

Ludwig Wittgenstein and William James

by Jaime Nubiola

The relationship between William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) has recently been the subject of intense scholarly research. We know for instance that the later Wittgenstein's reflections on the philosophy of psychology found in James a major source of inspiration. Not surprisingly therefore, the pragmatist nature of the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein is increasingly acknowledged, in spite of Wittgenstein's adamant refusal of being labeled a "pragmatist". In this brief paper I merely want to piece together some of the available evidence of Wittgenstein's high regard for William James, not only for his thoughts, but even more so for his character.

The first reference to James in Wittgenstein's papers is found in a letter of June 22, 1912, to Bertrand Russell. In that letter, written in Cambridge (England), after reporting to Russell the discussion he had with the psychologist Charles S. Myers about the relations between logic and psychology, Wittgenstein adds that, whenever he has the time, he reads James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Moreover, he offers the following comment: "This book does me *a lot* of good. I don't mean to say that I will be a saint soon, but I am not sure that it does not improve me a little in a way in which I would like to improve *very much*: namely I think that it helps me to get rid of the *Sorge* (in the sense in which Goethe used the word in the 2nd part of Faust)."¹ McGuinness suggests that the young Wittgenstein may have recognized his own condition in the description of "*The Sick Soul*" which William James gives in the sixth and seventh lectures of that book². Those memorable Jamesian pages may have been experienced by Wittgenstein as an explanation of, as well as a relief from his permanent dissatisfaction with his work and his compulsive need to both give and receive affection. His student O'C. Drury—who was urged by Wittgenstein to abandon philosophy and to go into medicine—remembers that Wittgenstein suggested to him in 1930 to read James' book³. Moreover—as Haack notes⁴—Wittgenstein must have felt sympathetic to *The Varieties of Religious*

¹ G. H. von Wright, ed., *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1974, 10.

² B. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life. Young Ludwig 1889-1921*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, 156.

³ M. O'C. Drury, "Conversations with Wittgenstein", in R. Rhees, ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1981, 121.

⁴ R. Haack, "Wittgenstein's Pragmatism", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1982 (19), 163. James fully anticipated Wittgenstein's attack to essentialism: G. Pitcher, *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1964, 218-219; G. P. Baker y P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein. Understanding and Meaning*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1980, 324.

Experience for James' rejection of the idea of an essence of 'religion' and to the suggestion that diverse religious experiences may have certain "family resemblances".

We also know that, at some time of the second period of Wittgenstein's stay in Cambridge during the thirties, James' *Principles of Psychology* was —as one of his former pupils A. C. Jackson told John Passmore⁵— the only philosophical work that was to be seen on his bookshelves. According to Elizabeth Anscombe, Wittgenstein read the abridged version of James, entitled *Psychology: The Briefer Course*, which was familiarly known amongst the students as the "Jimmy" to distinguish it from the heavy two volume edition⁶. In fact, William James is already mentioned in the second page of the *Brown Book*, the lectures of the 1934-35 course, when Wittgenstein refers to James' thesis regarding the specific feelings accompanying the use of words such as 'and', 'if' and 'or', and again in the pages where Wittgenstein echoes James' well known position that "a man doesn't cry because he is sad but that he is sad because he cries"⁷.

In *Philosophical Investigations* James is quoted four times (as many as Frege), and *The Principles of Psychology* is alluded to more frequently than any other text in the entire course of the book. Peter Geach and his collaborators identified more than thirty passages of *The Principles* which have a parallel in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and in *Zettel*⁸. Also, a great number of Wittgenstein's notes in his manuscripts 130-138 are related to James, although —as Schulte notices⁹— its real Jamesian source is not always evident. In the roughly 120 notebook pages written from May through September of 1946, Wittgenstein argues with James intermittently but consistently, and such persistent interest for another author is absolutely exceptional in Wittgenstein¹⁰. According to Monk, Wittgenstein had even thought of using *The Principles* as a course text in order to illustrate the conceptual confusions that he was trying to fight, but in the end —as he told Rhees— he preferred to talk just from his own head¹¹. In short, during his last years of his life Wittgenstein very often referred

⁵ J. Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, Macmillan, New York, 1957, 428, n. 2.

⁶ Personal communication to Robin Haack, "Wittgenstein's Pragmatism", 163, n.1.

⁷ L. Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1960, §1 y §48.

⁸ C. Cope et al, *A Wittgenstein Workbook*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1967, 48.

⁹ J. Schulte, *Experience and Expression. Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1993, 9.

¹⁰ S. S. Hilly, *The Later Wittgenstein*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, 207 y n. 477.

¹¹ R. Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius*, Vintage, London, 1990, 477.

to James in his lectures¹², and—to everybody's astonishment— on one occasion he even referred to an exact page number!¹³

Perhaps the distance between Wittgenstein and pragmatism may be understood in terms of James' view of the two different traditions of doing philosophy, which he expressed in his well known distinction between two types of mental make-up, the *tough-minded*, characterized by its empiricism of facts, and the *tender-minded*, defined by some intellectual going by principles. James' point is that his new pragmatism provides a middle way which enables one to overcome the shortcomings typical of these two make-ups¹⁴. In some sense, the later Wittgenstein also tried to overcome the shortcomings of these two alternatives. He certainly considered his *Tractatus* as an example of a miscarriage of the dogmatic tough-minded make-up, and, as a result, he maybe came closer to the tender-minded one. No doubt, the difference of temperaments between James and Wittgenstein is great; but Wittgenstein's affective acknowledgement of James's relevance makes it possible to detect some real affective community between them. As Goodman rightly observes, Wittgenstein treats William James as a wise master, although sometimes as a miscarried one¹⁵.

Wittgenstein was also fond of the powerful narrative style of William James, but above all he admired James as a person. His admiration was not confined to the recognition of James' authority in psychology, but above all he saw in James the good person that he would like to have been. This is born out by the comment which he made to Drury: "That is what makes him [James] a good philosopher; he was a real human being"¹⁶. That, to use Hilary Putnam's¹⁷ words, the deepest philosopher of the twentieth century had such high regard for William James, may be seen as an invitation to read James again, and to discover the real person he was.

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¹² According to the notes of the students P. T. Geach, K. J. Shah and A. C. Jackson, this is true also for the last course he gave: *Wittgenstein's Lectures on Philosophical Psychology 1946-47*, P. T. Geach, ed., Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York, 1988.

¹³ J. Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, 428, n. 2.

¹⁴ W. James, *Pragmatism*, in *The Works of William James*, F. H. Burkhardt, ed., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1975, I, 13; see also N. Rescher, *Baffling Phenomena*, Rowman, Savage, MD, 1991, 103-104.

¹⁵ R. Goodman, "Experience, Meaning, Pragmatism: James and Wittgenstein", (unpublished) 3; Abstract in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 1993 (67), 89, 3; see also R. Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Duty of Genius*, 478.

¹⁶ M. O'C. Drury, "Conversations with Wittgenstein", 121.

¹⁷ H. Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face, Philosophical Papers III*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, xxxiv.

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