and to its political institutions. By bringing these two sides of James’s pluralism together, its ethical or motivational force and its political ontology, I make the case that James points towards an original response to the vice of democratic docility.

James’s own political views, like those of Tocqueville, are notoriously ambiguous and have lead commentators to try to pin him down under an incredible diversity of banners.\(^8\) In what follows, I forgo the task of labeling James’s liberalism and instead argue that his remarks on politics, and their many contradictory pronouncements, should be located generally within the

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\(^6\) James, *Pragmatism*, 542

\(^7\) James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 664

Emersonian tradition of democratic individualism. Like Emerson, James defended a vision of free and eccentric individuality as a basic human good. And, also like Emerson, he saw conformity and complacency as pervasive and invidious vices. The inertia of social life necessarily draws people towards conformity and consistency, and yet free individuality is only possible in opposition or “aversion” to this tendency, not in its absence. This paradoxical relationship of need for and aversion from social life in Emerson is translated by James’s into an ambiguous relationship to political institutions. Whereas Tocqueville deemed the individuality that results from a democratic culture as the agent of democracy’s undoing, James suggests that it is institutions rather than individuality which is the ambiguous element in the formula. Democratic institutions exist to protect “our precious birthright of individualism,” and yet their shaping and governing power, like that of custom and habit itself, is always in danger of strangling the individuality it seeks to protect. The democracy in democratic individualism, then, is always only an indirect and ambiguous good in the service of individuality.


This indirect value of democracy is poetically expressed by Walt Whitman: “For it is not that democracy is of exhaustive account, in itself. Perhaps, indeed, it is, (like Nature) of no account in itself. It is that, as we see, it is the best, perhaps only, fit and full means, formulator, general caller-forth, trainer, for the million, not for grand material personality only, but for immortal souls.” Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," in *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996), 971-972. Miller and Lacey’s depiction of James as a radical democrat overlook the centrality of individuality to his political thought. Robert Lacey starts his study of James’s politics from his self-description in *Pragmatism* of the social and participatory character of pragmatic inquiry as “so very democratic” and accordingly proceeds to interpret James’s ethics, politics, and psychology as providing the ideological groundwork of a robust participatory democracy. However, if we read James not as a theorist of inquiry first and foremost, but rather as an engaged and reflective commentator on American democracy, we see that his support for democracy is always only tepid in comparison to his enthusiasm for American individuality. See Robert J. Lacey, *American Pragmatism and Democratic Faith* ( Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008)
If James’s pluralism is at the core of his political thinking, as I argue here, how exactly ought we understand the status of his pluralism? Is it an ethical doctrine? A metaphysics? A political program? In drawing the connection between James and Emerson I mean to highlight not just their political affinities but also James’s more complicated relationship to the tradition of American Transcendentalism. The Transcendentalists offered a contrast between the divided state of society and custom with a perception of nature that discloses unity and continuity in all things. “The human mind cannot be enshrined in a person, who sets a barrier on any one side to this unbounded, unboundable empire” Emerson wrote of this ultimate unity in ‘The American Scholar’, “It is one light which beams of a thousand stars. It is one soul which animates all men.”

James’s pluralism represents a transformation of this tradition after Darwin. No longer can any natural unity of things be posited, but this itself does not mean that ontological speculation about the ultimate reality of things is no longer possible either. Ontology after Darwin, as James articulates it in his pluralism, is a contingent and contestable view of nature that can never serve as a final foundation for politics or philosophy. It is instead an example of what Stephen White has named a ‘weak’ ontology: an articulation of human nature and the world that is cognizant of its status as merely one articulation amongst others, and that never posits itself as beyond revision and contestation. Every approach to politics, James wagers, necessarily projects some such ontological generalizations. According to James, a “philosophy is the expression of a man’s intimate character, and all definitions of the universe are but the

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deliberatively adopted reactions of human characters upon it.”

James’s pluralism is offered as an invitation to his readers to experiment with seeing the world in a new light. This kind of self-reflective invitation, James wagers, offers an ethically and politically more attractive response to the problem of docility than the strong and dogmatic ontological claims implicitly raised by Tocqueville and Roosevelt’s imaginary of the nation-state.

4.2 The Tocquevillean Thesis

I want to begin by looking at Tocqueville’s critique of individualism and the contemporary persistence of what I am calling the Tocquevillean thesis: namely, that the best means of combating individual withdrawal and insatiable materialism that lead to a docile citizenry is through reinforcing the bonds of mutuality between individuals through a form of political association that deepens citizens identification with their community and their shared mores and culture. It is in comparison with the wide consensus on the Tocquevillean thesis that the originality of James’s position emerges.

4.2.1 Equality, Individualism, and Docility

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16 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 639

17 Two caveats are necessary concerning what will inevitably be a controversial coinage. In calling this position Tocquevillean I do not mean to suggest that Tocqueville was the only canonical political theorist who sought to promote commonality as a palliative to political dangers of unconstrained individuality. The same position could be found in different forms in the writings of Plato and Hegel. Why I focus on Tocqueville as an exemplar here is that, unlike Plato and Hegel, Tocqueville was uniquely concerned with the problems of modern democratic politics. Moreover, this way of understanding the problems of individualism has become something of a dogma amongst contemporary political scientists and is frequently described as neo-Tocquevillean. This brings me to my second caveat. In referring to a specific Tocquevillean thesis I do not mean to suggest that this is the only part of Tocqueville’s response to the problem of docility, although I will argue that it is a central one. Tocqueville’s critique of administrative centralization and celebration of associational participation often point in the direction of the kind of Romantic willfulness and resistance that we find in James’s democratic individualism. However, even here, as I argue below, Tocqueville’s Romantic moments remain limited by his conservative conviction that a political regime is a full social regime that harmonizes politics, culture, family, and ethics. It is this last point that James’s pluralism rejects completely.
Democracy in America is a comparative study of the political, cultural and psychological consequences of the “great democratic revolution” sweeping through “all the Christian universe.” This great democratic revolution is based on the growing political and social equality of individuals. Tocqueville approaches equality as a disruptive force that brings about democracy through the demise of the fixed order of estates and status that mark aristocratic political culture. Whereas aristocracy represent a regime defined by stability, settled identities, and fixed meanings, equality of conditions functions as corrosive agent that destabilizes and unsettles fixity, making a democratic culture one marked by movement, instability, open identities, and contested meanings. Democratic revolution, then, like modernity itself, is characterized primarily by what it lacks or undermines, rather than what it creates.

Tocqueville’s analysis is driven by the question of what political costs and potentials are opened up by what Claude Lefort named democracy’s “dissolution of markers of certainty.”

Aristocratic institutions of rank and family have the function of binding people together. A system of social hierarchy gives each person a meaningful and rightful place in the social order. To have a fixed post means that one has a stake in the support one’s superiors for protection, and can draw on those below oneself for cooperation. This meaningful order is further entrenched through the structure of the aristocratic family. To bear a noble family name means one has a debt to past generations to uphold, and a promise to future generations to come. History, hierarchy, and prestige, Tocqueville notes, binds persons together around something

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18 de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 3, 6

19 To put this point clearly, Tocqueville’s account of the transformation from aristocracy to democracy is an example of what Charles Taylor calls a “subtraction theory” of modernity whereby “confining horizons,” like religion and custom, wither away. Like Max Weber’s subtraction account that Taylor targets, Tocqueville’s account of subtraction is meant to stress the trade-offs of this process rather than it’s the triumphant rise of the modern. See Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge: Harvard Belknap, 2007)

20 Claude Lefort, Democracy and Political Theory, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 19
“outside” of each individual.\textsuperscript{21} One’s primary obligations are towards one’s family, one’s nation, one’s sovereign, and towards the order itself, rather than towards one’s private self. The grand vice of aristocratic culture is to succumb to the blind instinct of selfishness, a vice that grows in every man’s heart by nature but which the authority of the moral aristocratic order represses and constrains.

Democratic equality undoes all of this. Rather than finding meaning in an external order, each person is given the free choice to live by their own lights and to fix their own expectations and identities. The leveling of status sets loose the free pursuit of individual desires. This dissolution of aristocratic power and privilege is the precondition for the democratic goods of autonomy, rational order, and toleration.\textsuperscript{22} Despite these achievements, the release of the unencumbered and appetitive aspects of individualism desiccate the sources of virtue upon which a democratic republic depends. Whereas aristocratic order tempered selfish expectations and desires through the authority of its social institutions, equality opens up the promise of upward mobility to all. Aristocratic regimes distribute economic goods according to inheritance. Democracy transforms material goods into commodities available for consumption on the market. Accordingly, individual self-interest finds an outlet in market competition and the pursuit of material advantage. The pursuit of private desires becomes an end in itself, with the perverse effect that goods are possessed without being enjoyed. “What attaches the human heart most keenly” in democratic times “is not the peaceful possession of a precious object, but the imperfectly satisfied desire to possess it and the incessant fear of losing it.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 483

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 9

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 506
Whereas aristocratic institutions functioned as moral ballasts against such unconstrained self-interest, the dissolution of the aristocratic family and class structures set the individual free from any sort of external moral order. The new disappearance of a fixed post within a social hierarchy or place within a family history contracts the individual’s sense of obligation. She becomes increasingly concerned with short-term goals and less and less concerned with the well-being of others. The final result, Tocqueville argues, is that individualism promotes each citizen to “isolate himself from the mass of those like him” and withdraw into private domestic and market life, “having thus created a little society of his own, he willing abandons society at large to itself.”

Individualism’s withdrawal from politics goes hand in hand with a denial of responsibility for the affairs of political life. Private individuals have neither an interest nor time for politics. “He who has confined his heart solely to the search for the goods of this world is always in a hurry, for he has only a limited time to find them, take hold of them, and enjoy them.” This abdication of individual judgment gives way to a culture of conformity. Individuals uninterested in participating in public debate and judgment simply conform to dominant ideas and values, and become increasingly inhospitable and hostile towards opinions and beliefs that challenge the status quo. The democratic voice of this conformity is the awesome power of the tyranny of the majority Tocqueville saw in America. Individuals passively submit to the voice of the majority, believing it to be an expression of their own voice. However, the vox populi of conformism is one that paradoxically functions only by silencing individual voice. Before it

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24 Ibid., 482
“everyone becomes silent and friends and enemies alike then seem to hitch themselves together to this bandwagon.”

Withdrawal and conformity come together to produce the political phenomenon George Kateb calls docility, “a condition in which people reluctantly accept being used, and do so because they have been trained to do so.” It is this sort of docility that Tocqueville thought not only undermines republican virtues, but worse still, suffocates the love of liberty needed to protect democracy from its slide into despotism. A key feature of democratic power Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America* is that of democratic states’ tendency to centralize power. Europe’s aristocratic and monarchic states demonstrate an extreme governmental centralization, as in the reduction of the state to the authority of a sole sovereign. Democratic powers are less centralized at the governmental level, but perversely more centralized at the administrative level. By administrative centralization Tocqueville refers to the logic of power Michel Foucault would later describe as governmentality: the ubiquitous exercise of power over populations and individuals through new forms of individuating technologies of census and public health, clientalism, and surveillance. To resist this extension of administrative power over private life, democracies require an active participatory citizen body that can keep power accountable. However, what unconstrained self-interest, withdrawal, and conformity all conspire to produce is in fact a welcome embrace of such a creeping expansion of power. Centralized power and docility come together to produce a uniquely democratic form of tyranny Tocqueville calls democratic despotism:

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25 Ibid., 512, 243

26 Kateb, *Inner Ocean*, 222

So it is that every day it renders the employment of free will less useful and more rare; it confines
the action of the will in a smaller space and little by little steals the very use of free will from each
citizen. Equality has prepared men for all these things: it has disposed them to tolerate them and
often even to regard them as a benefit.\textsuperscript{28}

This is the paradox of democratic culture for Tocqueville: the central good of democratic
government is the free expression of free individuality, but this individuality itself becomes so
myopically concerned with its own private life that it leaves the democratic culture and
institutions that sustain it unprotected to wither and decline.\textsuperscript{29} Like the culture of neurasthenic
illness that would characterize a generation American intellectuals some forty years later,
Tocqueville’s critical reflections on democracy stresses the origins of a political and social crisis
of free will.

\textit{4.2.2. Governing Mutuality}

Tocqueville’s study of democracy is comparative in two ways. The first, as we saw
above, is historical. The subject matter of \textit{Democracy in America} is primarily the political,
social, and moral consequences of the decline of aristocratic regimes and the rise of democratic
ones. But alongside this historical comparison of regime types, Tocqueville is also offering a
comparative study of democracy in America and France. What fascinates Tocqueville about
American democracy is how it, like post-revolutionary France, is a society founded on equality
but, unlike France, has managed to restrain the most destructive tendencies equality unleashes.
American democracy has balanced stability and popular sovereignty where the demise of the old
feudal order in France has only generated disorder, instability, and the creeping expansion of

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 663}

\textsuperscript{29} I owe this formulation of Tocqueville’s paradox to Cheryl Welch, \textit{De Tocqueville} (Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 2001), 78
administrative centralization. What about American democracy transforms the dangers of
democratic despotism into the promise of democratic deliverance?

The American experience of democracy is distinct from the French in two important
ways. The first is the geographical specificity of North America and its lack of hostile
neighbours. The second and more profound, Tocqueville observes, is how American institutions
have tempered the excesses of democracy by re-instituting aristocratic elements into democratic
culture. Alongside the federal devolution of power, the most important of these is the American
adoption of British legal institutions of common law and trial by jury. The legal class, by
consequence of its study of legal systems and texts, is by disposition in favor of order and
predictability unlike the wild and unpredictable wishes of majority opinion. This class,
moreover, reconstitutes the historical link offered by the aristocratic order through its respect for
the priority of legal precedent. The accumulated weight of legal decision functions like a
supplement for tradition that tempers innovation and novelty. At once drawn from the people but
elevated above them by their expert knowledge of the law the attorney’s bar and the judge’s
bench, Tocqueville writes, are the “American aristocracy.”

This aristocratic institution is deepened by the practice of trial by jury in civil matters. As
a jury member each citizen is given the opportunity to exercise judgment and coercive power.
Through participation in this is open and rotating office, Tocqueville argues, the habits of
ordinary citizens themselves become tempered like those of the judge and lawyer. The
experience of looking at society from the perspective of the law teaches a similar love of order

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30 de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 256
and respect for the idea of right. He regards the English practice of trial by popular jury as “one of the most efficacious means society can make use of for the education of the people.”

Finally, American democracy has succeeded where French democracy fails because of its institutions of township democracy where citizens learn the “art of associating.” “Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds,” Tocqueville observed, “constantly unite.” Without a class of powerful aristocratic elites to guide public judgment and promote policy democracy must rely on a plurality of associations, both civic and political, to generate power to achieve political ends. These associations are first and foremost of instrumental value in so far as they provide a manner of “artificially” consolidating power to pursue political action. But they also serve as an important bulwark against the fragmenting tendency towards individualism. The need to associate “draws a multitude of individuals outside themselves at the same time” and teaches citizens to expand their conception of self-interest to accommodate the need for public- or shared-interests. Civil and political associations, then, are not merely instruments of government but also “great schools, free of charge, where all citizens come to learn the general theory of association.”

Tocqueville’s account of associational life and popular participation provides a powerful alternative to the fragmentation and docility of individualism. But this account of associationalism comes at a certain political cost. To draw out this cost we need to be more specific about the distinction between American and French democracy. Among the causes that explain the success of American democracy Tocqueville mentions, geographic specificity and good laws and institutions, there exists a third and more basic cause we have not addressed so

31 Ibid., 262
32 Ibid., 492, 489
33 Ibid., 491, 497, 497
far. This is the democratic *moeurs* of the people. The “habits of the heart” that make up “the whole moral and intellectual state of a people” is the real foundation of American democracy and the redemptive power of participation he find in associational public life. “Laws,” Tocqueville writes, “are always unstable as long as they do not lean on mores; mores form the sole resistant and lasting power in a people.”

The pathologies of docility that Tocqueville lamented in France were due to the French lack of these distinctly democratic *moeurs*. The historical experience of deference to authority and monarchical rule made the French uniquely unfit to resist the rise of democratic despotism. America, by contrast, was in a unique position to benefit from growing equality because of the experience of equality it learned from Puritanism. All sects in America, despite their disagreements, belong to “the Great Christian unity” and share the same basic mores. The *moeurs* of the Christian faith foundationally bind citizens together as partners in self-rule and tempers the extremes of individual self-interest. Americans understand their own success in the individualist terms of self-interest well understood. Against this ideology of independence, Tocqueville argues that their individual freedom is only possible on the basis of a deeper commonality. As Dana Villa remarks of this point, Tocqueville shows how shared religious dogma constitutes the basic structure that underpins “the ‘superstructure’ of everyday Cartesianism.” “Christianity,” Tocqueville observed, “… reigns without obstacles, on the admission of all; the result… is that everything is certain and fixed in the moral world.” It is because of this pre-political moral foundation that political life can safely be “abandoned to the

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34 Ibid., 275, 261
35 Ibid., 278
36 Villa, *Public Freedom*, p. 57
discussion and attempts of men."³⁷ It is only the basis of this more basic commonality that the institutional and participatory powers of association can steer democracy away from despotism.

Tocqueville’s observation that thick social bonds of commonality serve as the basic bulwark against docility has been a hugely influential response to the predicaments of democracy. Civic republicans, communitarians, neo-conservatives, liberal nationalists, and radical democrats have all sought means of enjoining a deeper commonality between citizens to combat the dangers of individualism.³⁸ Yet all of these efforts, like Tocqueville’s own, seem to run into the same problem. That is, they seem to further legitimize and justify the creeping administration of everyday life by the state that Tocqueville warned docility itself enables. Every attempt to invoke the Christian family or nation as the supplement to democracy’s dissolution of markers of certainty is inevitably a failure. There is no natural fit between modernity’s absence of firm moral foundations and the fantasy of wholeness in enjins. Rather, there is a continuous and ongoing attempt to police the boundaries of the nation’s uniting function.

The Tocquevillean thesis generates this problem in two ways. First, the governance of commonality frequently means the policing of the boundaries of the moral consensus, castigating outsiders as deviants and dangers, enemies of the nation. The denial of the satisfaction of the people’s wholeness and self-identity is rationalized as the fault of others. Tocqueville’s remarks concerning atheists as representing a “dangerous malady” of the body politic are certainly expressive of this exclusive and aggressive fantasy of pre-political commonality.³⁹ Tocqueville approvingly recounts the story of an American court that refused to hear testimony from a

³⁷ Ibid., 279, 279


³⁹ de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 509
witness who did not believe in the existence of a Christian God. Contemporary examples abound of how the supposed democratic sanctity of the monotheistic nation, the heterosexual family, or the ‘tolerant’ civilization all function to limit the rights and citizenship of recalcitrant minorities, migrants, and outsiders who seem to undermine these sources of social coherence.

Secondly, the Tocquevillean thesis encourages not only the policing of outsiders, but a considered extension of governmental power within the nation itself. Recall, that the need for commonality was to facilitate the active, virtuous citizenry that could resist the administrative centralization of the state. Reading Tocqueville after Foucault, we should ask whether the insistence on deep commonality can be separated from an extension of administrative power to shape the public and private lives of citizens. When such an idea is combined with the extensive powers of the modern state apparatus, it takes the form of a fine-grained and comprehensive control of individual and collective conduct that Foucault analyzed as the government of conduct. The state administers everyday life through an ever growing list of mechanisms and agencies that range from public health, to the administration of public schools, licensing and accreditation, the distribution of services and welfare, establishing standards and ordinances, to the regulation of the economy and banking industry, and so on. This extension of governmental power into almost every aspect of private life in the service of reproducing the identities, values and capabilities of national citizenship seems almost entirely indistinguishable from the paternal power Tocqueville sought commonality as a buttress against. Democratic despotism is precisely a form of oppression that is “absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild.” that “provides for

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40 Ibid., 280
their security, foresees and secures their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, directs their industry, regulates their estates, divides their inheritances."  

Is the Tocquevillean thesis really the appropriate lens for understanding the problem of docility and the potential resources of democratic culture to transform its centrifugal forces into a benefit rather than a liability? The criticisms I have raised here are not original, nor do I think they are intractable. I offer them in the spirit of reminders as to the limits of many of our received judgments about the vices and virtues of democratic citizenship. I think these problems enjoin us to entertain alternative approaches to the problem of docility that begin from different premises where they are on offer. Tocqueville’s associational democracy offers an initial model of political pluralism as a response to the problem of docility. What we find here is a narrow pluralism of interests that comes about at the cost of moral pluralism. It is as an alternative to this narrow perspective that I propose that democratic theorists turn their attention to the deep pluralism of William James.

4.3 Docility and Acquiescence

James’s response to docility is to provide a philosophical basis for action by inventing new categories and narratives for making sense out of our experiences. His name for this basis is pluralism. Before turning to a more thorough account of what James means by pluralism and how contemporary theorists ought to engage it, I outline James’s critique of docility and draw attention to its proximity to Tocqueville’s critique of individualism. James differs from Tocqueville in an important way, however, in the sense that he does not provide a social-

41 Ibid., 663
43 Coon, "'One Moment of the World's Salvation'," 94
theoretical account of the paradoxes of democratic regimes as such. While Tocqueville approaches the issue of docility from the nuts and bolts perspective of the social scientist, James’s does so from the lectern of the public intellectual. Accordingly, engaging James as a political educator involves an extended conception of what to include as a political writing, requiring that we turn to his occasional public writings in Boston newspapers, his invited lectures to students and social organizations, and his personal letters.

“Individuality,” James pronounces, “is founded in feeling.” James espoused a conviction that what makes human life worth living is the exhilarating sensation that comes from living in the service of an ideal. The meaning of this kind of life is found less in the content of the ideal than in the affect of vitality that comes from willing it. Experiences of excitement and adventure are opened up by the moral energies our faith in ideals release. James’s liberalism resists the moralizing tendency to define or dictate exactly which ideals are worth living. These are decisions only individuals can make if they are to live these ideals as their own, with integrity. What matters foremost is willful fidelity to towards our ideals, as our ideals. A life of such willful action is a life of ‘zest’ and ‘strenuousness’. However, if this life of strenuous adventure is the defining quality of individuality, docility represents a fatal threat to it.

Apathy and popular complacency, James thought, were regrettable yet understandable responses to the everyday experience of citizens in the final days of America’s Gilded Age. The last decades of the American nineteenth century saw the rise of immense class stratification, the transformation of proprietary capitalism into corporate capitalism, the consolidation of Jim


46 Docility is my term, not James’s. His use of complacency, however, denotes the same phenomenon.
Crow white supremacy, revolutions in transportation and the continental consolidation of the United States by the rail network, the sudden explosion in the density and size of major cities, and the nation’s turn to imperial expansion in the south Pacific. Democratic citizens could only increasingly feel over-whelmed and helpless in the face of the complexity and scale of political and economic forces that seem to operate behind their backs and above their wills. This sense of powerlessness is what James called in a 1903 letter “the great disease of our country,”

It seems to me that the great disease of our country now is the unwillingness of people to do anything that has no chance of succeeding. The organization of great machines for "slick" success is the discovery of our age; and, with us, the individual, as soon as he realizes that the machine will be irresistible, acquiesces silently, instead of making an impotent row. One acquiescence leads to another, until acquiescence itself becomes organized. The impotent row-maker becomes in the eye of public opinion, an ass and a nuisance. We get to live under the organization of corruption, and since all needful functions go on, we next treat reform as a purely literary ideal:

We defend our rotten system. Acquiescence becomes active partnership. 47

Acquiescence is an understandable psychological response to these transformations, but as the last sentence suggests it is also a culpable one. It is “active partnership” in the effacement of free individuality. Individuals make themselves into docile subjects of the institutions and forces that steer social life, compromising themselves in the process. In acquiescence, citizens forfeit their possibility of their own individuality and, therefore, their freedom. James’s democratic individualism enjoins persons to find the courage to risk making their row, even if it may be impotent.

James does not provide a social-theoretical account theory of how the transformations in the structures of everyday life compromise human agency. Instead, he focuses on three related

democratic predicaments in his reflections on docility. I call the social phenomena that attract James attention predicaments as they are less Weberian ideal-types than they are moving targets for his attempt to articulate an experienced crisis in agency. These three predicaments are bigness, consumerism, and monism. James saw each one as an intractable aspect of modern life. What troubled him about each were their effects on ordinary people. If the waning spirit of individuality was to be resuscitated, it would mean thinking about how to attenuate the complacent effects of these aspects of modern life, without either rejecting them outright or longing for radical social reform. James’s political question then is, to borrow an expression of Charles Taylor’s, that of how transformations in how citizens “see-feel” these aspects of modern life might lead to the gradual transformation of the structures themselves.

The first predicament is the problem of what James called bigness. Bigness refers first of all to the “big” force at work in society – the economy, the state, the military, and the corporations. “I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms,” James wrote in an 1899 letter, “and with the invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual.” The complexity, scale, and increasingly bureaucratic nature of national political and economic structures meant that they seemed to float free from the agency and input of lone citizens. Often James would associate scale itself as a fault, writing that “[t]he bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed.” However, what James seems to mean here is not the physical or institutional scale of modern organizations. He uses the term to evoke the individual experience of feeling over-whelmed by the influence and control of


49 W.J. to Sarah Wyman Whitman, June 7, 1899 in Perry, Thought and Character, 315-316
these institutions.\textsuperscript{50} Most often, he uses it as shorthand to describe the combination of the three predicaments.

The second predicament is monism, what we might call the ideological superstructure of bigness. Monism is the philosophical temperament that demands unity and order that James identifies with the absolutism of Hegel and Royce. James saw monism as a philosophical position that satisfied the genuine human longing for belonging and stability in the world. The political danger of monism comes from its tendency towards abstractness: to see and appraise the world in terms of parts and tokens of a greater organic whole. Abstraction erases the concreteness of individuals. Instead, it looks at persons in terms of categories, populations, statistics, and kinds rather than as potentially eccentric and disorderly expression of free individuality. James believed that monism as a philosophy was simply less invigorating than his own pluralism, and not morally wrong. But when combined with the bigness of the modern state apparatus, monism becomes a dangerous ideology and a form of power.\textsuperscript{51} The conjunction of bigness and monism is reminiscent of Tocqueville’s warnings about the alliance of governmental and administrative centralization. What monism and bureaucratic bigness produce is a ubiquitous power that at once both governs the affairs of groups and populations, while at the same time specifying the conduct of individuals through an extensive system of licensing, accreditation and

\textsuperscript{50} Colin Koopman evocatively describes this affective dimension of bigness, “The ‘bigness’ that he opposes is a figure for the disciplinary constitution of socialized individuals, not a figure for the material oppression of scared individuals who rights precede the institutions of their production. James is not defending the purity of the individual from its corruption by social institutions; he is defending the creative energies that individuals can inject into institutions.” Koopman, “William James’ Politics of Personal Freedom,” 180

\textsuperscript{51} James memorably expressed his antipathy towards this elective affinity in a letter to Elizabeth Glendowner Evans dated February 15, 1901, “Damn great empires! – including that of the Absolute. You see how much crime it necessarily has to involve.” Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley, \textit{The Correspondence of William James}, vol. 9: July 1899-1901 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 422
certification.\cite{Foucault1980} James was actively involved in the movement to resist the state licensing of medical practitioners and university professors as instances of this invidious and freedom destroying administration of everyday life. Vociferously objecting to the requirement that university professors hold PhD’s, James asked, “is individuality with us… going to count for nothing unless stamped and licensed and authenticated by some title-giving machine?”\cite{James1987}

The third predicament is consumerism. James is no radical critic of capitalism.\cite{Livingston2001} For the man who defined truth by its “cash value” the legitimacy of the capitalist economy was not in question. What he objects to in consumerism are its psychological effects: the sedative delights of the “pleasure economy” encourage the flight away from individuality into mass-produced conformity and risk-averseness.\cite{James1987} The economic prosperity of the nation cultivates a passive nation of consumers averse to the strenuous moral mood James champions. Luxury and commercialism promote instead an easy-going moral mood. This mood is wary of effort and self-interested.\cite{James1987} It shies away from danger and excitement. James’s moral psychology categorizes these moods as ‘moral’ because they each prefigure different moral attitudes. The moral strenuousness of individuality goes hand in hand with a faith in our ability to enact some

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Foucault1980} On modern power as bi-polar, exercised both over the abstract population and concrete individual bodies, see Michel Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction}, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), part five
\bibitem{Livingston2001} To say this however is not to say that he is an unblinking champion of it either. For the claim that James’s radical pluralism unwittingly provides the ideological framework for the corporate transformation of the economy in the American 19th century see James Livingston, \textit{Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy: Rethinking the Politics of American History} (New York: Routledge 2001). For a criticism of Livingston’s argument see Robert Westbrook, "Our Kinsman, William James," in \textit{Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Hope} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005)
\bibitem{James1956} William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in \textit{The Will to Believe} (New York: Dover, 1956), 211
\end{thebibliography}
change in the world. The moral easy-goingness, by contrast, is connected to the determinist worldview of monism. The easy-going mood does not worry too much about whether or not our wills are efficacious in the world. It is the lazy mood of petite bourgeois respectability and decorum. It has no interest in the strenuous life of energy. The self-centered mood of the easy-going soul flees from the affective intensity of individuality into what James calls vanity. Vanity “is clearly something that permits anesthesia, mere escape from suffering, to be our rule of life.”

A docile, complacent, and disengaged citizenry is the natural outgrowth of these forces. Revitalizing citizenship means transforming the moral mood of America from this easy-going complacency to a strenuous one of confidence and conviction. Strenuous citizenship is heroic, risk-taking, and agonistic. It embraces conflict as an occasion for self-discovery rather than fleeing from it. “The solid meaning of life” James says of this feeling of conflict and effort, “is always the same external thing – the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man’s or woman’s pains.” Active citizenship means finding sources of confidence and courage to draw on. The seemingly unavoidable bigness of American life, however, produces acquiescent and passive citizens. James put little faith in the power of big institutions to curb their own excesses. Instead, individuality could survive the dangers of docility if it were buttressed by strenuous courage becoming a part of ordinary life. The challenge James faced, then, was how to shield citizens

57 William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," in *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover, 1956), 86


59 However, as Flathman correctly notes, James did argue for some basic institutional devices like the separation of powers at the national level and the division of authority between review boards and oversight committees in the debates on medical licensing he was involved in. Richard Flathman, "The Bases, Limits, and Values of Pluralism: An Engagement with William James," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 149, no. 2 (2005): 184
from the debilitating experience of bigness, and shape new courageous habits, and all without recourse to trading off individuality in the process.

James and Tocqueville share an anxiety about docility but seemingly very different analyses of the phenomenon. Inspired by the political events of *fin-de-siècle* America, James came to see the Tocquevillean thesis’ cure to the problem of docility worse than the original illness itself. Despite their historical proximity, there is no historical evidence to suggest that James read Tocqueville or took his arguments explicitly into consideration in his own writings. What we do have, however, is James’s frequent and impassioned responses to his own former student, Governor Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was only a rising political star when he attracted the attention of James’s poison pen. The occasion for James’s criticisms of Roosevelt was the snowballing bellicosity of America in the 1890’s, beginning with the Venezuela crisis in 1896, amplifying to the Spanish War’s conquest of Cuba and Puerto Rico, and ultimately to the suppression of a national liberation movement in the Philippines in 1899. The war on Filipino sovereignty represented the apex of this “torrent of mere empty bigness” overcoming American democracy.60 These historical details aside, what concerns the argument in this chapter is that it was precisely a Tocquevillean response to docility that Roosevelt’s celebration of the nation and empire put forward. Like Tocqueville, Roosevelt rallied the glory of the nation as a common cause to draw passive and self-interested citizens out of their docility. Importantly Roosevelt represents not only an instance of the Tocquevillean thesis but also a cooption of James’s language of strenuous individuality. Like James, it was the rhetoric of strenuousness and the life of feeling that Roosevelt used to inspire this manlier, courageous citizenship. If James’s vision of

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active citizenship will provide an alternative to Tocqueville, it must also provide an explanation of how it resists cooption by Roosevelt’s rhetoric of the excitement of war.

4.4 Roosevelt and the Strenuous Life

Governor Theodore Roosevelt, President McKinley’s most vocal supporter of the American presence in the Philippines, made his famous celebration of America at war entitled ‘The Strenuous Life’ on April 11th, 1899. Roosevelt’s speech celebrated the expansion of American economic and military influence across the hemisphere as a palliative to the corrupting indolence of America’s isolationist history. To inherit the glory and sacrifice of the great men who fought in the Civil War, Americans must not squander their success on navel-gazing commercialism. Rather, Americans ought to follow in the image of Lincoln and Grant and embrace the life of labour and strife as the embodiment of “all that is most American in the American character.”

Roosevelt argues that this sort of ethos means the courage of refusing to back down to the challenges that America must face as a global power, even if that means occupying and governing foreign peoples. The future greatness of America lay in its military’s power to confront such issues of the day. He defends the mutual benefit that the Philippines’s occupation will bring to American, the Filipinos, and humanity at large. The congressmen and public intellectuals who stand in the way of such a mandate, Roosevelt argues, are both guilty of treason and evil.

Roosevelt’s speech looks to the external order of the nation to regenerate the conviction and confidence that democratic equality erodes. An active, expansive, manly, and constantly moving democracy is framed in opposition to a passive, isolationist, feminized, and static

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servitude. On the side of docility, Roosevelt includes isolated individuals - the skeptic, the intellectual, the idiot, and the man of commerce – as victims of America’s becoming “over-civilized.” On the side of the nation, he finds friendship, mutual aid, effort as expressions of the authenticity of “the only national life which is really worth leading.” The nation is at once both the highest achievement of lone individuals, and the force that can draw them out of their lives of single-minded materialism. Echoing Tocqueville’s own comparison between progressive America and static China, Roosevelt argues that only the constant motion and expansion of the democratic state can sustain its vitality, less it chose to “rot by inches in ignoble ease within our borders” like the Chinese.62

The speech’s invocation of the strenuous life raises two claims. The first claim is that the life of strenuous action and challenge is the genuine life of individual freedom. That is, the feeling of effort and challenge is a crucial human good. On this point he and James are in basic agreement. Both take up the language of strenuous action to lament the docile complacency of inward-looking commercialism of American public life. Both men lauded the life of the worker and the frontiersman as exemplary instances of such strenuousness. But both also acknowledge that the most telling example of strenuousness was the courage of facing death in battle. This brings us to Roosevelt’s second claim and where he and James diverge. Roosevelt argues that it is the experience of war in the service of the nation that can correct a docile democratic culture. It is the binding power of obligation provided by the moral order of the nation state, that like a surrogate for the embedded meanings of aristocratic culture, provide some external order for democratic citizens. The experience of struggle and vitality that Roosevelt elsewhere celebrated in competitive sports and camping are only shadows of the feeling of excitement raised by international conflict.

62 Ibid., 758, 758, 757. On China see de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 438-39
Roosevelt’s speech evoked a long response from James on April 15, 1899 in the *Republican*. Roosevelt’s “abstract war-worship,” James wrote, is incoherent and morally irresponsible. The strenuousness of war is in itself not a good. To celebrate strenuousness as an end in itself ignores the fact that wars are to be judged by their consequences, and the gross brutality and enslavement of a free people in the Philippines are hardly consequences worth celebrating. “We are now openly engaged in crushing out the most sacred of things in this great human world,” he pleaded to his fellow Bostonians, “— the attempt of a people long enslaved to attain to the possession of itself, to organize its laws and government, to be free to follow its internal destinies according to its own ideals.” James points out that Roosevelt’s rhetorical praise for the glory of Lincoln and Grant cuts both way, as it must equally celebrate the strenuous lives of Jeff Davis and General Lee in the South’s war for succession, or even to justify what Roosevelt dismisses as “brigandage” in the Filipino struggle against the United States for self-government. In short, the celebration of war in and of itself is an expression of impetuosity, testifying to an immaturity of Roosevelt. “He is still in the *Sturm und Drang* period of early adolescence,” James remarks.

James’s response to Roosevelt, however, is not simply a denunciation. It instead was the beginning of his attempt over the next ten years to think about how his celebration of the strenuousness life, the life of effort and willfulness, could be preserved without endorsing the

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64 James, "The Philippine Tangle," 156

65 Roosevelt, "Strenuous Life," 764

66 James, "Roosevelt's Oration," 163
bellicose jingoism of Roosevelt. Harvey Mansfield claims that James’s response to Roosevelt ought to be considered as evidence that he was inconsistent in his endorsement of strenuousness. As Mansfield puts it, James is in fact “not so manly but just a nice guy.” But what Mansfield overlooks is that less than a lack of resolve to follow his arguments to their logical conclusion, James’s criticisms of Roosevelt are a criticism of his misunderstanding of democratic docility. Roosevelt saw war, adventure, and the nation as uniting values to combat docility. James instead saw Roosevelt’s influence as nothing other than a disheartening expression of docility itself. In his celebration of the nation at war, all three predicaments – scale, monism, and commercialism – came crashing together in a presidential decision that “reeked of the infernal adroitness of the great department store, which has reached perfect expertness in the art of killing silently and with no public squealing or commotion the neighboring small concern.” The hubris of bigness that Roosevelt celebrated was at the same time the reason he faced “no public squealing.” In fact, docility shows its true face not simply when citizens passively let events like this come to pass, but rather when they conspire with them through the mob mentality that James described of the war’s supporters. War, rather than providing some reprieve from docility, provides the most common occasion for the nation to exploit this explosive mix of what George Kateb rightly describes as “mobilized docility” and “aggressive obedience.”

67 On the shift in James’s philosophy after 1900 as a response to the excesses of his earlier statements on strenuousness, see Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher*


69 James, "The Philippine Tangle," 156

70 Kateb, *Inner Ocean*, 227
If Roosevelt was empire’s most able defender, James counted himself amongst the New England mugwumps whose duty it was to re-steer public opinion against the war, but without engaging in the same manipulative fear-mongering of Roosevelt.\textsuperscript{71} Despite the impotence of the lone individual against the bigness of empire, James constantly reminded his readers in the popular magazines and newspapers where he published his salvos against Roosevelt that “every American has a voice or a pen, and may use it.”\textsuperscript{72} Ordinary people must find the courage to speak up for both their own integrity and that of those individuals being slaughtered on the other side of the globe. James sought to summon courage, but one that would not spill over into the blood-thirstiness of Roosevelt’s strenuousness. The challenge for James then, was how to hold on to the democratic goods of conviction and confidence without breeding arrogance and violence. What James offered in response to both Tocqueville and Roosevelt is an alternative conception of citizenship that takes modern democracy’s lack of final foundations not as a liability but an opportunity re-energizing our experience of citizenship.

4.5 Pluralism as Political Philosophy

Thus far, I have argued that for James docility poses a grave threat to democratic individualism in terms of the experience of individual powerlessness occasioned by the concatenation of bigness, monism, and consumerism in American life. These predicaments of democracy are persistent features of the political culture of a liberal capitalist democracy, but the experiential effects they produce promote an acquiescent withdrawal into a private life that leaves political power unaccountable and uncontrolled. As an alternative to docility, I have gestured towards


\textsuperscript{72} James, "The Philippine Tangle," 158
James’s vision of active citizenship as something strenuous, agonistic, and adventurous. But I have also argued that the attempt to promote strenuous citizenship through identification with the nation and its bellicose projects, as represented by Roosevelt’s use of the rhetoric of strenuous, is not a cure to docility, but rather only a second face of docility itself: the manipulated obedience of citizens whipped up into a frenzy. In an address delivered after his exchange with Roosevelt, James outlines the political equivalents of the strenuous and easy-going moods as the two fundamental parties in any nation, the party of red blood, “the party of animal instinct, jingoism, fun, excitement, bigness” and the party of reflection, “that of reason, forecast, order gained by growth and spiritual methods.” The desire for fun and excitement is always in danger of proceeding in blindness to its human costs, while reason and thoughtfulness grow pale without the vitality of action. The role of the public intellectual in a nation split in to these two camps is not to champion one at the expense of the other. Rather, it is “to blow cold upon the hot excitement, and hot upon the cold motive.” A democratic politics for James needed to balance both passion and constraint.

Pluralism is to the political problem of docility what tychism was to James’s ethical and psychological problem of abulia. He champions what he calls pluralism as a way of steering a path between the atomistic withdrawal of the consumer and the bellicose monism of national belonging. James’s use of the term pluralism shares some elective affinities with the more familiar use of the term by political scientists, but is importantly deeper and richer than its familiar variants. The first familiar sense of pluralism is interest-group pluralism we saw in

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73 Address to Graduate School at Harvard, Jan. 9th, 1902 in Perry, Thought and Character, 299, 298

74 On the historical and conceptual connections between James’s pluralism and the discourse of pluralism in political science see Avigail Eisenberg, Reconstructing Political Pluralism (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), David Schlosberg, "Reconstructing the Pluralist Universe," Political Research Quarterly 51, no. 3 (1998). James’s use of the term pluralism is borrowed from the German philosophical tradition that goes back to Lotze where pluralismus and pluralität designate the priority of multiplicity and irreducibility of particularity in nature. On the reception of
Tocqueville. This is the view that state power can be constrained and held accountable through a polyarchical arrangement that distributes power across a variety of economic and civil-society groups. As developed by Harold Laski and others, interest-group pluralism shares an important intellectual debt to James, and James himself describes his own vision of pluralism as “conceived after a social analogy as a pluralism of independent powers.”

However, James does not place the state, even a decentered one, at the centre of his pluralistic universe. The second sense of pluralism is value-pluralism. This is the view that there exists a plurality of human values that lack any ultimate harmony and are bound to come into conflict. James is certainly a value pluralist in this sense. “There is hardly a good,” he writes in ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’, “which we can imagine except as competing for the possession of the same bit of space and time with some other imagined good.” He recognizes the incommensurability of values, although he does not think the plurality of values is any deep way unique within the abundant plurality of the universe, one that contains a plurality of spaces, times, experiences, judgments, and groups. The plurality of values only stands out in the sense that, like religion, it provides a particularly trying site of disagreement amongst people. James’s deep pluralism, by contrast with each of these usages, is an attempt to be explicit about the ontological assumptions that underpin political argumentation. In making these implicit assumptions explicit James champions a ontological pluralism that stresses the open, unfinished quality of the universe as a set of assumptions underlying democratic practices. Deep pluralism is a normative and

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76 James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," 202

77 See Flathman, "The Bases, Limits, and Values of Pluralism: An Engagement with William James," 165-166
descriptive approach to the world that provides new categories and concepts for interpreting our experiences of the world.

In this section I provide an account of this deep pluralism and argue that it may serve as a better ground than the monism of the nation for inflecting citizenship in the direction of the careful balance of passion and constraint.

4.5.1 The Evolution of James’s Pluralism

Docility represents democracy’s crisis of confidence. Because citizens don’t believe that they can make any change in the face of the bigness of the modern world, they withdraw into the anesthesia of vanity and conformity. To find the confidence to act, citizens need to experience a world that meets their efforts half way. Sheldon Wolin captured this connection between confidence and democracy when he wrote that it is precisely because action involves intervention into existing affairs, that it is always sorely in need of “a perspective of tantalizing possibilities.”

Like Wolin, James argues that how we experience the world is subject to how we narrate it, how our ideas and feelings help us make sense out of our experience of things. What is needed is a new language for redescribing experience that stresses the world’s receptivity to action. “If we survey the field of history and ask what features of all great periods of revival, of expansion of the human mind, display in common we shall find,” James wagers, “I think, simply this: that each and all of them said to the human being, ‘The inmost nature of reality is congenial to powers that you possess.’” Like with Darwin’s tychism, James finds this elective affinity between agents and their world in a pluralistic universe.

James introduced his notion of pluralism in his 1897 introduction to The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy but only provided a sustained meditation on what

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79 James, "Sentiment," 86
exactly he understands by pluralism in his 1908 Hibbert Lectures at Oxford, *A Pluralistic Universe*. In the 1897 version James presented pluralism as a consequence of his radical empiricism. “*Prima facie,*” as empiricism discloses things, “the world is a pluralism; as we find it, its unity seems to be that of any collection.”80 Like a museum collection, the world is made up of unique objects and artifacts with no natural unity between them. The connections and relations between the parts are made by the curator, or in the case of empiricism, by the self who experiences this world. James’s central concern here is to distinguish pluralism from the monism that posits an absolute relationship between the parts of the world. What he points to instead, as the at times wandering and disconnected set of reflections he edited together in that volume suggest, is that the world is a multiplicity of particulars that hold some order and relationship between them, but that these relationships are contingent and shifting.

*A Pluralistic Universe* pushes these passing reflections on the relationship between the parts and the whole, multiplicity and unity to the register of ontological reflection about the interdependence of being and becoming. A pluralistic universe is one where “[w]hat really exists is not things made but things in the making.” In contrast to Hegel and other metaphysical theories of becoming that posit some fixed being as either the engine or final cause of history, James argues that being and becoming are related to one another as parts of a circle, albeit not a vicious one. It is a universe that is not exhausted by the laws of nature or competition, nor reducible to the play of self-interests or any other essential force. Unlike the clean ‘slick’ machine of bigness or the determined and orderly world of monism, a pluralistic universe is “a turbid, muddled, gothic sort of an affair, without a sweeping outline and with pictorial

80 William James, "Preface [Radical Empiricism 1897]," in *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover, 1956), viii
nobility." It trades off this aesthetic ideal of closedness and wholeness to embrace the place of chance, indeterminism, and freedom in the order of things.

At the centre of this universe stands the Darwinian lesson about chance. Chance is not a positive attribute of this universe, but rather something negative. It indicates a disconnection and spontaneity, of not being “controlled, secured, or necessitated by other things in advance of its own actual presence.” The primacy of chance makes the ultimate order of monism impossible. Every attempt to speak for the whole, to find an “all-form,” always leaves something out. There is always negativity, a chance that escapes every claim to speak on behalf of the lack, whether it is through a shared faith or nation. The pluralist perspective argues that,

[T]here may never be an all-form at all, that the substance of reality may never get totally collected, that some of it may remain outside of the largest combination of it ever made, and that a distributive form of reality, the each-form, is logically as acceptable and empirically as probable as the all-form commonly acquiesced in as so obviously the self-evident thing

But, importantly, neither is the world strictly marked by chance and heterogeneity. The world is “neither a universe pure and simple nor a multiverse pure and simple.” To argue, like some postmodernists, that there is some ultimate difference or disunity in the world would strike James as simply the Janus face of the either/or logic of Tocqueville and Roosevelt. James’s pluralistic universe aims at a third way between absolute order and absolute incommensurability. James’s point in these lectures, like in his comment about the collection-like quality of the world in 1897,

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81 James, A Pluralistic Universe, 650
82 William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," in The Will to Believe (New York: Dover, 1956), 154
83 James, A Pluralistic Universe, 645
84 James, Pragmatism, 551
85 On the important differences between James’s pluralism and postmodern views of pluralism and difference see Carrie Tirado Bramen, The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for National Distinctiveness (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000)
is that there exist orders of connection and relationship between the parts of the world, but that these orders are not fixed. Each part of the pluriverse has “some” connection with others. “[E]ach part of the world is in some way connected, in some other ways not connected with its other parts.”

This last point, that pluralism enjoins both multiplicity and order, is something that has been overlooked by contemporary proponents of James’s pluralism.\(^87\) To them, James’s pluralism represents a normative celebration of difference as an end in itself. As Kennan Ferguson puts this point, James’s pluralism “encourages intellectual and political differences, recognizing those alternative worlds as necessary to life’s vitality. For James, pluralism is prescriptive; for Rawls and other liberals, it is descriptive.”\(^88\) Consequently, Ferguson and others view James’s political thought as solely oriented towards the agonistic contestation across these differences. Through a pluralism that “privileges individuality at the expense of group and associational multiplicity,” as Richard Flathman interprets James, community and sociality are held together by “the agonistic disposition to ‘act against’ resistance and opposition.”\(^89\) This way of interpreting James’s pluralism, as a celebration of the disconnected, spontaneous, and different parts of the world cannot sustain the democratic agonism Flathman and Ferguson find here. What it supports, rather, is precisely a form of antagonism that is insensitive to the interdependence of selves. Drawing out pluralism as a collection rather than just a mess or a wild

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86 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 666

87 In a recent article Dylan Weller makes a similar point by stressing James’s alternateness to the psychological need both for excitement offered by pluralism and the easy comfort enjoined by a monistic view of the world. Pragmatism takes no final stance on pluralism vs. monism but rather functions as philosophical “mediator” that answers to the human “hankering for the good things on both sides of the line” James, *Pragmatism*, 491-3. See Dylan Weller, "William James, Pluralism, and the Science of Religious Experience," *Theory & Event* 13, no. 3 (2010)

88 Ferguson, *William James: Politics in the Pluriverse*, 10

array, James finds means to inject some caution into his rejection of monistic philosophies. If it is to provide an alternative to the monism of Roosevelt’s nationalism, James’s pluralism has to both prefigure confidence and constraints. That is, it has to attenuate its strenuousness in some important ways.

4.5.2. Conviction and Constraint

Approaching James’s pluralism this way, as a fragile balancing act between the demands of unity and diversity, offers a more compelling account of his political ethic than Ferguson does. James is no moralist. He consistently resists the moralistic drift to define an exclusive list of ideals worthy of conviction.90 His pluralistic metaphysics prefigures a certain moral sensibility, but neither defines it nor commands it. As he says of its prefiguring power, “I must point, point to the mere that of life, and you by inner sympathy must fill out the what for yourself.”91 James as a philosopher and public intellectual points to the that of a pluralist, unfinished universe. It is up to you to take up that vision and find your own way in it. How does a pluralistic universe help us find our way?

The two conflicting political imperatives of the public intellectual – blowing hot on cold, and cold on hot – translate into two seemingly contradictory habits of citizenship. Conviction undisciplined by mutual respect leads to the impulsive will of Roosevelt’s imperialism. Mutual respect uninspired by conviction can only inspire docility and the obstructed will of the abuliac.92 What James proposes is a vision of engaged citizenship that holds both moments together –

90 But this is not to say that James’s pluralism accommodates all ideals. As pluralistic, it acknowledges the persistent conflict amongst values and prohibits exclusive ideals that fail to abide by the terms of fair play and agonistic respect that allows this conflict to sustain itself as a non-antagonistic one. On James and the limits of toleration see Andrew F. Smith, "William James and the Politics of Moral Conflict," Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society 40, no. 1 (2004)

91 James, A Pluralistic Universe, 762

92 On abulia and the explosive will see Chapter 3
conviction and mutual respect – in a way that brings out the best of each. Joshua Miller objects that this democratic temperament of James’s involves a psychological dissonance that would be trying if not impossible for most citizens. Respect and conviction, Miller argues, spring from different sources. Freedom means action and adventure as opposed to the dull humdrum of habit and convention, but this freedom is only possible when shaped and cultivated through the assemblage of habits. Similarly, conviction is a force that propels agents out into the world, but it must be tempered by habits of mutual respect towards others.

James wagers that his invocation of a pluralistic universe is one where the seemingly contradictory demands of conviction and constraint find mutual support. Pluralism, like pragmatism, is less a philosophical doctrine than an attitude or a sentiment. “Temperaments with their cravings and refusals,” James observes in *Pragmatism*, “determine men in their philosophies, and always will.” Philosophy does not rest on final logical proof but on the needs and desires of the individuals it serves. In so far as there are no natural or universal set of needs of the human soul that all can agree on clearly, there will always be a need for diverse philosophies. But in saying this James is not merely making the point that his pluralism is meant to preach to the converted. New philosophies too can change our temperaments and cravings by giving a new perspective on the world and ourselves. In redisclosing the world as a place of novelty and order, difference and identity, in a complex and fragile process of becoming and change, James means to invite a new temperamental response or ethics of response to it.

Conviction and constraint, or mutual respect, constitute the minimal constraints necessary to allow this pluralism to persist as a home fit for equals, but rather than canceling each other out as Miller suggests, the two demands are held together in a productive tension. On

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93 Miller, *Democratic Temperament*, 92

94 James, *Pragmatism*, 501-2
the one hand, an open and unfinished universe is one where creativity and action are still possible. Because no force can close out chance forever, there is always room to act. That is, it is a universe that invites conviction as something that still matters. One the other hand, because this universe is made up of the fragments of particulars with no “all-form” to hold them together, there is no view from nowhere and no grounds to speak for the whole. Because “no single point of view can take in the whole scene” in a pluralistic universe, then there may always be something left to be learned from the perspective of another.95 This universe then prefigures action as opposed to resignation. But unlike the imperial of confidence of Roosevelt’s monism, James’s pluralism assembles reminders about the contingency of our convictions and the need to be open to listening and cooperation with others. Misunderstanding, conflict, and partiality are inevitable in a pluralistic universe. The disconnections that define us make difference not a failure but a resource to draw on, as people with whom we are connected in some way yet disconnected in others will see shared problems and questions differently, and bring a new and much needed perspective to bear on them. “Even prisons and sick-rooms,” as James puts this point with great pith, “have their special revelations.”96 Conviction requires respect for others if our values and judgments are going to be responsive ones that help us make sense out of this world. A pluralistic universe prefigures a lively citizenry precisely in so far as it keeps alive the dynamic tension between these two forces: conviction and constraint.

4.6 Imagination and the Rhetoric of Pluralism

95 James, "Dilemma," 177

A Pluralistic Universe represented a philosophical response to the monism of Roosevelt’s nationalism. As opposed to recovering a fixed external order in the nation-state, James sought to transform America’s democratic modernism as a philosophical resource rather than a liability. On philosophical grounds, James makes the more compelling case. But on political grounds, these sorts of arguments seem like a fairly insubstantial response to both the vice of docility and Roosevelt’s popular rhetoric of strenuousness. Educating citizens in philosophy ought to strike us as an awfully ineffective means of mobilizing an anti-war movement. James was a man of faith but no naive optimist. His diagnosis of American democracy is melancholic at the best of times. He acknowledges that “it is no small thing to inoculate seventy millions of people with new standards.” What would be needed to resuscitate the mortifying body of American democracy would be nothing less than the injection of new civic habits. Habits are not the sort of thing that can be legislated or willed into existence, but neither can we rely on philosophical persuasion as the guiding star of mass politics.

Recall, however, that his pluralism was less an attempt to answer the perennial problems of philosophy than an attempt to speak to the imagination and temperaments of his audience. As a public intellectual he dares his audiences to re-imagine their universe as a pluralistic one, and ask themselves how they can make sense out of themselves and their practices from this new perspective. In this sense, James’s politicization of imagination – even at the deepest level of ontology and the nature of the universe – is a democratic practice. The transformation of habits is something that must come from within, and it is this power of introspective imagining that James appeals to. After all, the external and collective acts of deliberation and participation celebrated by contemporary democrats are often only really advocated as a catalyst to the internal and

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reflective practice of imagination where persuasion takes place. To this end, James’s lectures often take less the form of a sustained argument than they are instances of storytelling. Against the monistic story of empire, powerlessness, and determinism that the Gilded Age told itself, James came up with a counter-story, an onto-story. James’s democratic response to the problem of docility then is to critically provoke the enlarged mentality of his fellow citizens so as to empower them to transform themselves.

James held no misconception that the conformist and thoughtless character of everyday life, any more than habit, could be overcome definitively, but instead he thought conformism might be used against itself for democratic ends. Social reform, James once told an audience, must begin from the acknowledgement that “invention and imitation, taken together, form… the entire warp and woof of human life, in so far as it is social.” Individuals imitate one another. It is this fact that makes the docility of America such a difficult habit to break. What are needed, then, are new examples to imitate. The example, to quote Hannah Arendt, “is the particular that contains, or is supposed to contain, a concept or general rule.”

Roosevelt, too, knew this point well. He offered his own experience with the 1st United States Cavalry in its assault on Cuba in his incredibly popular The Rough Riders. Roosevelt’s examples of manly heroism, danger, gore, and victory translated the American myth of the frontier cowboy into the political and cultural context of the Gilded Age. The Boys of ’89 were precisely the models of heroic Americans Roosevelt sought to cultivate. If James’s philosophical arguments were alone insufficient to respond to this popular rhetoric, his standing as a public

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98 Robert E. Goodin, “Democratic Deliberation Within,” Philosophy and Public Affairs 29, no. 1 (2000). Sheldon Wolin argues that imagination is at the heart of the theorist’s contribution to politics. Through imagination the theorist represents an aesthetic seeing of the world in its “corrected fullness” in a manner that is meant to help guide political thought and action. See Wolin, Politics and Vision, Part One, Chapter one.

99 James, "Gospel," 832

100 Hannah Arendt, Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 84
intellectual gave him an opportunity to re-appropriate the language of warrior strenuousness in the service of his vision of pluralism.

James transfigures the nationalist praise of war in pluralist terms with his praise of Union Army colonel Robert Gould Shaw. James delivered an oration in his praise in front of the Boston Opera House in 1897 on the occasion of the unveiling of a monument depicting Shaw and his men. In this oration he praises the strenuous life of Shaw, but less the strenuousness that he brought to the battlefields of the Civil War than the moral courage he exemplified as a leader. Shaw was a colonel in the Massachusetts’s 54th Regiment, the Union’s so-called black regiment. The 54th was the first regiment of black soldiers to fight for the Union during the war. Shaw was shot through the heart and killed fighting alongside his men at the battle of Fort Wagner. Although the 54th never captured Fort Wagner and suffered astounding losses in the battle, their valor on the battlefield was widely acclaimed. Shaw’s life at the front lines is at first glance a perfect example of Roosevelt’s ideal of strenuousness. But what James finds so remarkable about Shaw is not his military courage. The bellicose nature of human beings makes this kind of courage all too easy. What James praises are the “unselfish public deeds” that sprung from Shaw’s “more lonely courage.”

Before his involvement with the 54th, Shaw was Captain of the Massachusetts 2nd Regiment. The 2nd was a revered unit already tested in battle and Shaw was already on the path to promotion and recognition within it. When Shaw was invited to lead the experiment of the 54th

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101 The monument, sculpted by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, is itself quite interesting for its incredibly detailed and specific depiction of the unique individuals who together made up the 54th. Rather than presenting the soldiers as undifferentiated members of a single unit, Saint-Gaudens spent years working on the sculpture to capture the unified quality of the unit in motion as a multiplicity of unique men. On Saint-Gaudens’s working-process and the monument itself see the account in Harvey Cormier, The Truth Is What Works: William James, Pragmatism, and the Seeds of Death (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 155-179

he had to choose between the successes and standing that his present career promised or the loneliness, ridicule, and possible failure he faced fighting shoulder to shoulder with African-American soldiers. While he had endured some of the most gory and devastating violence of the civil war by this point, in terms of social standing “he had till then been walking socially on the sunny side of life.” Shaw drew on a different kind of courage to break with social expectation and make the risky decision to fight with the 54th. What led him, James argues, was his commitment to the tenets of a pluralistic faith where each individual has a story to tell. In an instance of great rhetoric, James subverts the imperialist’s own rhetoric to describe this pluralistic faith as “our American religion…. the faith that a man requires no master to take care of him, and that common people can work out their salvation well enough together if left free to try.”\(^{103}\) It was slavery’s affront to this faith that gave Shaw the confidence to withstand his own loneliness and doubts about the soldiers under his command to lead the 54th into battle.

Against Roosevelt, James argues that it is this less traditional and less popularly acclaimed, but perhaps for those reasons all the greater, kind of courage that sustains a democratic culture. Strenuousness is a political good because it draws citizens from their myopic concern with private interests and makes them willing to put them aside, and even sacrifice them, in service to the democratic system that sustains their individuality.

The nation blest above all nations is she in whom the civic genius of the people does the saving day by day, by acts without external picturesqueness; by speaking, writing, voting reasonably; by smiting corruption swiftly; by good temper between parties; by the people knowing true men when they see them, and preferring them as leaders to rabid partisans or empty quacks. Such nations need no wars to save them.\(^{104}\)

\(^{103}\) Ibid., 67, 66

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 73
It is only where the strenuousness is drawn out by the provisionality and uncertainty of things – their unfinished and unfinishable quality – that it evolves in James’s hands into a distinctively democratic form of openness.

The habits Shaw displays are examples of the sublime mix of respect and courage a pluralistic universe demands of us all. Shaw was a hero who sacrificed his life for the principles of equality as he understood them, but perhaps more important than his sacrifice for principle is the heroism of his individual integrity in breaking with convention in order to create new meaning and resist unreflective prejudice when it mattered most. The success of American democracy relies on both, but it is only through balancing of the former by the latter that any hope for democracy resides. What America needs, then, is not new laws nor monuments, but rather new habits of both courage and self-constraint. This courage is needed because “democracy is still upon its trial.” James concludes his oration by underscoring this fact to his audience. Democratic courage depends on the fragile combination of two habits carried over into public life, “habits so homely that they lend themselves to no rhetorical expression, yet habits more precious, perhaps, than any that the human race has gained.” These are the habits of respect for those with whom we disagree, and the habit of conviction in the pursuit of justice. It was by breaking with the first habit that “the slave States nearly wrecked our Nation” and by holding to the second that “the free States saved her life.”

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter argues that William James’s critique of docility provides a novel and attractive model of democratic social criticism. In contrast to Tocqueville and Roosevelt, James provides an account of democratic participation that does not lament the lack of commonality and

105 Ibid., 73, 74, 74, 74
mutuality in the empty space of a democratic regime, but rather embraces it as a positive resource of democratic individualism. Against the fantasy of the nation that drives the Tocquevillian thesis – the claim that the individuality of democratic culture is self destructive and requires that democracy be grounded in some prior unity or commonality – James turns to a minimalist and pluralist vision of democratic citizenship that emphasis the bicameral habits of conviction and constraint. Avoiding both the disciplinary powers of the state, and the inflammatory rhetoric of empire, James offers a model of democratic politics that is premised on imagination and inspiration. I provide a case study of this politicization of the imaginary with James’s example of the Robert Gould Shaw’s civic courage.

Pragmatism justifies such a pluralistic universe not by its indubitable proof but rather by “the consequences useful for life that flow from it.” But if a philosophy is only an expression of temperament, and of value for its consequences for life, it does not follow that pluralism ought to be valued as an uncontested grounds for democratic praxis. A pluralistic universe that contains real contingency rather than purpose and unity is one that may equally inspire terror as it does freedom. As James reports of a friend’s reaction to his pluralism, “the thought of my universe made him sick, like the sight of the horrible motion of a mass of maggots in their carrion bed.”

In Pragmatism, James sketches the history of philosophy as the struggle between the rationalist, optimistic, idealist monism of the tender minded and the empirical, pessimistic, deterministic pluralism of the tough-minded. The aim of pragmatism as a method is to overcome this dichotomy by satisfying the human “hankering for the good things on both sides of the

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106 James, Pragmatism, 606

107 James, "Dilemma," 177
From the tough-minded, pragmatism borrows its empiricism, confidence in science, and pluralism. But from the tender-minded, it satisfies our need for hope, religious faith, and a sense of order and belonging in the world. “A man’s philosophic attitude,” he writes, “is determined by the balance in him of these two cravings.” Philosophy must find some compromise between “an abstract monotony” and “a concrete heterogeneity.”

If James’s politics is to provide some response to Tocqueville and Roosevelt we must similarly ask if it too satisfies the human hankering for both sides of the line – unity and multiplicity, order and surprise. In the next chapter I look at whether or not James’s politics can satisfy these twin demands by looking at the criticisms of it leveled by Walter Lippmann. Contrasting James and Lippmann brings to the foreground an aesthetic conception of practical reason that mediates this hankering for the good things on both side of the line in terms of what James calls the practical and poetic moments of practical reason.

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108 James, *Pragmatism*, 491-492

109 James, "Sentiment," 66, 67
Chapter 5: Blind Faith?

“A man’s power is hooped in by a necessity, which, by many experiments, he touches on every side, until he learns its arc.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Fate’

5.1 Introduction

In The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism Michael Oakeshott distinguishes two understandings or “styles” of modern political thought. The politics of faith and the politics of skepticism, as he calls them, represent two fundamentally distinct understandings of government and the purpose of politics in the modern world. According to the first, politics is in the pursuit of perfection, where perfection means the ever-increasing growth in human freedom. Quite unlike religious faiths that stress finitude and sin, the politics of faith is a faith in human capabilities for progress. Oakeshott describes its account of perfectibility as a kind of “cosmic optimism” concerning the mundane salvation of humankind through the efforts of men. And the central agent of this perfection is government. According to the second, the politics of skepticism, humankind is not capable of any such perfection, or if it is, such perfection is not the concern of politics. Its skepticism is aimed towards the hubristic claims of human progress and the excessive uses of state power it legitimizes. Where the first often celebrates democratic community as the highest achievement of social life, the second advocates a “prudent diffidence” between citizens and is wary of the looming threat of the tyranny of the majority.¹

James’s political thought would seem to fall into the category of a politics of faith. The previous chapter explored James’s pluralism as a source to inspire civic habits of conviction and constraint. James advocated a kind of democratic openness that draws sustenance from the

contingency and chance of a pluralistic universe as an occasion for self-discovery and action. At the heart of this argument is a faith in human capabilities that is neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but rather melioristic. “Meliorism,” as James describes the attitude with which pragmatism approaches the world, “treats salvation 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.” For James this meliorist faith is both pragmatism’s guarantee and the ethical sensibility that ties it to democracy as a way of life. Democratic institutions and culture are the “actual conditions” James speaks of that guarantee the political conditions where individuals can each enact “one moment of the world’s salvation.” As John Dewey put this point more forcefully after James’s death, “Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature.”

From the perspective of the politics of skepticism, however, James’s meliorist faith seems naive if not politically disastrous. The politics of faith that aims at this-worldly perfection of individuals and society through political reform is an attractive modernist project. However, as Oakeshott warns, it threatens to slide over into a moral dogmatism that fails to fold doubt into its convictions, and at its extreme devolves into a moral despotism inhospitable to disagreement or dissent. In recent years, critics of pragmatism have made similar criticisms of James’s politics of faith. Robert Lacey argues that James’s epistemology, psychology, and metaphysics are all grounded in a conception of democracy that demands “a leap of faith that most intellectually

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honest critics are not willing to make.” It is the persistence of such an unreasonable faith in contemporary political theory that has lead to the theoretical incoherence and real-world failure of participatory democracy. Patrick Deneen similarly argues that James’s politics of faith are an instance of political theory’s confusion of men as they are with men as they might be. This confusion, Deneen wagers, can only function to promote a cycle of politically utopian idealism that overlooks the real capabilities of citizens and devolves into a pessimistic cynicism. Against James, both Deneen and Lacey each advocate a politics of skepticism with lowered expectations for democracy.

In this chapter I ask if James’s moral psychology and his account of political transformation are as problematic as these critics make it out to be. To investigate whether or not James’s politics are in fact a politics of faith I aim to bring the arguments of the last two chapters into sharp relief by contrasting them with the politics of skepticism of Walter Lippmann. This contrast between James and Lippmann is telling for two reasons. The first is that Lippmann was a student and admirer of James’s and whose early works shows traces of James’s influence. In a letter he wrote as he sat down to write his first book after his failed experience in municipal government in Schenectady, New York, Lippmann wrote, “The more I see of ‘machine politics’ the more certain I become that metaphysics is a very real and important pursuit. The epistemological problem, especially, is one that has tremendous consequences. James always felt that, and I’m just beginning to see concretely what he meant…” His youthful debt to James is

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worth studying here because Lippmann ultimately came to reject his pragmatism and political optimism after the gruesome experience of the First World War, along with Randolph Bourne and others of his generation. The politics of skepticism he outlined in his now infamous critiques of democracy, *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1927), is directed both at his own youthful thinking and, by extension, to James’s meliorist democratic faith.

The second reason for capping this study of William James with a comparative study of Walter Lippmann’s democratic theory is that Lippmann’s mature criticisms of democratic faith are grounded in a similar moral psychology of habit to that which underpins James’s meliorism. This is a point that is seldom recognized by scholars of American political thought. Indeed, Lacey claims that James’s account of habit is a distinctively “democratic psychology” based more on faith than evidence. But it is also the psychology on the basis of which Lippmann comes to the conclusion that “[w]e must abandon the notion that the people govern.” Where James saw the force of habit in conduct as a sign of mutability and potential, Lippmann takes the persistence of habit as a symptom of the fixity and limits of human nature. In bringing Lippmann and James into dialogue on the issue of moral psychology this chapter addresses the political stakes of habit. What are its limits? What sorts of tolerances and resistances does the plasticity of the brain, the body, and the self occasion? And how does the stuttering pace of the transformation of habits inform the edifying and educative claims of democratic theory?

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8 Lacey, *American Pragmatism and Democratic Faith* 18

By assembling Lippmann’s reminders concerning habit this chapter appraises the critique of James’s democratic faith so as to reject it. I argue that James’s politics do not fit Oakeshott’s model of the politics of faith, but neither is it an example of the politics of skepticism either. Drawing out the dangers and obstacles of the moral psychology of habit through Lippmann, I argue that James himself is aware of these limitations and folds them into his own political thought. Neither optimist nor pessimist, the meliorist is a trimmer. The trimmer, as Oakeshott concludes his study of faith and skepticism, is the thinker who maintains the ambiguity and complexity of politics without siding exclusively on the side of perfection or diffidence. Like the trimmer on a ship who constantly adjusts the sails to adapt to the ever changing wind and sea, James’s democratic individualism aims to balance the demands of both faith and skepticism to steer democracy’s ship safely between the excesses of each.

This chapter proceeds in four parts. In the first section I outline the basic problems of democratic self-government analyzed by Lippmann in the 1910’s. These include the loss of authority, the problem of scale, and the problem of complexity. I present Lippmann’s arguments so as to stress the shadow of James’s analysis of modern society and meliorist vision of human agency over his early writings. In the second section I turn to his critique of democratic meliorism and the “vague unworldliness” of democratic theory. I offer a reconstruction of Lippmann’s psychological rejection of the sovereign or omnicompetent citizen and his politics of skepticism that follows from it. In the third section I offer a comparative study of James, Dewey, and Lippmann’s psychology that stresses the centrality of habit. With these comparative lines drawn out I then go on to demonstrate why the Jamesian account of persuasion and transformation provides an answer to Lippmann’s skepticism about the possibility of psychological transformation. This final section proceeds through a close reading of James’s
most sustained account of practical reason in the 1899 essay he described as “the perception on which my whole individualistic philosophy is based”: ‘On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings’.  

5.2 Modernism and Meliorism in Lippmann’s Early Writings

William James’s laments concerning the bigness of Gilded Age America found a social psychological expression in the works his colleague and friend Graham Wallas. Wallas was a Fabian socialist lecturing on government at Harvard in the late 1900’s who took a special interest in the new psychology and its political implications. In his 1914 opus, The Great Society: A Psychological Analysis, Wallas argued that the feelings of being overwhelmed and powerless that so struck James were not just an idiosyncratic response of a genteel soul. Rather, they were the psychic costs of the structural transformation of modern society. “During the last hundred years,” Wallas wrote, 

the external conditions of civilized life have been transformed by a series of inventions which have abolished the old limits to the creation of mechanical force, the carriage of men and goods, and communication by written and spoken words. One effect of this transformation is a general change of social scale. Men find themselves working and thinking and feeling in relation to an environment, which, both in its world-wide extension and its intimate connection with all sides of human existence, is without precedent in the history of the world.  

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10 WJ to Elizabeth Glendower Evans, April 24 1899 cited in William James, Talks to Teachers on Psychology, vol. 12, Works of William James (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 244

11 Importantly, the psychology Wallas had in mind was the functionalist one of James’ Principles. In the preface to the 1907 edition of his Human Nature and Politics Wallas gives special thanks to James for inspiring him to “think psychologically” about the function of political institutions. And James himself wrote to Wallas in 1908 inviting him to focus his psychological lens on “the diseases of society and their prevention.” Cited in Sugwon Kang, "Graham Wallas and Liberal Democracy," Review of Politics 41 (1979): 548

Industrial societies have become so big, so complex, and so impersonal that they begin to escape the dictates of human will and wish. Individuals find themselves caught up in an “ever-extending and ever-tightening nexus” of dependence on forces and decisions far beyond their control.\textsuperscript{13} The costs of this sort of society, Wallas warned, are that both human happiness and social stability are only ever fragile achievements. What this situation calls for is the need to bring together advancements in science with those in planning, less individuals become prepared to surrender themselves to the blind drift of the Great Society.

Wallas’s account of the Great Society captured not just James’s political anxieties but those of the era. Can liberal democracy survive these transformations?\textsuperscript{14} And what role is left for citizenship in an increasingly technocratic and impersonal social world? Of the many American intellectuals moved by \textit{The Great Society}, none of them wrestled with the question so persistently and creatively as Walter Lippmann. Lippmann was only twenty-five when Wallas’s book was published, but had already risen to public notoriety for his critique of liberal intellectualism in \textit{A Preface to Politics} (1913). He graduated from the Harvard class of 1910 where he had studied both with Wallas and James. Wallas in fact dedicated his book with an open letter to the young Lippmann, inviting him to reconsider \textit{Preface}’s celebration of instinct over intellect. Lippmann took Wallas’s left-handed compliment to heart and spent the next twenty years wrestling with the question of how democracy might bring human intelligence to bear on what he called “the new scale of human life which machinery has thrust upon us.”\textsuperscript{15}

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\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 4
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\textsuperscript{14} Wallas’s emphatic answer ‘yes’ remained a voice in the wilderness in early 20\textsuperscript{th} Century Britain as other Fabians like the Webbs and Shaw gravitated eerily close to fascist nationalism. On Wallas’s liberalism and his break with the Fabians see Kang, "Graham Wallas and Liberal Democracy,"
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\textsuperscript{15} Walter Lippmann, \textit{Drift & Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest} (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 88
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In *Drift and Mastery* (1914), Lippmann interprets Wallas’s challenge with the remark “we have inherited freedom, and have to use it,”

The battle for us, in short, does not lie against crusted prejudice, but against the chaos of a new freedom… So if the younger critics are to meet the issues of their generation they must give their attention, not so much to the evils of authority, as to the weaknesses of democracy.\(^{16}\)

Like Weber, Lippmann argues that the modern world is defined by the experience of disenchantment.\(^{17}\) Science, democracy, and the “the artillery fire of the iconoclasts” have all laid waste to the authority of religion and tradition as reliable guides to value and action. While this represents a new kind of freedom, it also provokes a crisis of authority. The feelings of meaning, belonging, and purpose that absolute convictions provided are lost to this new world. “All of us are immigrants in the industrial world,” Lippmann writes, “and we have no authority to lean upon… The modern man is not yet settled in this world.”\(^{18}\) And left unsettled and unguided, modern citizens are unsure of what to do with their inherited democratic freedoms. If the people have been emancipated from the powers of priests and kings, they appear to have only been handed over to a new class of corporate capitalist elites like Carnegie and Rockefeller who promise a new form of servitude. The final result of this new freedom is that an inward looking commercialism competes with a backwards looking conservatism to make sense out of this new freedom, but both, Lippmann argues, turn away from the challenge of asking what forward-looking uses of freedom can replace the void left by disenchantment.

Lippmann presents democracy as an ambiguous achievement in this transition. Democracy was born as a fighting creed against the power of kings and oligarchs, but once

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 16, 17


\(^{18}\) Lippmann, *Drift*, 16, 118
Democratic government becomes the status quo of the modern world, what values and ends does it pursue? This is the basic question of *Drift*. Democratic freedoms by themselves are an empty achievement if not combined with intelligence and guided towards human happiness. “Democracy,” he writes, “… is a way of life, a use of freedom, and embrace of opportunity.” Without some “vision” to guide the use of these freedoms modern America is left caught between the drift towards capitalist oligarchy and the backwards looking conservative rhetoric of piety and community that turns a blind eye to the cosmopolitan transformations of the nation. As a result both routes can only promote a passive response to the forces and transformations sweeping over society. Darwinist, free-marketers, and socialists promote this drift with their naïve faith in the progress of history, while popular leaders like President Woodrow Wilson and William Jennings Bryan effectively stick their heads in the sand when they rail against trust corporations in defense of the small entrepreneur and the local community. Unless leaders continue to act like a Don Quixote running against windmills that do not exist, the “village” mentality of early democracy has to be abandoned. In its place, citizens need to cultivate what Lippmann calls a “frank worldliness” of the cosmopolitan who sees these transformations as technical challenges to be mastered.\(^{20}\)

Lippmann is, on the one hand, optimistic that this psychological transformation can take place, but also deeply aware of the obstacles it must face. The loss of tradition has resulted in a loss of orientation in making sense out of the world. The loss of “something outside ourselves” has thrown individuals into a crisis of self-reliance they are unprepared for.\(^{21}\) The disoriented and


\(^{20}\) Lippmann, *Drift*, 143

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 111
self-doubting “soul” of the modern individual has become “disorganized.” In a passage reminiscent of Descartes’ description of the drowning terror of doubt in his *Meditations*, Lippmann writes that modern disenchantment “threw us into the water, and now we have to swim.” This spiritual crisis of authority is compounded by the further problems of the scale and complexity of society. “[M]an as he is today is not big enough to master the modern world.” The complexity of this new chaos is “brain-splitting” and there is no longer any given authority to appeal to for guidance. The result is that individual citizens are left seemingly un-fit for self-government as they lack the perspective necessary to make sense out the entangled nature of modern society, and are susceptible to every form of corruption, manipulation, and influence. “What thwarts the growth of our civilization,” Lippmann writes in a passage that foreshadows his arguments in the 1920’s, “is… the faltering method, the distracted soul, and the murky vision of what we call grandiloquently the will of the people.”22 The fate of democracy hinges on the people’s ability to respond to the changes of the times.

How can modern citizens make use of the freedom that ails them? Lippmann’s answer, along with that of other Progressives like Croly and Dewey, is that the transformations of modern society not only destroy old authorities but bring with it new technologies of coordination and intelligence. In particular, labour unions, the women’s movement, the coordinating achievements of trust corporations, and an activist national government all provide means of rethinking participation and intelligence in an age of industrial democracy. To coordinate these diverse social forces as tools of mastery requires a “common discipline” to guide them.23 Lippmann’s name for this discipline is science. The power to measure, scrutinize,
and manipulate the world provided by scientific method is what is needed if intelligence might fill the void left by authority.

Importantly, the conception of science Lippmann proposes for this task is decidedly non-positivist. The positivist emphasis on method for method’s sake turns the lively task of science into something cold and rigid. On Lippmann’s account science is an expression of human curiosity and imagination. It is less a body of expert knowledge than “an attitude towards life” that stresses the place of experimentation in transforming nature into a site of human agency and growth. Like James said of pragmatism, the scientific method treats life “not as something given but as something to be shaped.” This shaping is itself an expression of desire and fantasy. Between the pedant’s disinterestedness and the romantic’s passing fancy, the true scientist is someone who “is inspired by a vision without being the victim of it.”

Lippmann situates this scientific attitude at the heart of his understanding of democracy as a way of life. Democratic politics is the “twin brother” of scientific thinking. Equating the two may seem like either a depoliticizing vision of democracy or an unscientific view of science. However, Lippmann is able to draw such a close connection between science and democracy because they represent two names for the same attitude of meliorism. In coding science and democracy as “visions” or an “attitude” that guide action, Lippmann translates James’s ethics of the will for the purposes of Progressive politics. In *Pragmatism*, James described meliorism as “an attitude in human affairs” that allows one to approach the world as something flowing and becoming where “we catch fact in the making.” For James, like for Lippmann, taking up this attitude provides a therapy of the will where the external world is no longer something imposing

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24 Ibid., 151, 151, 165

25 Ibid., 151

26 James, *Pragmatism*, 613
and alien (see Chapter 3). Meliorism humanizes the complex impersonality of the world by leaving it open to the efficacious force of value. When a meliorist acts on an ideal, James writes,

...these ideals are not bare abstract possibilities. They are grounded, they are live possibilities, for we are their live champions and pledge, and if the complementary conditions come and add themselves, our ideals will become actual things. What now are the complementary conditions? They are first such a mixture of things as will in the fullness of time give us a chance, a gap that we can spring into, and, finally, our act.²⁷

Where James saw meliorism as an individual faith, Lippmann seeks to reorient the political culture of democracy around this central value. Science provides the model of intersubjectivity needed to translate the uncoordinated social forces of labour, capital, consumers, and the state into a shared project of cooperative self-government.²⁸ Through discussion between diverse constituents, inquiry into common problems can generate the beginnings of common solutions. It is these coordinating and empowering features of scientific inquiry that Lippmann seeks to capture when he writes that science simply is “the culture under which people can live forward in the midst of complexity.”²⁹

*Drift and Mastery* ends with an almost ecstatic celebration of science as the handmaiden of dreams, visions, and the creative imagination. This is an edifying image of science and, clearly, also a very Jamesian one. And perhaps like much of James’s thinking, Lippmann’s book is marked by deep tensions and contradictions. He champions reason but also the powers of imagination and desire. His remarks on commercial capitalism and the women’s movement often

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²⁷ Ibid., 613. Italics original


²⁹ Lippmann, *Drift*, 151
move between praise and blame unsystematically.\textsuperscript{30} But the deepest tension resides between two seemingly different accounts of how science might inform politics. Alongside his Jamesian enthusiasm for science as the “culture” of democracy is an acknowledgment of the rise of expertise in the Great Society. He praises in particular “the new science of administration” embodied by corporate administrators as an instance of the frank-worldliness democracy demands. The scale of industry has made it impossible to rely on ordinary experience and common sense in administration. Instead, it calls for a class of professional administrators and graduate schools of business administration. Lippmann holds up this new class of “practical men” as his only concrete example of what contact with scientific method might look like.\textsuperscript{31} The tension between scientific expertise and scientific culture remains a background issue in \textit{Drift}. Ten years later in \textit{Public Opinion} it moves to the front and centre of Lippmann’s democratic theory.

\subsection*{5.3 Lippmann’s Machiavellian Moment}

The brutality and violence of WWI, combined with Lippmann’s own experience behind the scenes in Paris during the Versailles negotiations, disabused him of his youthful democratic optimism.\textsuperscript{32} With the publication of \textit{Public Opinion} in 1922, Lippmann refounds his political

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\item[\textsuperscript{31}] Lippmann, \textit{Drift}, 41, 43, 44
\item[\textsuperscript{32}] Benjamin Wright over exaggerates these discontinuities by distinguishing Lippmann’s body of writing into five incommensurable periods, while others like Patrick Diggins and Charles Wellborn introduce a retrospective continuity onto his work by reading the conservative foundationalism of his late books back into the early works. Compare Benjamin F. Wright, \textit{Five Public Philosophies of Walter Lippmann} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973) with Charles Wellborn, \textit{Twentieth Century Pilgrimage: Walter Lippmann and the Public Philosophy} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969) and John Patrick Diggins, \textit{The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). For a careful reading of Lippmann’s corpus that is attentive to both its continuities and discontinuities see D. Steven Blum, \textit{Walter Lippmann: Cosmopolitanism in the Century of Total War} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).
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reflections on what Oakeshott calls “a reading of human conduct” rather than a theory of human nature. In doing so, Lippmann explicitly identifies himself with the political skepticism of Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. These skeptical readers of human conduct, Lippmann writes, acknowledged the inevitability of conflict and were “bored” by talk of harmony and concord. In a striking passage Lippmann goes so far as to imagine himself as a new Machiavelli who dares to use “plain language in a field hitherto preempted by supernaturals.” The supernaturalism that Lippmann dares to secularize is not Christian moralism but rather the theological character of democratic theory. In unmasking democracy as a site of conflict and competition rather than perfection, Lippmann presents himself as reenacting Machiavelli and Hobbes’s liberation of politics from myth and its return to this-worldly concerns. Public Opinion draws on recent findings in social psychology as well as his own studies of the print media to wage a social-scientific attack on “democratic faith.” What he proposes in its stead is a skeptical and chastened view of politics that entrusts elites to rule so that “each of us may live free from the trampling of a bewildered herd.”

5.3.1 The Omnicompetent Citizen

In comparison with the frank worldliness of Drift, Public Opinion and its sequel, The Phantom Public, present democratic theory as promoting a “vague unworldliness.” Lippmann’s

33 Oakeshott, The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism, 32
34 Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), 143. John Patrick Diggins recognizes Lippmann’s admiration for Machiavelli but curiously judges it to be based on Machiavelli’s “pre-modern grasp” of the epistemic dilemma of public opinion. Diggins overlooks how Lippmann takes up Machiavelli as a model for the critique of political moralism and, perhaps even, as an example of a founder of new modes and orders. See John Patrick Diggins, "Republicanism and Progressivism," American Quarterly 37, no. 4 (1985)
35 Lippmann, Public Opinion, 170
36 Lippmann, Phantom Public, 145
37 Ibid., 160
target in these two popular polemics is the liberal theory of the public and its solution to the problems of complexity and scale. According to this theory, a free and uninhibited press collects and distributes information to an indefinite reading public. The circulation of news and stories through an effective mass media provides the information the citizen-reader needs in order to form reasoned opinions. For Kant, Bentham, and Mill and others, this vision of the press puts freedom at the core of public intelligence. “Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion,” as Mill expresses this liberal view of the priority of the free press, “is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action.”\(^{38}\) So long as the press is protected as free, the public will never lack information. Between the limited horizons of individuals and the omniscient knowledge of collective mind, the public opinion engendered by a free press assures the intelligence and perspective demanded by the challenges of popular government in mass society.

Lippmann faults this theory with three failings. It assumes an abstract and mythological view of the citizen, an idealized and unrealistic account of the how the press functions, and demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of social psychology. These three errors constitute the basic premises of what Lippmann calls “the mystical fallacy of democracy.”\(^{39}\) The mythic core of this vision of the public is its basic premise of “the ideal of the sovereign and ominicompetent individual.”\(^{40}\) This is the good citizen as something ready-made. The critical interest, rationality, and good judgment needed to process the tidal wave of information provided by the free press are not acquired virtues but rather a natural endowment. According to

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\(^{40}\) Lippmann, *Phantom Public*, 11
Lippmann traditional democratic theory is built on this idealized account of human nature where “[m]en took in their facts as they took in their breath.” Those who built a theory of popular government on the foundation of such a conception of “the people,” he argues in a trope clearly indebted to both Machiavelli and Hobbes, “have built on sand.”\(^{41}\) Indeed, it was this foundational assumption of human nature as something ready-made at the core of democratic theory that Lippmann attacked as early as Preface. Echoing Machiavelli’s injunction that in politics what matters is how people do live, not how they ought to live, Lippmann writes that “the one thing no democrat may assume is that the people are all dear good souls, fully competent for their task.”\(^{42}\)

It is this public made up of such imaginary citizens that Lippmann attacks as merely a “phantom” public: a ghost in the minds of philosophers.

The other two faults are descriptive. The various attempts from Rousseau to Croly transform people as they are into citizens as they might be either takes the people as already basically competent to their task, or presents full competency as a regulative ideal that they can make progress towards. This notion of perfectibility is a bad ideal that democratic theory can do without. “I think it is a bad ideal. I do not mean an undesirable ideal, bad only in the sense that it is bad for a fat man to try to be a ballet dancer.”\(^{43}\) It is a bad ideal because it distorts two seemingly unavoidable facts about the public. The first is the fact that the mass media is a non-ideal device for the distribution of information and opinion. Newspapers trade in distorted information due to the compression of complex issues into simple headlines, the use of coded


\(^{43}\) Lippmann, *Phantom Public*, 29
language, the limits of circulation, and the fast speed of the news cycle. But if the press is a poor source for information, it is an excellent device for manipulation and propaganda. Lippmann’s studies of propaganda and news coverage during the First World War convinced him just how sophisticated the press had become as an apparatus of mass persuasion.\(^{44}\) If the public needs the free press to inform its judgments, it also needs to be protected from its often malicious presentation of facts.

The second fact of the public that makes this omnicompetent citizen a bad ideal is human psychology itself. First of all, most people are simply uninterested in politics. They lack the time and commitment necessary for developing informed opinions on matters of common concern. Rather than critical and rational citizens, individuals are fickle and short-sighted. Furthermore, individuals lack the mental perspicacity to take the incredibly complicated nature of the political world into account. Human perception is selective and distorting in its representations of external reality. “In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world,” Lippmann argues, “we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.”\(^{45}\) Like the media apparatus that willfully distorts information to manufacture consent, the individual’s psyche reduces the infinite diversity of the world into a series of simple stereotypes that more often than not simply confirm her own convictions.

5.3.2 The Perfectionist Failure

The toxic combination of distorted information and selective perception seems to pull the rug out from under the democratic faith in public opinion as a guarantor of public rationality and


\(^{45}\) Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 44
good judgment. As Lippmann concludes in *Public Opinion*, the free press has failed to correct for “the primary defect of popular government;” namely,

…the failure of self-governing people to transcend their casual experience and their prejudice, by inventing, creating, and organizing a machinery of knowledge. It is because they are compelled to act without a reliable picture of the world that governments, schools, newspapers and churches make such small headway against the more obvious failings of democracy, against violent prejudice, apathy, preference for the curious trivial as against the dull important, and the hunger for sideshows and three legged calves.⁴⁶

If the people’s judgment is to remain the basis of legitimacy there requires a great ‘machinery of knowledge’ between them and irreducible complexity of the political world. It is for this reason that Lippmann concludes *Public Opinion* with a call for the method of the social sciences to become a political instrument of analysis for making intelligible unseen facts. Importantly, elected officials are no more prepared for this task than the public.⁴⁷ What is needed then is the establishment of permanent intelligence sections for each section of cabinet that provide reports and summaries for representatives. In the place of public opinion would emerge a professional public of experts and elected representatives who cope with the complex problems of a changing society. The people can carry on as outsiders left to support the “ins” when things are going well, and to oust them in favour of other representatives when things are going poorly.

This is Lippmann’s skeptical conclusion. But it is important to note that if the people have failed democratic theory, perfectionist democratic theory has failed the people too. Citizens are told that they are to bear an incredible responsibility of responding to the complex problems of a mass society, but yet are given no professional training or education towards this task.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 197

Instead of public spirit, they experience alienation from both the complexity of the modern political world they inhabit and from the demanding duties they feel shackled by and unfit to perform. Lippmann expresses the distance between the experience of the modern citizen and the ideals of civic virtue in a passage worth quoting at length,

The private citizen today has come to feel like a deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery off there, but cannot quite manage to keep awake. He knows he is somehow affected by what is going on. Rules and regulations continually, taxes annually, and wars occasionally remind him that he is being swept along by great drifts of circumstances.48

This is a double alienation that leaves citizens lost in a world of public affairs that are in no way identifiable as their own world. Lippmann expresses his sympathies for the ordinary citizen when confronted with the impossible tasks of democracy’s unattainable ideal. But more than just sympathy, Lippmann stresses a warning that these ideals themselves are harmful to democracy. Placing unrealistic expectations on citizens does not inspire. It unwittingly conspires with the alienation they experience in modern societies to make democracy less, not more, secure as a regime. Democratic myth becomes the prime source of democratic disillusionment at a time when fascism and totalitarianism were presented as popular alternatives.49 Rather than invigorating citizens, its saps them of their political energies. “The criteria which you then apply to government,” Lippmann writes of this desacralized perspective, “are whether it is producing a certain minimum of health, of decent housing, of material necessities, of education, of freedom, of pleasures, of beauty.”50 To demand a more exacting vision of the state as the public’s general

48 Lippmann, Phantom Public, 29

49 Ibid., 145-146

50 Lippmann, Public Opinion, 170-171
will risks sacrificing the liberal goods it provides while promoting a dangerous concentration of power.

5.4 Pictures in the Head and the World Outside

Lippmann’s criticisms of the politics of faith have been widely decried as elitist and “unremittingly pessimistic.”\(^{51}\) In contrast to the pragmatist account of human beings as active and rational creatures engaged in a learning relationship of experimentation with their environment, Lippmann is said to present human nature from “an elitist and pessimistic perspective,” as “passive and basically irrational,” suffering from “psychological incompetence,” with individuals “simply dogmatic and irrational” when it comes to deliberating about their beliefs.\(^ {52}\) In dividing the political world into technocratic insiders and bewildered outsiders, Lippmann has contributed to “the depoliticization of the public sphere” and given up on the possibility of democracy itself.\(^ {53}\) In this section I argue that these criticisms conflate two dimensions of Lippmann’s argument that ought to be distinguished. The first is his epistemic argument about the limits of representation which Dewey subjects to biting critique in \textit{The Public and Its Problems}. The second is Lippmann’s claim concerning the tenacity and necessity of habit. It is this second line of argument that draws him closer to the pragmatists and raises a series of problems for any politics of faith.

5.4.1 The Epistemic Argument

\(^{51}\) Alastair Hannay, \textit{On the Public} (New York: Routledge 2005), 48


\(^{53}\) Carey, ”Reconceiving 'Mass' and 'Media',' 58
In a review of the *Phantom Public* John Dewey acknowledges the affinity between Lippmann’s critique of the sovereign individual and the pragmatist critique of philosophical abstraction.\(^5^4\) This sort of attack on the abstractions of the social sciences and philosophy was at the heart of turn of the century historicizing criticisms in American philosophy. For instance, Charles Beard had made a similar critique of the omnicompetent citizen in his 1908 *Politics*, “Man as a political animal acting upon political, as distinguished from more vital and powerful motives, is the most unsustainable of all abstractions.”\(^5^5\) In the spirit of what Morton White called American political thought’s revolt against formalism Lippmann’s criticism can be read as part and parcel of a turn away from politics as a philosophical enterprise and towards an anthropological and psychological approach.\(^5^6\)

Lippmann’s central innovation in *Public Opinion* is the psychological argument that all experience is mediated through the mental fictions of stereotypes. Stereotypes provide a simplified and contracted experience of reality that, like a spot light, illuminates certain aspects of the world while excluding others to the darkness of its penumbra. Through the force of custom, education, family, culture, and sometimes even personal invention, individuals take on blinkered ways of seeing the world. Like the title of *Public Opinion*’s first chapter suggests, stereotypes provide “pictures in our heads” that provide a snapshot of the complex “world outside.” These snapshots present us with a “pseudo-environment” or “counterfeit reality” within which we act and live.\(^5^7\)

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\(^5^5\) Charles Austin Beard, *Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), 6

\(^5^6\) Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formalism*, revised ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957)

\(^5^7\) Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 8, 7
Lippmann is emphatic that it would be wrong to divide the world into those who act on stereotypes, and those who can do without them and act on a correct perception of reality. As Lippmann stresses in a letter to Malcolm Willey, stereotypes are “certain fixed habits of the cognition” that make experience possible at all.58 The task of political reform is not to relieve the public of its stereotypes but rather reform the quality of their stereotypes. “What matters,” he writes, “is the character of the stereotypes.” The quality or character Lippmann’s language of picturing suggests is the adequacy of representation between the pictures in our heads and the world outside. Do these “pictures”, “maps”, and “mental images” correspond to the facts in the world?59 The point of inserting experts between the public and the world is to provide a more exact representation of the buzzing, blooming confusion of industrial society.

Despite this shared skepticism of abstraction Dewey and other pragmatists have faulted Lippmann for remaining caught within the philosophical paradigm he sought to break free from. In particular, they have objected to the language of picturing and visuality as disclosing the persistent Cartesianism of Lippmann’s argument.60 On the Cartesian account of knowledge the world is picture-able by a knowing subject that stands outside of it. John Dewey’s rebuttal of Lippmann in Public and Its Problem takes the form of an attack on this Cartesian vision of knowledge. Whereas Lippmann’s worries concerning the cognitive limitations of public opinion presume a spectator theory of knowledge that begs the question of how public intelligence could be possible at all, Dewey proposes an account of intelligence as something transactional that is


59 Lippmann, Public Opinion, 29, 9, 7

shared in social practices through collective experiments of adjusting to an ever-changing environment. Knowledge, as Dewey rearticulates it, is an emergent property of the transaction between self and world, not the picture of an other-worldly self that mirrors the world. Against the metaphors of vision that drive Lippmann’s argument, Dewey suggests instead the appropriate experiential metaphor for the problem of the public is aural. “Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator.” Dewey argues that it is this trap of Cartesian thinking that lures Lippmann towards the seemingly undemocratic conclusions that the only alternative to the economic oligarchy he rails against in *Drift* is the “intellectual aristocracy” of the expert class.  

5.4.2 The Psychological Argument

Dewey rejects the Cartesian premises of Lippmann’s epistemology but at the same time acknowledges the force of his psychological line of criticism. Stereotypes, as we’ve seen, are fixed habits of cognition. Like James, Dewey is keenly aware of how primordial habits are in the constitution of the mind. “ Habit,” he writes, “is the mainspring of human action.” This poses a problem, however, for the transformative and perfectionist ambitions of democratic deliberation. If our habits are flexible and responsive, the public can pursue collective forms of inquiry to shared problems. But where habits are rigid and mechanical, the reflective and open-minded virtues necessary for effective inquiry cannot get off the ground. Habits are acquired through repeated routines and practices. The idea that we could be argued out of them strikes Dewey as

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62 Ibid., 334
the equivalent of “magic.”

If collective inquiry is meliorist and progressive, how can such habits be corrected?

In an acknowledgement of this tension between men as they are and men as they might be, Dewey cites an important passage from the ‘Habit’ chapter of James’s *Principles of Psychology*. Recall from earlier that the chapter on ‘Habit’ is structured in terms of a broad ontology that begins with the role of habit in the plasticity of matter, moves on to the constitution of the brain, then society, and then to the ethical self. This passage occurs in the penultimate point in this narrative. James writes,

Habit is thus 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 keeps the fisherman and the deck-hand at sea through the winter; it holds the miner in his darkness, and nails the countryman to his log-cabin and his lonely farm through all the months of snow; it protects us from invasion by the natives of the desert and the frozen zone. It dooms us all to fight the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choices, 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 different social strata from mixing. Already at the age of twenty-five you see the professional mannerism settling down on the young commercial traveller, on the young doctor, on the young minister, on the young counsellor-at-law. You see the little lines of cleavage running through the character, the tricks of thought, the prejudices of the ‘shop’, in a word, from which the man can by-and-by no more

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63 John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, in *The Middle Works: 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 14: 1922 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 18, 22. Dewey puts this point forcefully: “It would have taken a new race of human beings to escape, in the use made of political forms, from the influence of deeply ingrained habits, of old institutions and customary social status, with their inwrought limitation of expectation, desire, and demand. And such a race, unless of disembodied angelic constitution, would simply have taken up the task where human beings assumed it upon emergence from the conditions of anthropoid apes. In spite of sudden and catastrophic revolutions, the essential continuity of history is doubly guaranteed.” Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 336

64 Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 335
escape than his coat-sleeve can suddenly fall into a new set of folds. On the whole, it is best he should not escape. 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.\textsuperscript{65}

A flywheel is an engine part that conserves inertia and rotational energy. Habits sustain social norms and practices across the separateness of individuals and beyond the finitude of succeeding generations. It is what binds individuals as a whole but at the same time neatly demarks differences of status, privilege, and power. As James says of the habits of the shop, habits are the logic of this social order imprinted right down into the bodies and movements of individuals. It is the glue that holds together social plurality into an organized and manageable whole. That this is the case is something “well for the world.”

Why is this “well for the world”? James’s answer (Chapter 3) is the function of habit in the constitution of the will. Why do Dewey and Lippmann, we might ask, also believe that the fixity of cognitive habits is well for the world?\textsuperscript{66} Lippmann offers two reasons for the importance of stereotypes. The first is the role of habit in the economy of action. The second is the role of habit in the feeling of ontological security.\textsuperscript{67} Like Drift’s culture of science that enables individuals to live forward in the midst of complexity, the stereotype plays an analogous role of satisfying the psychological need for perspective in a society that is less a fixed organic whole than it is a fluctuating and fractured set of relations between individuals, things, and events.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{65} William James,\textit{ The Principles of Psychology}, vol. I (New York: Dover, 1950), 121

\textsuperscript{66} Dewey’s complete to answer to this question is articulated in his social psychological inquiry \textit{Human Nature and Conduct}. Important to note that this text was written only three years before \textit{Public} and informs the latter’s major arguments.

\textsuperscript{67} I borrow this way of describing the stereotypes function from Rogers, "Democracy, Elites, and Power: John Dewey Reconsidered,"

\textsuperscript{68} Lippmann, \textit{Phantom Public}, 73-81, 152-162
Like habit, stereotypes are psychological buffers that permit skillful interaction with the world. There are two related dimensions of this buffering. The first is skillful action enabled by the economizing of effort. Rather than having to think each particular anew, the stereotype provides a shortcut for interpreting the world in terms of groups and types. This economizing of effort is a basic prerequisite for the felicity of everyday actions. Like James examples of repeating the alphabet or one’s prayers without explicit attention, the stereotype establishes a basic interactive competence that frees up cognitive energies for higher level purposes. Secondly, the stereotype buffers by protecting the self from the overwhelming reasons, desires, and suggestions for pursuing one course of action over another. For any particular course of action to be decided on resolutely, other possibilities have to be decidedly excluded. “For these blind spots,” Lippmann writes, “keep away distracting images, which with their attendant emotions, might cause hesitation and infirmity of purpose.” In both cases, habits function as the guarantor of will.

What these buffering properties suggest is that the stereotype is more than a gel or lens through which an unencumbered self receives a distorted picture of the world. The self only needs these buffers because she is always constitutively involved in an adaptive relationship with the world’s contingencies. As James said of experience, stereotypes come double-barreled: they are both a perception of certain facts of the world and at the same time a relational and affective involvement with those facts. They are “loaded with preference, suffused with affection or

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69 Lippmann, Public Opinion, 48-50

70 James, Principles I, 116-118

71 Lippmann, Public Opinion, 63

dislike, attached to fears, lusts, strong wishes, pride, hope.” Stereotypes are less the rose-coloured glasses of the spectator than a loose assemblage of habits, desires, expectations, hopes, and worries that are in a relationship of constant testing with a recalcitrant world. Despite the persistence of visual metaphors that keep crowding out Lippmann’s argument, it is this holistic account of complex adjustment that drives Lippmann’s psychology.

The second dimension of habit is its ontological function. Its projections of anticipation and expectations constitute a network of meanings “where we feel at home.” Lippmann raises two claims here. The first is the psychological comfort we find in expecting the future to be like the past. Like Peirce said of belief, habitual expectation that the future will be like the past protects us from the anxiety of doubt. But Lippmann is making a larger claim than Peirce’s remark that we seek to avoid the irritation of doubt. The security and comfort of a stereotype is grounded not only in its local assurance of consistency, but in what I called in the last chapter its function of ontological projection. At the core of every stereotype is a form of value projection that Lippmann calls a “philosophy of life.” He explains, “At the heart of every moral code there is a picture of human nature, a map of the universe, and a version of history.” Through ontological projection we ground some sense of self-understanding and our place in the cosmos which underpins our “self-respect.” Accordingly, this loose assemblage of desires, habits, and expectations is what allows us to experience some sort of stability in the whirl of modern societies. It is solely through this complex projection of meanings on to the world and our place in it that people can persist in a modern condition where, as Lippmann put this point in Drift, the rock of ages has been blasted.

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73 Lippmann, Public Opinion, 65
74 Ibid., 52, 49, 67
These two psychological features of the stereotype offer two obstacles to the politics of faith. The first, its buffering function, presents a problem of prejudice and pre-judgment that individuals always bring to their collective decisions. This problem is then confounded by the deep psychic attachment to our stereotypes as sources of ontological security. Lippmann argues that the experience of self-doubt where “the stereotype is shattered” is nothing short of an existential crisis. When this breakdown occurs we experience a feeling Lippmann describes as “an attack on the foundation of our universe.” Because stereotypes are so deeply part of our experience of feeling at home in the world, we have an investment in forgetting or dismissing such contradictions. Where the world clashes with our values and expectations, the average person “discredits the witness, finds a flaw somewhere, and manages to forget it.”

That is, we close ourselves off from the claims of others and retreat into our own prejudices.

Lippmann’s stereotype psychology might profitably be read as drawing out the political implications of James’s 1879 ‘The Sentiment of Rationality’. There, James similarly echoes Peirce’s argument that we are psychologically disposed to seek peace and rest and avoid distress and anxiety. This psychological need for “a feeling of the sufficiency of the present moment” drives the philosophical ambition for simplicity and parsimony in on conceptions of the world. A perspective that reduces the world to a series of types and categories is one that satisfies this “craving for rationality.” Accordingly, James argues we are drawn to theories and ways of seeing the world that help us “feel at home” in the world. James points to both findings in psychology and biology to suggest that, as a species, we must rely on how custom “acquaints us

75 Ibid., 61, 62, 52, 54
with all the relations of a thing, it teaches us to pass fluently from that one thing to others, and
pro tanto tinges it with the rational character."\(^{76}\)

But this psychological need for order and predictability that custom and stereotype satisfy
is only one passion of the soul that James puts forward in that essay. We are similarly subject to
the conflicting “passion for distinguishing” – with knowing the world in its particularity and
specificity. This second passion leaves us disappointed with the explanations and stereotypes that
reduce the variability of experience. Instead, it drives us “to the process of seeing an other
besides every item of its experience.” That is, we seek wonder and newness and experience that
our received customs and explanations close out. These two cravings, as James describes them,
are mutually antithetical. And yet, all philosophies must strike some balance of the two.
Lippmann’s skepticism places its sole emphasis on the first of these cravings: the craving for
order and predictability as the dominant passion of the soul, and so the citizen. James, by
contrast, seems often to stress the draw of the second drive to experiment, novelty, and
“ontological wonder” as he calls it. James’s point, however, is that there must be some balancing
of these two demands. His psychology of habit at once points in the direction of custom and
closure in the way Lippmann suggests, while also aiming beyond it in search of the unfamiliar
and unknown. How can a consideration of this craving to “escape into the teeming and dramatic
richness of the concrete world” loosen the fixed hold our habits seem to have on us?\(^{77}\)

5.5 Blindness and Conversation

\(^{76}\) William James, “The Sentiment of Rationality," in The Will to Believe (New York: Dover, 1956), 70, 78, 77

\(^{77}\) Ibid., 66, 71, 69
Thus far in the chapter, I have looked at three elements of Lippmann’s critique of political perfectionism that Michael Oakeshott dubs the politics of faith. Beginning from his early progressive writings on democracy and modernity I outlined Lippmann’s debt to James’s meliorism in his analysis of the problems of authority, complexity, and scale that plague modern industrial democracies. Subsequently I turned to Lippmann’s writings from the 1920’s to reconstruct his turn to political skepticism and implicit critique of Jamesian meliorism. What precisely Lippmann objects to is how the fictions and myths of democratic theory divert both citizens and their representatives from an adequate response to the problems of modern democracy and, more problematically, unwittingly promote an apathetic cynicism in the face of these challenges. In the third section I then looked more deeply at the political psychological arguments that drive Lippmann’s rejection of democratic theory. Here we saw that Lippmann’s rejection of a theory of human nature in favour of a reading of human conduct results in some very similar conclusions to those prompted by James’s psychology of habit. Importantly, Lippmann’s account stresses the problem of fixity and stasis that James’s account of habit introduces into political theory and the challenges it raises for a politics of faith that emphasizes transformation and perfectionism. At the end of this section I insinuated that James’s account of our psychic cravings holds out an element that is missing in Lippmann’s account of practical reason. With this stage setting done, I now turn to a fuller account of James’s psychology to demonstrate how the introduction of this second element offers a more complete and dynamic account of habit’s role in political persuasion and transformation than Lippmann’s arguments presume. I propose that this argument is at the core of James’s late essay on the moral problem of human blindness.
James’s “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” is a curious piece. It is made up almost entirely of anecdotes and long quotations from Romantic and Transcendentalist poets, and makes no specific mention of politics or current events. At its core is a celebration of the inscrutability of value and the poetic transcendence facilitated by a “mystic sense of hidden meaning” in experience. And yet, James assures us that this lecture “is more than the mere piece of sentimentalism which it may seem to some readers.” More than sentimentalism indeed. James considered this piece the central ballast of the political ambitions of his Talks to Teachers. Published in 1899 at the height of James’s political involvement in the Philippines tangle, James understood the essays in that volume as an explicit critique of the intolerance and hubris of the American occupation. He describes it as a contribution to a pluralist philosophy with the practical aims of celebrating America’s seemingly forgotten democratic respect for individuality. To rekindle the embers of this national tradition of democratic respect “the pretensions of our nation to inflict its own inner ideals and institutions vi et armis upon Orientals should meet with a resistance as obstinate as so far as it has been gallant and spirited.”  

James offers his blindness essay as a contribution to this resistance.

James opens the essay with the claim that moral and aesthetic judgments are equally cognitive and affective. In judging something to be important and worthwhile we are both raising a cognitive claim to validity (that X is worthy of value) and expressing an emotional statement (that I feel X to be worthy of value). Without feelings of like and dislike, no claim could persuade us that it could be of value. We have to come to feel X to be of value if we are to judge it so. What James draws from this observation is the claim that because human judgment is

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grounded in what can be felt, we have no access to judgments of value and happiness that we ourselves do not or cannot experience. We have no grounds to presume that we can judge “in an absolute way” on the values of other persons lives and ideals.\textsuperscript{79} Judgments of value can only extend as far as our circle of sympathy can reach in appreciating the senses of value held by others.

James calls this subjective limitation of judgment blindness. It is a limitation “with which we are all afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves.” Most precisely, this is a blindness that arises from the fact that we can only be spectators to the lives of others, and share no part in their inner lives and feelings. As observers of actions from the outside, we often miss “the whole inward significance of the situation” when we claim to judge the value of the lifestyles of others. James gives an example of the experience of his own blindness during a trip to North Carolina. James was horrified by the squalor, ugliness, and disorder of the log cabin homesteads of the poor residents he witnessed there. “The forest had been destroyed; and what had ‘improved’ it out of existence was hideous, a sort of ulcer, without a single element of the artificial grace to make up for the loss of Nature’s beauty… No modern person ought to be willing to live a day in such a state of rudimentariness and denudation.” When he asked his driver what sort of people lived like this, James was shocked to hear him praise these ugly scars across the landscape as the fruits of hard work and sources of proud accomplishment. James realized that “the clearing, which to me was a mere ugly picture on the retina, was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sang a very paean of duty,

\textsuperscript{79} James, "Blindness," 841
struggle, and success.\textsuperscript{80} His judgment of the value of this way of life was distorted by a
certainty to the inner meaning and value his driver found here.

James’s anecdote presents two dimensions of blindness.\textsuperscript{81} The first is the limited,
perspectival, and value-laden nature of human experience. Our perceptions of the world are
already shaped through the values and ideas we bring to them. Seeing the world in one particular
way occludes seeing it from another’s perspective at the same time. That is, James and the driver
see the same phenomenon from two different perspectives, each exclusive of the perspective of
the other. We can call this first dimension world-blindness. It is the same perspectival blindness
Lippmann analyses as the stereotype. The second dimension is the blindness that arises when we
close our eyes to the fact of world-blindness. This is what we might call self-blindness, a
forgetful blindness towards the fact that our judgments and perceptions of things are just one
amongst others. Where the first form of blindness is an ineliminable aspect of experience as
such, the second is revisable and invites ethical and political reflection on how to cope with the
fact of world-blindness.

This account of judgment seems at face value to be radically subjective. If we can only
judge as far as we can privately feel something, then can we really judge anything at all? James’s
point here is to say that while no categorical judgments are possible, the cognitive dimensions of
judgment can be strengthened in so far as we can correct for the limited scope of our sympathies.
James’s discussion with the driver opens his eyes to how there may be value to be found here,
and invites him to judge the cabins again from the perspective of an enlarged mentality that has

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 841, 843, 842-3, 843

\textsuperscript{81} I take these two to be the most important dimensions of blindness in James’s essay. John Lachs argues that there
are in fact ten forms of blindness in James’ text, including the inability to share private feelings, blindness to who
others are, ignorance, blindness to novelty and beauty, blindness to the ordinary, the blindness of spectators, and
profited from conversation with the driver. His judgment becomes less partial as a result, and more sensitively attuned to the facts of the world. That is, between solipsism and dogmatism, James’s account of blindness points to the intersubjective character of judgment as something that is fallible and open-ended, but not merely fictional as a result.

James’s essay situates this dynamic account of judgment within a broadly Romantic critique of modern society. This criticism is articulated through a contrast of two standpoints, the practical and the poetic. World-blindness is the ordinary state of what James calls the practical standpoint. As “practical beings” we act in a teleological, task-oriented fashion. The fast, busy, and often repetitive nature of work and leisure in modern life requires an economizing attention and energy towards the completion of specific tasks. That is to say, the plurality of values and possible courses of action must be bracketed if any one value or action is to be embraced. In chapter 2 we saw this need for resolution of the will as the origin of habit in action. Here, James expands this theme to say that the felicity of practical action requires insensitivity towards other possibilities. The limited penumbra of our world-blindness is a feature of this teleological nature of action. “Our deadness towards all but one particular kind of joy would thus be the price we inevitably have to pay for being practical creatures.”

However, while the practical standpoint is the ordinary one, it is not the only standpoint. In contrast to this busy, work-oriented standpoint James points to a non-teleological standpoint of poetic experience. This is the standpoint of mystics, artists, and tramps that can see the world in its corrected fullness without the constraints of task-oriented perception. Through poetry, art, and a Romantic embrace of the natural world the “hard externality” of the practical standpoint can give way to this experience of “the vast world of inner life beyond us” that James calls an

82 James, "Blindness," 841, 847
“impersonal world of worths.” When we are caught up in the frenzy of this aesthetic world, we are released from the daily concerns of efficiency and necessity and elevated up into an experience of nature where “our self is riven.”

Precisely in order to evoke this kind of poetic experience, James’s essay consists of a collection of long quotations from Wordsworth, Shelly, Emerson, Whitman and Tolstoi. James pleads with his young audience (it was originally published in a collection titled *Talks to Students*) to believe that such an experience is possible, and that there is value in the world beyond America’s competitive and materialist ethos. James’s essay frequently idealizes this distinction, drawing intellect and practicality down on the side of drudgery and servitude, and feeling and poetry on that of experience and freedom. But in its more subtle moments, these two standpoints are presented as two interdependent moments in action, whereby the habits of ancestral blindness are upset and disturbed, and refigured as new ways of seeing the world.

Rather than strict alternatives, the poetic standpoint represents a moment of disarticulation within the practical standpoint. James describes these types of extraordinary moments as coming over us, which come over us “suddenly” and overtakes us “in mysteriously unexpected ways.” The affective intensity of the poetic disfigures our current ways of seeing the world, setting the narrow interests of the old self to “fly to pieces.” But this moment of disarticulation is only of value in so far as it allows us to rearticulate the pieces of the self anew. When these experiences strike us, James writes, “a new center and a new perspective must be found.” The world-blindness of our ordinary ways of seeing the world are not put aside for this higher poetic vision, but rather unsettled, allowing us to see different things and other sources of

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83 Ibid., 847, 851, 847
84 Ibid., 848, 855, 847, 847
value that had been hidden from us before. These moments allow us to rearticulate our practical bearings, and remind us that our current visions of value are neither absolute nor unchanging.

James’s essay is a warning against the dangers of self-blindness. If we are to be heedful in our judgments, and tolerant of seemingly different ways of seeing the world and finding value in it, we have to cultivate an awareness of how our own visions are partial and distort as much as they illuminate the world. James posits poetic experience as an impulse or affect that can open us up to these new ways of seeing. But if our practical bearings show us the world through “the jaded unquickened eye” how can these moments of disarticulation affect us? Or, to put this in the terms of the last section, if our stereotypes are rigid and fixed how do we break and remake these habits of world judgment? James’s answer is that we must cultivate “responsive sensibilities” towards what is unexpected and novel in the world if we ever hope to escape the misunderstanding of self-blindness. Value is not chosen so much as found in the world, and it requires a certain “capacity of the soul” to let oneself open up to the normative claims the world makes upon us. These responsive sensibilities consist of listening, watchfulness, and suspense as ways of exposing ourselves to the unexpected claims and surprise of an open future, as opposed to the practical anticipation and expectation that assumes that the future will be just like the past. 85

This responsive dynamic of dis- and reconfiguration seems to be precisely the kind of conception of practical reason Lippmann suggests is not possible for us. The fixity of habit means we are stuck with our stereotypes and therefore we ought to resign ourselves to the political control of our betters. This said, there exist passages in Public Opinion where even Lippmann himself comes up against the limits of this sort of argument. He acknowledges “a

85 Ibid., 854, 856, 856, 859
prospect for radical improvement” in the capabilities and concerns of ordinary citizens. The influence of experts on public discourse could indeed have the function of “re-education” whereby “the enormous censoring stereotyping, and dramatizing apparatus can be liquidated.” Where this is the case stereotypes would not so much be alleviated as our self-blindness towards them might be. When stereotypes are reflective in this way, individuals “hold them lightly” and “modify them gladly.”86 He goes on:

It is only when we are in the habit of recognizing our opinions as partial experience seen through our stereotypes that we become truly tolerant of an opponent. Without that habit, we believe in the absolutism of our own vision, and consequently in the treacherous character of all opposition.87 Lippmann hints at this possibility but has no faith that such a capacity might be possible for more than the few.88 The many are inevitably trapped within their stereotypes and their self-blindness. In a telling image that opens on the first page of Public Opinion Lippmann presents ordinary citizens as captives in Plato’s cave trapped within a world of shadows but ignorant that there world is merely that – shadows. It is left to the virtuous few to dare to journey up towards the sun and acquire the education for politics. Plato called these brave few philosopher kings. Lippmann calls them experts.

What defines the expert for Lippmann is not solely their specialist knowledge but more importantly their virtu of flexibility. This sort of person is the kind who can persist in the midst of complexity. While Lippmann does not explicitly invoke it, his exemplar for this kind of person seems to be less the Platonic philosopher king than the man Graham Wallas refers to “a

86 Lippmann, Public Opinion, 137, 218-219, 50
87 Ibid., 69. The sorts of remarks also scattered throughout Phantom, a text Alan Ryan describes as even “more nihilistic” than its precursor. See Lippmann, Phantom Public, 124
88 One of the few commentators to acknowledge this tension is Robert Westbrook, John Dewey and American Democracy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 296
live wire” in *The Great Society*. A live wire is a new sort of man made possible by modern society. His ability to act willfully distinguishes him from the rote routines of the typists and secretaries and foremen he scorns. “He is set to form a habit of non-habituation, of picking up and acting on his mental suggestions at the point where they first appear as an uncomfortable and perhaps almost subconscious interference with an easy train of thought.”

This modern man who is “in the habit of overriding habit” is a rarity who alone is in a position to respond to the modern world.

James too acknowledges the seeming permanence of blindness. “We have unquestionably a great cloud-bank of ancestral blindness weighing down on us, only transiently riven here and there by fitful revelations of the truth.” But unlike Lippmann, James claims there are no great seers or experts who manage to escape from this condition. The point of James’s essay is to stress that any claim to stand outside the circle of the blind is a mistaken self-assessment that is unfortunately all too common. The familiar claim to have an insight into the values and concerns that should guide the lives of others is “the root of most human injustices and cruelties, and the trait in human character most likely to make the angels weep.” The political lesson is not to educate the fine few to escape this human condition, but rather to teach us how to live within this blindness and to find means of cooperation and exchange with each other precisely where there are no philosopher kings to guide us. He concludes this essay, “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 in which he stands.”

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89 Wallas, *The Great Society*, 87

One way to interpret this conclusion is in the terms of the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty. In our public or practical lives we must reserve judgments about the lives of others, while in our private lives poetry and art gives us license for artistic self-creation.\textsuperscript{91} This conclusion, however, is not the one that James puts forward. For James, the practical and the poetic are not different spheres, one which is public and fixed and the other private and fluid. They are rather two moments or standpoints that we take up in action. If we interpret the poetic more broadly than James’s examples of Tolstoi and Whitman suggest, we can see that what the acknowledgment of blindness invites is neither political withdrawal nor the need for an expert class, but instead the invitation for carefulness in conversation. It is conversation rather than art that James gives as the example of how he himself came to challenge his own blindness when he opened himself up to the remarks of his driver. In conversation the practical and the poetic do not clash in pursuit of truth or rightness. Rather, conversation is a model for the experiences that stir us from who we are to who we might be without outlining any theory or fixed road to get there.\textsuperscript{92} The Cartesian leanings of Lippmann’s political theory as science blind him to the all too ordinary experience of exchange where practical concerns and poetic reflections find a home alongside and in interaction with scientific exactness. Rather than trying to order these different forms of utterance they interpenetrate and interrupt each other to allow places of discovery and adventures rather than proof and refutation.


\textsuperscript{92} Compare with Oakeshott’s description of conversation, “In conversation the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate; there is no ‘truth’ to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought. They are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or to refute one another, and therefore the cogency of their utterances does not depend on their all speaking in the same idiom; they may differ without disagreeing… There is no symposiarch or arbiter, not even a doorkeeper to examine credentials. Every entrant is taken at its face-value and everything is permitted which can get itself accepted into the flow of speculation… Properly speaking, it is impossible in the absence of a diversity of voices: in its different universes of discourse meet, acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to one another.” Michael Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," in \textit{Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays}, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 490
That this sort of conversation might be possible, one marked by attentiveness, listening, and openness towards the unexpected, is the faith on which James’s political thought rests. This faith, however, is not a faith that presumes the ever growing perfection of citizens. The interplay of the practical and poetic, and the space for reflection and learning that opens up between them, is James’s attempt to turn us away from theoretical puzzles that concern Lippmann’s psychology (How the mind can know the world? How we can reach the ideal from the real?) and back to the practical concern of how we might make sense out of ourselves and do less violence and injustice to others in the process. The ordinary practices James returns us to is the experience of wonder and confusion that is always implicit within the diversity of voices of conversation. In my conversation with myself and in my conversations with others the poetic is not strictly speaking the concern of art or aesthetics. It is instead that surprise, that question, that self-doubt which interrupts the habitual flow of practical action and invites a movement where the self is riven. Faith, as James understands it, is a “belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible.” There is no logical requirement that conversation will succeed in this manner. But where it does succeed to stir us, it has done so because people found “the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance.”^93

5.6 Conclusion

After outlining the attractions and dangers of both the politics of faith and the politics of skepticism Oakeshott announces, “Our task is to find some means of being at home in the complexity we have inherited, and cannot now avoid, without indulging ourselves in the false

^93 James, "Sentiment," 90
hope of discovering a market in which we can exchange it for simplicity.”

This task demands a caution towards the extremes of both faith and skepticism and the search for a moderate approach to politics that is wary of both the idealization of men as they might be or the despair towards men as they are. To steer this middle path he offers up the image of the trimmer as one who uses his weight to turn against the current and keep the ship on a steady path. The trimmer poses knowledge of the extremes and a capacity for judgment of the events that fall in between them. He maintains the ship straight through preserving an acknowledgement of the complexity of politics and the different contributions made by different groups in politics.

From his perspective in the middle of the twentieth century, Oakeshott concluded that the trimmer ought to pull in a skeptical direction to moderate the excessive faith of Marxism and other ideologies. Writing at the turn of the 20th century, James pulls towards faith. James’s seeks to temper the skepticism of elite politics in a number of ways, but still manages to be wary of the excesses of the politics of faith. He does this in four ways.

The first is his limited perspective on perfectionism. Blindness is a permanent part of the human condition. There is no escaping it. Our struggle with blindness is a struggle with ourselves that gives meaning to existence. We can never achieve a perspective on politics that exceeds the need for cooperation, compromise, and coordination with others.

The second is the non-perfectionist quality of his perfectionism. Perfectionists, as Oakeshott describes them, recognize “a single road.” He explains, “no matter how slowly you are prepared to move along it or how great the harvest you expect to gather as you go, you are a perfectionist, not because you know in detail what is at the end, but because you have excluded

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94 Oakeshott, The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism, 120
every other road and are content with the certainty that perfection lies where it leads."95 That is, perfectionism posits a single teleological image of what perfection might be. James rejects this.

In our blindness we can never posit one single road as the only true and right one. It requires that we abandon the presumption “to regulated the vast field.”96 Like perfectionists, James is concerned with the well being our souls, and like perfectionists James posits a growing transformation from who we are today to who shall be tomorrow, but this growth is as far as the argument can go.

Thirdly, James’s conception of faith is grounded, like skepticism, in an account of human conduct rather than a theory of human nature. James’s meliorism does not spring from transcendental reflection but rather in hands-on laboratory work of a physiological psychologist as well as the scholarly erudition in politics, literature, and the arts.

And finally, as a cumulative consequence of all this, James’s perfectionism has no special role for the state. Government is an instrumental good for the order it provides, not more the moral goals it aims towards. The conversation of the poetic and the practical is an art that can be solicited, inspired, and even provoked but never legislated, ordered, or commanded.

Oakeshott draws a connection between the ambivalence of these two styles of political activity and the ambiguity of political language. Much of the political argumentation that goes on between these two styles of politics amounts to little more than speaking at cross-purposes as they use the same words to different purposes. In acknowledging the complexity of politics and the divided nature of our political traditions, Oakeshott concludes, we reclaim the ambiguity of language as a benefit rather than a cost. And we do this here precisely with habit. Rather than

95 Ibid., 26
96 James, “Blindness,” 860
dull custom or lively action, habit is both and neither. Habit is the hardening and stratifying of practices, but it is also through habituation that the future becomes open to us as a place for new habits and new beginning. As creatures of habit we are always caught in a constitutive tension between being and becoming, between our dull routines of past repetition and the possibility of new habits and new horizons. To embrace this ambiguity in language is to inject some caution into our desires for sovereign freedom from habit and history. It is, in the end to embrace who – or what – we are.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

“Valor consists in the power of self-recovery”
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Circles’

6.1 The Road So Far

The central ambition of this dissertation has been to provide a study of philosophical and political confidence and agency. The central conceptual innovation of this project has been to focus on habit and its role in both the acquiescence and empowerment of democratic individualism. To draw out this novel understanding of habit and its political implications I have offered a study of the interrelationship of habit and politics in the psychological and philosophical writings of William James. James is thought to have little to say about politics. What he is remembered for is not his political thought but rather his profound reckonings with philosophical questions of epistemology and religion. I have challenged this narrow reading of James by drawing attention to the connections between his psychological, metaphysical, and political writings as different moments in a single project of willful empowerment. At the core of this vision of empowerment I reconstruct a moral psychology of democratic citizenship that stresses the making and unmaking of habits through a prefigurative process I call conversation.

The occasion for a political study that brings together both James and the concept of habit is the so-called ethical turn in democratic theory. This renewed emphasis on the character or spirit of democratic citizenship attends to the political importance of sensations, feelings, habits, and moods as sites of political concern. The conceptual origins of this turn can be traced back to the late works of Michel Foucault and his study of the ethical regimes of Ancient antiquity. We saw that what democratic theorists have sought two things in the late writings of Foucault. The first was a rhetorical device for criticizing the intellectual biases of liberal political thought. Following from this, they have sought a reconstituted a notion of practical reason that is
grounded in ethical practices rather than moral codes. This dissertation began with a reading of the late works of Foucault to articulate the bare outlines of such a theory of practical reason and moral psychology. It did this by bracketing his normative claims concerning transgression and resistance so as to focus more clearly on his implicit meta-ethical arguments. In suspending the moment of normativity we captured a glimpse of an aesthetic account of practical reason that passes by too quickly in Foucault’s writings. This is practical reason as a practice of un-doing and re-doing the habits that constitute the self.

To better understand this concept of habit and practical reason I proposed that we turn to the pragmatist tradition for guidance. This turn might have seemed counterintuitive. Pragmatism is often thought to promote a technocratic and instrumental view of human rationality that is at odds with the aesthetic and affective account democratic theorists have looked for in Foucault. Critics as diverse as Randolph Bourne, Lewis Mumford, Martin Heidegger, and Max Horkheimer have all accused pragmatism of reducing rationality to the means-ends thinking representative of industrial society.¹ That is, pragmatism is an ideology of modernism in its project of mastery. My emphasis on the centrality of habit seems to further consolidate this reaction as it reduces action and mind to the positivist category of “behavior.”

In my account of the pragmatist tradition and its conception of habit I have sought to overturn this perspective on pragmatism as vulgar modernism. I take pragmatism to provide instead a novel attempt to square both the demands of philosophical modernism and the ethical draw of enchantment. Through a comparative study of philosophical responses to the Darwinian revolution in America I have offered an account of Peirce and James as wrestling with how to

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preserve the inspiring mood of enchantment. At the centre of both of these attempts is a novel redefinition of habit as an active and spontaneous force in nature. Whereas Peirce developed a conception of habit as a metaphysical perspective on the inner continuity of nature, William James saw habit as the key to both a psychic crisis of confidence and a philosophical predicament of determinism. Neither rote repetition nor “effete mind” as Peirce called it, James came to understand habit as the bearer of will and spontaneity in a post-Darwinist nature. I called this position, James’s enchanted Darwinism. This creative and spontaneous conception of habit came to inform an aesthetic discipline of willfulness and the philosophical therapy he sought to offer as a public intellectual.

James’s ethical recovery of enchantment lays the groundwork for his account of pluralism and his foray into politics. Here we see James as a critic of democratic docility, a political analogue of the psychological and ethical crises of determinism and meaninglessness he confronted in his own life in the early 1870’s. The analysis James offers of this democratic vice builds on his conception of habit and willfulness. Unlike Tocqueville, Roosevelt, and others who seek to empower citizenship through the consolidating imaginary of the nation-state, James offers a skeptical account of empowerment tied to the imaginary of what he called a pluralistic universe. In his criticisms of Roosevelt, James showed us how our political arguments are always implicitly built on ontological claims that prefigure different forms of political sensibility. James presents his loose unwieldy pluralism as more suitable figuration for empowerment than that bellicose and dogmatic ethics of nationalism he opposes.

James’s response to political events may seem compromised by pragmatism’s optimistic and unrealistic democratic faith. In the fifth chapter I offered an account of James’s meliorism to demonstrate how it constitutes more than the Whitman-esque optimism James describes as “that
We saw this by bringing the themes of ethics, ontology, and habit together in a discussion of James’s account of practical reason. Like Foucault, James offers an aesthetic account of practical reason that stresses the role of habits in the ongoing conversation with the constraints of blindness. We saw that rather than a sunny meliorism, James’s political reflections on blindness as a political problem injects moments of skepticism and caution into his politics that his critics frequently overlook. Between the uncritical, blind optimism of Roosevelt and the skeptical political cynicism of Walter Lippmann, James’s moral psychology prefigures a politics of conversation where citizens openly and cautiously seek to correct their own blindness in an ongoing dialogue with one another.

I take this cautious practice of conversation to offer an attractive figuration of what exactly democratic theorists are doing when they seek something called ‘ethics’ as an emendation to the dominant theories of democracy. In the introduction, I outlined two criticisms of this turn to ethics. The first was the criticism of indeterminacy. What exactly are we talking about when we talk about ethics? What of any theoretical substance can be said about a concept like democratic ethos? This is a question that Richard Rorty has raised concerning the principle of fraternity: “But how to formulate a ‘principle of fraternity’? Fraternity is an inclination of the heart, one that produces a sense of shame at having much when others have little. It is not the sort of thing that anybody can have a theory about or that people can be argued into having.”

Over the course of this dissertation I have sought to answer this challenge by giving substance to a habitual account of practical reason and moral psychology. The second criticism was that the turn to ethics, to a concern with topics of habit, sentiments, and feelings, amounts to a turn away

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from politics. I have tried to answer this second question less by saying than showing in the dissertation. By reading James as a public intellectual in his historical context I have sought to show how his own philosophical and political reflections on ethics was deeply constitutive of his political practice and directly tied to events in the political world. In concluding I want to build on this strategy of demonstration by offering a few closing remarks on James’s recovery of conviction and its contribution to the debate surrounding the turn to ethics.

### 6.2 Self-Recovery

Intellectual historian James Livingston situates the rise of pragmatism in the economic transformations of America between 1890 and 1930. The transformation in question is the decline of a propertied capitalist economy oriented towards production and the rise of a corporate capitalist economy and the creation of speculative credit markets. As we saw in the introduction, critics have accused James’s pragmatism, with its metaphors of cash-value and truth on the credit system, as being very much a child of the Gilded Age. Livingston raises this line of criticism to the next level by arguing that James’s pragmatism is not merely a result of these transformations but in fact serves as their ideological “frame of acceptance.”

James’s critique of the Cartesian dualism of self and world and his redesription of experience as a continuum of habits, Livingston argues, functions to facilitate the cultural shift from the propertied notion of the self as producer towards the open and unfinished self of the consumer.

As we’ve seen in chapter 4, James thought himself a critic of the corporate transformation of America and the phenomenon of bigness that represents it. James described

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himself as a “believer in small systems of things exclusively.” The modern corporation and the instrumental culture of business served as a regular trope in his description of the American war in the Philippines. He described President Taft’s policy to exclude Emilio Aguinaldo from negotiations as an action that “reeked of the infernal adroitness of the great department store, which has reached perfect expertness in the art of killing silently and with no public squealing or commotion the neighboring small concern.” But despite these assertions, Livingston may have a point that James is insufficiently attentive to the consequences of his arguments.

This same charge of misrecognition has been leveled against the turn to ethics in democratic theory. In particular, critics have picked up on the turn’s claims that political consequences follow from seemingly non-political actions. William Connolly, for instance, stresses the importance of experimenting with our modes of time and image perception through watching Hollywood movies; Davide Panagia eloquently makes the case that the pleasures of eating exquisite organic meals rather than mass-produced fast foods is a benefit not only to our health but a political project of interrupting common regimes of taste, perception and judgment; Thomas Dumm offers up an inward looking life of loneliness as a response to the drive to mastery and violence that arises from our failure to acknowledge the inescapability of loneliness. Other examples are boundless. Like James’s invitation to imagine a pluralistic universe, do

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these projects fail to change existing patterns of inequality and power, or worse, actually function as consumerist “frames of acceptance” to such patterns themselves?

Wendy Brown has dismissed such experiments in self-cultivation as “the politics of withdrawal.” To pin our hopes on the transformative power of watching movies and eating turkeys, even very delicious ones, are at best only “ways of appeasing left despair about the contemporary non-viability of a radical democratic perspective.”

Jodi Dean and Antonio T. Vásquez-Arroyo go further to argue that such a turn to ethics not only avoids concerns of social justice but actively undermines them. These practices represent an active abandonment of social criticism and an embrace of the present social order that makes political theories “congenial to current power relations at a moment when they need to be sharpened and wielded as crucially and antagonistically as possible.” The consumerist quality of much political involvement today is a telling example of this shift from a critical theory of “immanent criticism” to this politics of “immanent affirmation.” You can change the world by shopping – but shop ethically, we are told. From purchasing more efficient light bulbs to the popularity of farmers’ markets, social change is presented as something continuous with the general patterns of consumption and leisure. Is the politics of making and breaking habit not itself a shift into this kind of pseudo-politics that amounts only to a lot of sound and fury that doesn’t amount to signifying much?

At the centre of this debate between advocates of ethics and their critics is the question of what role our convictions still play in a late-modern politics. To be convictions, our ideas and values must be heartfelt and more than the dull conformity of habit. But these convictions must

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at the same time not be so adamant and dogmatic as to leave no room for the conflicting convictions of others. Where we lack convictions altogether we are docile. Where we hold them too absolutely, we are fundamentalists. Each side of this debate is ultimately trying to find some middle point between these two points. Connolly et al. appeal to technologies of perception and judgment, like watching movies, that they claim will help cultivate a more responsive and open form of democratic conviction that tempers the excesses of fundamentalism. Dean et al., by contrast, argue that embracing responsiveness, generosity, and carefulness as “ethical resources” is a gesture that is “available only under conditions of the denial of politics.”\(^{10}\) It amounts to an embrace of political “fuzziness” at a moment of growing economic and a political disparity where was is needed is “conviction, condemnation and denunciation.”\(^{11}\)

Stephen K. White and Richard Flathman both suggest James’s doctrine of the will-to-believe might serve as a middle point between these extremes of conviction, although without developing the point in any detail.\(^{12}\) While I agree that James does chart a middle course here this is not the most fruitful way of appropriating James for democratic purposes. James’s 1897 essay ‘The Will to Believe’ is ultimately an epistemic argument about the separate justifications of religious beliefs and scientific ones. James himself came to regret his name for this position

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\(^{10}\) Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 124


and instead came to call it the right to believe. If White means to suggest in appealing to this argument that his vision of a democratic argument is ultimately akin to a subjective religious faith that we have a right to believe in the face of all arguments to the contrary, then he has conceded the point to Dean and Brown. However, we have seen how James’s own attempt to balance conviction and constraint steers a path between faith and skepticism that may offer some guidance to this issue. In the face of a political culture split between the poles of believing too much and believing too little “what should be preached is courage weighted with responsibility.”

The consequences of James’s preaching are threefold. The first is that James teaches us to be wary of the rhetoric of ethos. There is no singular integrated ethos we bear in politics. Rather, we are an assemblage of habits. Some of these habits will be responsive and questioning, but others will inevitably be blind and thoughtless. To forgo the macro-language of ethos for the micro-language of habits introduces an awareness of the only stuttering pace of self-transformation. Breaking habits is no easy task, nor can all of them be broken at once. If James offers anything like a political temperament to emulate it is the courage to work to confront the persistent and inescapable blindness with which we address others, rather than escaping this challenge into the conceits of coding the competing political positions as generous vs. resentful, pluralistic vs. fundamentalist, hospitable vs hostile as White and Connolly too frequently do. If we still want to call James’s position an ethos, we can do so only by returning the term back to

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14 William James, "Preface [Radical Empiricism 1897]," in *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover, 1956), xi

Foucault’s original use of it to denote “work on our own limits, that is, a patient labor of giving form to our impatience for liberty.”

The second contribution James makes is to reject the persistent intellectualism of this debate. By intellectualism James means, “the belief that our mind comes upon the world complete in itself, and has the duty of ascertaining its contents; but has no power of re-determining its character, for that is already given.” This sort of intellectualism is evident in White and Connolly’s acceptance, and therefore justification, of the structural features of a liberal democratic capitalism. As White puts this point, his project is to investigate how we might go about “living the structures” of the modern world differently. He likens the work of democratic coalition-building to bamboo plants that do not knock over neighbouring structures but rather grow around them. A meliorist would share White’s worries about a political project that changes everything all at once. To assume this is the political version of the Cartesian presumption that everything can be doubted at once. Peirce called such doubts paper doubts. We might call the longing for total social transformation paper politics. But saying that everything is not open to chance at once can go hand in hand with the claim that everything is open to change in principle. To act with conviction is precisely to approach the world as a place receptive to one’s action. And it is in acting on the attitude that change is possible that change happens. If there is a political lesson to be drawn from James’s will to believe it is this. He explains in Some Problems of Philosophy, “We can create the conclusion, then. We can and may, as it were, jump with both feet off the ground into or towards a world of which we trust the other parts to meet

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18 White, The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen, 97, 89
our jump – and only so can the making of perfected world of the pluralist pattern ever take place. Only through our precursive trust in it can it come into being.” 19 While this is not to say that any change in particular will be easy, it refuses to take anything off the table before hand.

Finally, James returns us to the priority of the act. Connolly and White have focused almost exclusively on the presumptive dimensions of generosity. That is, they have outlined a political ethics of how we must relate to ourselves to become open to the claims of others when they are made on us. As a result their discussion of conviction is rightly charged with ‘fuzziness’ as it focuses exclusively with a hyper-reflexive concern about how exactly I relate to my own convictions at the expense of thinking about the worldly consequences of these convictions. To White’s credit, he has acknowledged that the cultivation of a democratic ethos is only “an initial disposition” and “part” of a response to the claims of politics. 20 Yet what follows from this is always left unanswered. James shifts the terms of debate by asking: What is my relationship with the world? That is, how does coming to re-imagine the world in a new pluralistic fashion give me the conviction to act in it in such a way that then, recursively, justifies my initial presumption. Pluralism for James, unlike Connolly, is not an ontological source I draw on to cultivate a relationship to myself. Rather, it is a stance towards the world that I take up to guide my habits and action in it.

Another way of putting this point is to say that James shifts the issue of conviction from the inward looking question, of how ought I relate to my own convictions to open me up to the world, to the outward looking question, of what is my relationship to the world itself and how

19 James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 1100

20 White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen*, 88, x. Similarly, Jane Bennett responds to critics that “there is no reason that an ‘aestheticized’ self cannot engage in collective practices of mobilization for reasons other than self-realization.” While Bennett is surely correct on this point, simply pointing this out does not suggest how aestheticization and “collective practices of mobilization” might have any sort of elective affinity. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 151
ought this then guide the ways I act. The effect of this shift, from inward reflection to outward habits, at once draws James both closer and farther away from Dean in stressing the active, existential need for conviction in action. James’s convictions concerning the injustice of American imperialism, Jim Crow lynch mobs, the centralization of medical authority, and the professionalization of the university took the form of public acts of denunciation. He did not fear the absolutism of holding a conviction in the face of injustice. But, and this is where he moves away from Dean, this confidence only came about through his experiments with the seemingly non-political therapeutic activities of imagination, self-discovery, and ascetic self-discipline. It was by learning to “see-feel” the world in new ways, just as the turn to ethics promotes, that he came to revere the decisive action of men like Robert Gould Shaw who found the courage to stand up for justice.

James pluralism is the source of the inspiration and conviction. The unfinished quality of nature is an invitation to self-assertion. But it also raises a series of reminders concerning the excesses of conviction and denunciation. An unfinished world inhabited by a plurality of creatures acting on their own convictions is one where conflict is inevitable. This conflict may serve as an occasion for the genuine living James calls strenuousness. But it is also an occasion for injustice and oppression. All democratic games have their losers. James calls this the pinch of our convictions,

The pinch is always here. Pent in under every system of moral rules are innumerable person whom it weighs upon, and goods which it represses; and these are always grumbling in the background, and ready for any issue by which they may get free... See everywhere the struggle and the squeeze; and everlastingly the problem of how to make them less.\(^{21}\)

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The persistence of this pinch, and the claims of equality that struggle against it, are the engine that drive the history of liberalism according to James. But it also means that our convictions must remain open to the ongoing pressure of what he calls the poetic, the force of surprise and the unexpected that come to us in conversation. This openness does not undermine conviction, but rather strengthens it by grounding it in a deeper perspicacity of the human condition, and the loss that every position entails in a pluralistic universe. In his early comparison of the will-to-mastery of Teutonic civilization with the virtues of Negro civilization, W.E.B. DuBois invokes this aspect of James’s pluralism as to invite us to acknowledge that “not only the assertion of the I, but also to the submission to the Thou is the highest Individualism.”

To summarize, we might say that James’s political contribution is to re-actualize the Emersonian conception of courage in the face of the democratic predicaments of Gilded Age America. Emersonian courage, the “self-recovery” in this chapter’s epigraph, is not the shame to suffer dishonor or spirited love of glory of the soldier at war. It is instead the courage to make a project of ourselves in the face of habit, conformity, and socialization. As benign as this may seem, this sort of intellectual and ethical honesty is incredibly rare. It springs at once with unhappiness with the unauthentic and compromised state I find myself in, as well as a response to the calling of a newer, better self that I might achieve. Emerson describes this calling as the question for self-reliance. James, as we’ve seen, describes it as the lonely courage to break with the habits we find ourselves saddled with and the quest to re-habituate a new more honest self. For James, the individual is neither a pre-social given nor a final achieved self. It is rather the ongoing task of becoming anew, settling down into our habits, and opening ourselves up again. “Life,” as James summarizes this view of perfectionism without perfection, “is in the transitions

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as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing-line of the battle, were like the thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn. In this line we live prospectively as well as retrospectively. It is ‘of’ the past, inasmuch as it comes expressly as the past’s continuation; it is ‘of’ the future in so far as the future, when it comes, will have continued it.”

Does James’s attempt to square the demands of conviction and constraint only amount to a “frame of acceptance”? Philosophy can only be its time captured in thought. That James’s political thought bears the traces of its origins is no claim against it any more than it is to lament that the turn to ethics does not overturn the liberal capitalist order of modernity. James and Hegel join hand in hand in knowing that there is no jumping over Rhodes. A more generous way of putting this point than Livingston’s construal is Cornel West’s observation that “American pragmatism is less a philosophical conversation initiated by Plato and more a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment.” An interpretation need not merely be an endorsement, and James’s skill as an interpreter of America is his power to redescribe its current practices and norms in a way that combines critical scrutiny with the possibility of a newer or better self that awaits if only we have confidence that we can get there from here.


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