

# RECONSTRUCTING JAMES'S EARLY RADICAL EMPIRICISM: THE 1896 PREFACE AND "THE SPIRIT OF INNER TOLERANCE"

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper re-contextualizes William James's early radical empiricism based upon a historical and philosophical reading of the 1896 preface of *The Will to Believe*. I suggest that James's "irrational" early radical empiricism, as guided by the "spirit of inner tolerance," is tinged with a fringe sensitivity or awareness of the epistemic outsider. Based upon his critique of the blind monist, this paper argues that when we look toward a wider conception of James's philosophy, it reveals that his early radical empiricism is intimately concerned with social and moral elements with regard to matters of fact and perspective. Utilizing Gavin's manifest-latent hermeneutic, I show how James defends this type of outsider, the epistemic underdog, with the hope of creating a more open, free, and democratic marketplace of ideas and practices that is predicated upon the value of respectful difference.*

When we look toward James's first public announcement of radical empiricism, it becomes clear that we need to be more critical as to how we discuss his ideas. In contrast to Edward Madden's interpretation, I am suggesting that we avoid using James's later formulation (e.g. his 1904-05 technical writings) as a measuring stick for his 1896 articulation.<sup>1</sup> As we inquire into James's *early* radical empiricism,<sup>2</sup> we ought to *not* assume that he is directly concerned with metaphysics, with pure experience, and the epistemological relations of the subject-object dichotomy.<sup>3</sup> A more critical reading, I suggest, is one which draws from the historical, thematic, and philosophical context of James's work in the mid to late 1890's.

According to this interpretation, which focuses on a close textual and contextual reading of the preface of *The Will to Believe*, when we take a wider view of what "philosophy" means to James we see that his early radical empiricism is more pervasive than previously acknowledged. This paper aims to show that not only was James intimately concerned with epistemological matters of fact and perspective, but also their social and moral implications. It suggests an alternative narrative is uncovered if we look toward particular themes, both historical and philosophical, which reveal themselves as focal points of James's work in the mid 1890s, particularly the year 1896. It reveals a counter philosophical history that resituates how we understand the range and scope of James's early radical empiricism, the types of discourse that he entered, and what type of persons were capable of producing knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

In the first section of the paper, I address James's radical empiricist conception of philosophy and suggest that we need to move away from metaphysical interpretations and attend to the social, moral, and epistemic dimensions of his thinking. Building upon this wider view, the next two sections are divided between manifest and latent readings of the text—a

hermeneutic strategy that Gavin utilizes in his most recent work, *William James in Focus*. Section two highlights the manifest characteristics of James's radical empiricist methodology by focusing on his critique of rationality and perspectival limits. Section three offers an experimental reading of the 1896 preface of *The Will to Believe* by focusing on the latent content. It fleshes out what James calls "the spirit of inner tolerance" and his defense of the epistemic outsider. This section closes with the observation that we can find two types of persons emerge from the preface: (1) the blind monist who is incapable of seeing the inner significance of "the other"; and (2) the epistemic underdog, or outcaste, whose belief system locates him/her on the fringe of a dominant epistemological paradigm. In the concluding remarks, I suggest that the "irrationalism" of James's early radical empiricism is guided by the "spirit of inner tolerance." More specifically, that his new philosophy is tinged with a fringe sensitivity or awareness of the epistemological other and aims to defend this type of outsider with the hope of creating a more open, free, and democratic marketplace of ideas and practices that is predicated upon the value of respectful difference.

### I: REDEFINING PHILOSOPHY ACCORDING TO EARLY RADICAL EMPIRICISM

In order to grasp the moral and social undercurrent of James's early radical empiricism, we need to take a fresh look at his first public description. In December of 1896 James penned the preface to *The Will to Believe & Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. The text itself is comprised of a ten essays written within a seventeen year span between 1879 and 1896. In addition to previously publishing most of these articles in both popular magazines (e.g. *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner's*, etc.) and technical journals (e.g. *Mind*, *International Journal for Ethics*, *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, etc.), he also delivered many of these papers as public addresses to a variety of associations, clubs, and societies.<sup>5</sup>

#### A. THE "IRRATIONALISM" OF THE 1896 PREFACE

In the preface James provides his audience with three different ways of understanding his new philosophy of radical empiricism. First, he describes his position as an attitude, then as a method, and lastly as a worldview. This paper focuses on the latter two themes of James's early radical empiricism, specifically, as a method of epistemological critique and as a worldview that functions as an undefined yet robust, or thick, pluralism—both of which include epistemic, metaphysical, moral, psychological, and social dimensions. Looking toward these aspects of his early description of radical empiricism enables us to see two critical elements. First, that his democratic, pragmatic, and pluralistic tendencies not only focus on individuals, but upon individuals within an environment—that is to say, a social context. And, secondly, it suggests that at this time in his career, James seems to be preoccupied with "fringe facts," or facts that lay outside of the epistemological norm(s).

In the 1896 preface, after having defined and methodologically described his position as "radical empiricism," James redirects his attention to the reception of this new standpoint by his philosophically-minded colleagues:

Many of my professionally trained confrères will smile at the *irrationalism of this view*, and at the artlessness of my essays in point of technical form. But they should be taken as illustrations of the radically empiricist attitude rather than as argumentations for its validity. That admits meanwhile of being argued in as technical a shape as anyone can desire, and

possibly I may be spared to do later a share of that work (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup>

In the 1896 preface James describes himself as a radical empiricist and a pluralist. As noted in the above paragraph, he also assumes that his colleagues will consider his position as “irrational.” It takes little imagination to understand why James might anticipate this claim. Given his tendencies to defend indeterminism, psychical research, religion (or the right to believe religiously), etc., one can easily foresee how his imagined opponent (positivist, realist, etc.) might consider his standpoint to be irrational. That is to say, because James’s arguments seek to democratically defend the “irrational” opinions and experiences of various minority groups that run counter to the epistemological status quo, it goes without saying that he would be considered guilty by mere association. For someone to study, let alone argue for, those subjects that are deemed to be irrational and alogical is to be irrational oneself.

However, when we reconsider the cultural, historical, and philosophical context within which James is working, I find that what at first appears to be a cautionary remark is, in fact, a telling feature. By using this so-called “irrationalism” as a point of departure, I reconstruct an alternative framework for understanding his early radical empiricism.

James maintains that the collected essays depict the radical empiricist attitude, albeit in an untechnical, but dramatic form. According to his remark in the preface, “these essays seem to light up with a certain dramatic reality the attitude itself, and make it visible alongside of the higher and lower dogmatisms between which in the pages of philosophic history it has generally remained eclipsed from sight.”<sup>7</sup>

While it seems that James is trying to provide us with a context for grasping this attitude, it is entirely too open and vague for any definitive interpretation. Much of the secondary literature draws our attention to James’s confrontation with absolute idealism and realism, while also demonstrating his upbringing in the British (and Scottish) empirical tradition and how he overcomes the problems that vexed them. While this literature has refined our understanding of James’s methodological commitments and his philosophical heritage, it often neglects to incorporate his interest in fringe, or subaltern, thought.<sup>8</sup> In the context of nineteenth century religious and cultural movements, Catherine Albanese, a notable scholar of American religion, defines subaltern as “a person holding a subordinate position.” While much has been written on James’s interest subaltern culture, such as mental hygiene, mental healing, mysticism, psychopathology, and psychical research, his interest in fringe thinking has yet to be systematically explored in connection with his early radical empiricism.

#### B. PHILOSOPHY AS THE “HABIT OF ALWAYS SEEING AN ALTERNATIVE”

Considering the fact that James describes his new philosophy as lying hidden between the lower and higher philosophical dogmatisms, we need to inquire into the nature and meaning of James’s conception of philosophy and how it is to be regarded as something new. Consulting Baldwin’s *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* reveals four definitions of philosophy. The first three refer to natural, moral, and metaphysical philosophy, whereas the fourth functions as an inter-disciplinary system of thinking that captures the “animating spirit of all.”<sup>9</sup> While I could make use of Baldwin’s definition as a general measuring stick for nineteenth century thought, doing so would not capture the idiosyncratic distinctions that differentiate James’s conception of philosophy from other contemporary thinkers.

As early as 1876 James offers a definition of philosophy that runs against

the grain. In "The Teaching of Philosophy in Our Colleges" he alludes to the importance of the unconventional point of view and the ability to look beyond our own proclivities. He writes:

If the best use of our college is to give young men a wider openness of mind and a more flexible way of thinking than special technical training can generate, then we hold that philosophy...is the most important of all college studies. However sceptical one may be of the attainment of universal truths....one can never deny that philosophical study means *the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again, of imagining foreign states of mind*. In a word, it means the possession of mental perspective (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup>

What is significant about this definition is that it breaks from the traditional definition (*philo-sophia*) by offering a different type of wisdom. It captures James's pluralistic tendencies by showcasing the multiplicity of perspective, rather than a singular search for truth. Philosophy, in this sense, is grounded in a perspectival shift whereby the philosopher learns to "imagine foreign states of mind," seeing the usual as unusual, and to always seek an alternative. Our challenge, then, is to see the continuity within James's early philosophical thinking and that this idea of "mental perspective" is one that pervades his democratic, pluralistic, and pragmatic thinking.

Late in his career James once again takes up the task of defining philosophy, this time devoting the first chapter of *Some Problems of Philosophy* to its definition and meaning. While it is certainly not the definitive definition for James, it does reflect a long and illustrious career of thinking things "philosophically." He closes his introduction with the following distinction:

In its original acception, meaning the completest knowledge of the universe, philosophy must include the results of all the sciences, and cannot be contrasted with the latter. It simply aims at making of science what Herbert Spencer calls a system of '*completely-unified* knowledge.' In the more modern sense, of something contrasted with the sciences, philosophy means 'metaphysics.'<sup>11</sup>

In this passage James provides us with two conceptions of philosophy. The modern distinction is predicated upon an essential division between the roles of science and philosophy; the philosophy of old, however, contains no such distinction. He then proceeds to evaluate the two conceptions:

The older sense is the more worthy sense, and as the results of the sciences get more available for co-ordination, and the conditions for finding truth in different kinds of questions get more methodologically defined, we may hope that the term will revert to its original meaning. Science, metaphysics, and religion may then again form a single body of wisdom, and lend each other mutual support.<sup>12</sup>

From this passage, it is quite clear that James praises the philosophy of old, which he deems as "more worthy," and longs for the day when philosophy functions as the Spencerian system of unified knowledge. When we consider James's ongoing critique of "Science," we can see that what he considered as "science"—which does not carry the dogma and bias of its capitalized

brethren—is extremely sympathetic to what were then, and still now, considered by many as non-scientific, or pseudo-scientific, enterprises.<sup>13</sup> As is well known, James devoted much of his life to psychical research. Perry observes that it was “not one of his vagaries, but was central and typical.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, James was also a believer and regular participant in many alternative medical practices.<sup>15</sup> And, as is more popularly known, he was a strong advocate of mysticism and the diversity of religious belief.

When James’s interests in fringe “sciences” are taken into account, it suggests that his mid-1890s conception of philosophy is to be located somewhere between the early and late definitions. As exemplified by the essays in *The Will to Believe*, we get the sense of James’s inter- and intra-disciplinary thinking as a philosophical attempt to bring together the fields of physiology, psychology, psychopathology, psychical research, and religion. At the same time, when we consider the latent content of the essays and their defense of what I am calling the “epistemic underdog,” then the attitudinal component of James’s philosophy “as always seeking an alternative” becomes more readily apparent.

## II. EARLY RADICAL EMPIRICISM AND THE 1896 PREFACE: THE MANIFEST CONTENT

In his recent book, William Gavin develops a hermeneutic strategy of reading James’s text as parsed between manifest and latent images.<sup>16</sup> The manifest content tends toward detailed descriptions of James’s radical and innovative ways of looking at the self, the world, and the dynamic relationship between. The latent content, Gavin maintains, is “directive” insofar as it leads back to experience. In this capacity, the latent content is partial, unfinished, and lacks the sense of certainty.<sup>17</sup> Using this strategy, I argue that two images emerge from James’s 1896 preface. On the one hand, we find a manifest image of his early radical empiricism that is overly concerned with methodology and criticism. On the other hand, a latent image of the text reveals a position that is deeply troubled by social and moral issues.

### A. THE METHODOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

Turning toward the opening pages of the 1896 preface, James decides to give his new position a nickname for ease of reference. He writes,

Were I obliged to give a short name to the attitude in question, I should call it that of *radical empiricism*, in spite of the fact that such brief nicknames are nowhere more misleading than in philosophy. I say “empiricism,” because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience.

Here we have the classic starting point of a philosophical methodology. James defines his orientation as being that of an empiricist. The traditional narrative is to differentiate this school of thought from rationalism and to point out their respective historical and philosophical differences.<sup>18</sup> James simplifies this division by reducing it to the fallibility of human knowledge, which stakes its position on the idea that knowledge claims are liable to change and modification through experience. The significance of his linguistic adjustment—that is the transformation of “assured conclusions” into “hypotheses liable to modification”—is paramount not only for understanding his early radical empiricism, but also his pragmatism.<sup>19</sup>

The next major feature is that he further qualifies his stance as “radical” insofar as it may apply to any particular situation. He explains it as follows:

...and I say “radical,” because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis, and, unlike so much of the half-way empiricism that is current under the name of positivism or agnosticism or scientific naturalism, it does not dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all experience has got to square.<sup>20</sup>

James's concern here is for any type of monistic *thinking*, not merely a particular metaphysical doctrine. What is interesting is James's use of the term ‘monism.’ The first instance is presented as the “doctrine of monism” and gives the sense of referring to a singular thesis. The unfortunate consequence of this linguistic designation is that it is all too often identified as a specific type of rationalist metaphysics, as opposed to referring to its broader meaning. According to Baldwin's *Dictionary*, monism is defined as a “name applicable to *any system of thought* which sees in the universe the manifestation or working of a single principle.”<sup>21</sup> James is fairly clear about capturing the latter sense of the term when he mentions “the doctrine”: he refers to a variety of monistic thought, such as “positivism,” “agnosticism,” and “scientific naturalism”—not just absolute idealism.

At this stage in its development, radical empiricism refers to a methodology that asks uncomfortable questions: it challenges basic practical assumptions and philosophical presuppositions as a way of shaking the foundations of certainty. It does not, however, provide the solution to its criticism: it functions solely at the level of epistemological (or logical) critique.<sup>22</sup> Taken together, the above points showcase how James's early radical empiricism methodologically challenges both monistic thought—in any and all forms—and the idea of certainty: *all claims* concerning matters of fact are to be treated as “hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience.”

### B. PERSPECTIVAL CRITIQUE

Thus far according to a manifest reading of 1896 preface we have seen that James is intimately concerned with aggressive and over-extended knowledge claims. His radical empiricist position is methodologically rooted in the fallibility of human knowledge and directed toward the rampant dogmatism that permeates nearly all aspects of intellectual pursuit. While its aim is deeply concerned with the nature of truth, this perspective is expressed in a negative fashion. By showcasing rational and perspectival limits, James is directly calling attention to the dogmatic manner that certain parties monopolize their own perspective. The heart of this critique is that the “inward clarity” of a particular point of view is incapable of achieving a public or universal status: it always eclipses some fact or point of view.

In *William James at the Boundaries*, Bordogna astutely observes that one of the features of James's “new epistemological regime” is that his style of argumentation quickly shifts gears between different lines of reasoning.<sup>23</sup> While he may begin with a methodological and epistemological framework, it quickly turns into a discussion of moral and social issues, only to later re-explore their meaning in a new epistemic and/or methodological context. This zigzagging style of argumentation, not unique to James, appears in the preface after he has described the basic meaning of radical empiricism. Unless closely followed, these distinctions can be easily lost, hence the importance of calling attention to how he is attempting to re-orient our perspective to that of an open, democratic, and pluralistic orientation.

James begins his perspectival critique reflecting on the reasoning process: “Postulating more unity than the first experiences yield, we also discover more. But absolute unity, in spite of brilliant dashes in its direction, still remains undiscovered, still remains a *Grenzbegriff*.”<sup>24</sup> From an empirical standpoint, we postulate based upon previous experience. As our experience-base broadens, our hypotheses expand reaching further and deeper into the nature of reality and ourselves. Yet, however far we stretch, there is invariably something just out of intellectual reach. James expresses this point in “The Will to Believe” and “The Sentiment of Rationality” by arguing that if confronted with a genuine option that cannot be decided by reason alone, then our “passional nature” decides thusly.<sup>25</sup>

As we continue to trace his zigzag style we see James transitions to the epistemic dimension and showcases the limitations of reason: “After all that reason can do has been done, there still remains the opacity of the finite facts as merely given, with most of their peculiarities mutually unmediated and unexplained.”<sup>26</sup> Elaborating upon this perspectival limitation, he fluidly moves into the practical dimension in order to abstractly apply his critique of reason to the greatest of philosophers. Drawing a parallel between the limitations of reason and our own human perspective, James points out that the “inward clarity” of one perspective is also necessarily limited: “To the very last, there are various ‘points of view’ which the philosopher must distinguish in discussing the world; and what is inwardly clear from one point remains a bare externality and datum to another.”<sup>27</sup>

The take away message is that James invokes a certain element of relativity into the degree to which something is deemed rational. A more accurate way of asserting this is to follow his language of “*pro tanto* rational,” meaning rational *to such an extent*. The point is subtle, but definitely there: James’s argument addresses the *psychological*, not epistemological, elements of rationality.<sup>28</sup> Translated into the epistemology of “inward clarity,” he is calling attention to lack of communication between certain perspectives and the inability to imagine foreign states of mind. When an event takes place, multiple perspectives converge on one point as a means of addressing it: however, what is necessitated in one point of view, may be mere distraction in another.

James draws this discussion to a close by zigzagging once more between the abstract and the practical in order to drive home this idea of limitations:

The negative, the alogical, is never wholly banished. Something—call it “fate, chance, freedom, spontaneity, the devil, what you will”—is still wrong and other and outside and unincluded, from *your* point of view, even though you be the greatest of philosophers. Something is always mere fact and *givenness*; and there may be in the whole universe no one point of view extant from which this would not be found to be the case.<sup>29</sup>

The brevity of the argument certainly does take away from its effectiveness. However, it is critical to understand that James is not trying to provide his readership with a technical and definitive statement regarding radical empiricism. Instead, all that he is trying to do is illustrate *how* the essays which follow are brought together under a central theme. This sentiment surfaces again and again throughout James’s work in the mid 1890’s. Most pointedly, in the preface to *Talks to Teachers* he reflects upon his recently announced pluralistic philosophy and states that “[a]ccording to that philosophy, the truth is too great for any one actual mind...to know the whole of it.”<sup>30</sup>

To further illustrate this point, James draws upon the obscure writings of 19<sup>th</sup> century journalist, poet, and mystic, Benjamin Paul Blood. “‘Ever not quite’ must be the rationalistic philosopher’s last confession concerning it.”<sup>31</sup> While he

goes on to quote Blood's lathe metaphor to illustrate his point, the meaning of this idea of "ever not quite" is better captured in a later essay. In "A Pluralistic Mystic," James elaborates more fully what he means when he invokes B.P. Blood's famous phrase. He writes:

"Ever not quite!"—this seems to wring to the very last panting word out of rationalistic philosophy's mouth. It is fit to be pluralism's heraldic device. *There is no complete generalization, no total point of view, no all-pervasive unity, but everywhere some residual resistance to verbalization, formulation, and discursification*, some genius of reality that escapes from the pressure of the logical finger, that says, 'hands off,' and claims its privacy, and means to be left to its own life. In every moment of immediate experience is somewhat absolutely original and novel (emphasis added).<sup>32</sup>

### III. EARLY RADICAL EMPIRICISM AND THE 1896 PREFACE: THE LATENT CONTENT

By rereading James initial description of radical empiricism within the broader context of his work in the mid to late 1890s, I am suggesting that not only is James challenging dogmatic and monist thinking by going after their ideals of objective evidence and certitude, but that we also find a pervasive theme of epistemic, moral, and social sensitivity that directly relates to what he calls "the spirit of inner tolerance." In the remaining pages, I shall tease out this "spirit of inner tolerance" as it correlates to "fringe thinking" and follow it as it becomes more prevalent in James's thought. Not only does James defend the irrational other through the selective engagement of which types of discourse he enters, but he also attempts to legitimize the alogical other as a valid type of knowledge producer by seeking to normalize the non-normal and rationalize the irrational.

#### A. "THE SPIRIT OF INNER TOLERANCE"

Throughout his mid to late 1890 publications, James is hard-pressed by the issue of (in)tolerance of opinion. In 1896, after a year of attacking the dogmatic and intolerable opinions that monopolized the fields of psychotherapy, religion, and science, he suggests that the utility of his work will be best grasped in the "marketplace" that is governed by a "régime of tolerance."<sup>33</sup> In the 1896 preface James singles out the intolerant scientist—or, read more broadly as all dogmatists and monizers of thought—and his/her dogmatic rejection of religion as the object of criticism: "With all such scientists, as well as with their allies outside of science, my quarrel open lies; and I hope that my book may do something to persuade the reader of their crudity, and range him on my side."<sup>34</sup> Here James is defending religious, ethical, poetical, teleological, emotional, and sentimental thinking—what he elsewhere calls the "personal view of life"—from mechanical rationalism, positivism, dogmatism, and monism.<sup>35</sup>

For James, it is critical that this régime of tolerance moderates the "intolerance of Science" in both speculative and practical endeavors.<sup>36</sup> This becomes clearer as we step back and look at the types of discourse that he engaged in during the mid-1890s. In 1894 James pragmatically defends the legitimacy and value of alternative medicine, specifically the mind-cure movement. He argues against the Massachusetts's Medical Registration Act maintaining that mental faith healers are producing results and thus advocates the continued use and study of mind-cure techniques.<sup>37</sup> In 1897, shortly after announcing his radical empiricism, James



challenges physiological-psychologists by democratically defending the rational legitimacy of religious belief in regard to the logical possibility of human immortality. More pronounced, however, are James's activities of 1896.<sup>38</sup> In the Lowell lectures on "Exceptional Mental States" he argues for the normalcy of degenerative mental health by arguing that we are all cut from the same cloth. In "The Will to Believe" he rationally defends the legitimacy of faith. And, in "The Address of the President before the Society for Psychical Research" he wards off attacks by the narrow views of "Science" by suggesting that we reinstate the "personal view of life" and its "facts of experience."

In short, James argues that we need to be more careful about how we judge one another and how we come to view the truth of our own opinion. In the preface to *The Will to Believe*, when James is talking about why he defends the religious hypothesis he suggests an evaluative approach that is grounded in pragmatic and Darwinian thinking: he says that the "freest competition" and the "openest application to life" are the "most favorable conditions under which the survival of the fittest can proceed."<sup>39</sup> James maintains that this idea of unabashedly free competition is rooted in "the spirit of inner tolerance" whereby what is "inwardly clear" to one individual can and should be capable of co-existing in a moral and social framework with others. In "The Will to Believe" he is very explicit about this point:

No one of us ought to issues vetoes to the other, nor should we bandy words of abuse. We ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect on another's mental freedom: then only shall we bring about the intellectual republic; then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless, and which is empiricism's glory; then only shall we live and let live, in speculative as well as in practical things.<sup>40</sup>

The practical side of this moral, social, and epistemological tolerance is that if a fallibilistic and non-dogmatic interplay of ideas and practices were adopted, then the outsider need not "lie hid each under its bushel, indulged-in quietly with friends." Instead they would be able to "live in publicity, vying with each other...[in] the liveliest possible state of fermentation."<sup>41</sup>

This "spirit of inner tolerance" comes to the forefront of James's thought in his essay, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" which is published in *Talks to Teachers*. In the preface he makes reference to the position he advocated in *The Will to Believe*. Recall that in the latter, James first describes radical empiricism as a "definite philosophical attitude," then nicknames it radical empiricism, only to subsequently identify it with pluralism. In *Talks to Teachers*, he laments that he did not make "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" more impressive. In a letter to Elizabeth Glendower Evans, he alludes to its importance for his thought. Having sent her a copy, James recommends that she not bother reading the "Teacher part, which is incarnate boredom." Instead, he explains, "I sent it to you merely that you might read the Essay on a Certain Blindness, which is really the perception on which my whole individualistic philosophy is based."<sup>42</sup> For readers unfamiliar with this piece, James argues that all too often we fail to perceive the inner significance of the other. The purpose of the essay is to open our eyes to this inner world with the hope of becoming more tolerant and respectful of "alien lives and personalities."

A careful reading of the preface to *Talks to Teachers* reveals a telling portrayal of the heart of James's early radical empiricism. Like his comments in the preface to *The Will to Believe*, he anticipates how his readers and colleagues might view the piece as mere "sentimentalism." However, according to James, it is significantly more insofar as "[i]t connects itself with a definite view of the

world and of our moral relations to the same.” What is striking about this statement is how it parallels the ideas of his early radical empiricism. In both texts he implies that the root cause of immoral and poor epistemic relations stem from the social problem of perspectival blindness. In both texts James democratically defends the outcaste and is deeply concerned with matters of fact and perspective.

On the connection between the two, we can see that James intertwines the perspectives of radical empiricism *qua* critique and an epistemological, moral, and social pluralism:

Those who have done me the honor of reading my volume of philosophic essays will recognize that I mean the pluralistic or individualistic philosophy. According to that philosophy, the truth is too great for any one actual mind, even though that me be dubbed ‘the Absolute,’ to know the whole of it. The facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in. There is no point of view absolutely public and universal. Private and uncommunicable perceptions always remain over, and the worst of it is that those who look for them from the outside never know *where*. The practical consequence of such a philosophy is the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality—is, at any rate, the outward tolerance of whatever is not itself intolerant.... Religiously and philosophically, our ancient national doctrine of live and let live may prove to have a far deeper meaning than our people now seem to imagine it to possess.<sup>43</sup>

#### *B. AN EPISTEMIC TYPOLOGY: THE BLIND MONIST AND THE EPISTEMIC UNDERDOG*

In closing the manifest-latent hermeneutic strategy for interpreting the text, I want to point out an observation that James’s description of radical empiricism focuses on two epistemic types: the blind monist and the epistemic underdog.<sup>44</sup> The first is the perspective that is blind to the ideals and “vital secret” of the other. It is the universalizing vision by which an individual “presume[s] to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons’ conditions or ideals.”<sup>45</sup> Whether consciously or unconsciously, it is the perspective that monopolizes its own point of view by epistemologically monizing the world. A frequent by-product of seeking ever greater unity, this type of singular-mindedness rules out the possibility that other points of view have “gotten it right.” These are the positivists, agnostics, and scientific naturalists that James chastises as having dogmatically affirmed monism “as something with which all experience has got to square.”<sup>46</sup> For these types of individuals, such things as “fate, chance, freedom, spontaneity, [etc.]” are not *real* possibilities.<sup>47</sup>

The second perspective never directly comes to the surface of the preface, but is one which lies hidden in shadow. It is the “irrational” other that is “wrong and other and outside and unincorporated” from the aforementioned universalizing vision. Their plight is relegated to the epistemic fringe, existing as anomalies which function as “bare externalit[ies] and datum” to the monolithic vision. Objectified and overlooked, this perspective is exemplified by an epistemic and social suffering: as an outcaste, these types of beliefs are deemed “irrational,” “alogical,” or simply not normal. Representatives of this type of individual range from practitioners of faith healing to psychical researchers to mystics.

It seems that whenever James exercises the radical empiricist critique—that is to say, when he challenges a blind monist type—there is always an

epistemic underdog lurking at the fringe of the monolithic belief in question. According to this analysis, James's early radical empiricism actively and democratically defends their point of view as one inherently containing "real possibilities, real indeterminations, real beginnings, real ends, real evil, real crises, catastrophes, and escapes, a real God, and a real moral life."<sup>48</sup>

For example, in 1894 James speaks out against the proposed state mandated legislation that would require medical practitioners to register and pass a series of state examinations. The point was to root out quackery and to standardize medical practices.<sup>49</sup> While there are benefits to this legislation, doing so would further exacerbate the already problematic relations between allopathic medicine and alternative practices and, in James's mind, limit the range of good experimental science. Case in point, James argues that "whatever one may think of the narrowness of the mind-curers, their logical position is impregnable. They are proving by the most brilliant new results that the therapeutic relation may be what we can at present time describe only as a relation of one *person* to another *person*."<sup>50</sup>

#### **IV: CONCLUDING REMARKS: FRINGE SENSITIVITY AND RATIONALIZING THE IRRATIONAL**

At the outset of this essay I remarked that James's self-decried "irrationalism" is a guiding theme of his early radical empiricism. As I have argued above and elsewhere, James's mid to late 1890s interest and work in alternative discourse with regard to the types of persons that were capable of producing knowledge provides a fruitful context for exploring the meaning of his 1896 announcement of radical empiricism. By locating James's *early* radical empiricist philosophy somewhere between "an interdisciplinary unifier of knowledge" that is sympathetic to fringe sciences and a "mental perspectivalism" that sees the alternative standpoint of the epistemic underdog, we can see more clearly why James might anticipate that his colleagues would consider his ideas irrational by association. If James takes interest in and is capable of finding puzzlement and astonishment in places that conventional and monopolizing epistemologies rejected, then it is fairly clear that members of the epistemological status quo would indeed consider him and his philosophy as irrational.

When utilizing the "spirit of inner tolerance" as a point of departure for reading the latent content of the 1896 preface, the nature and function of James's description of radical empiricism dramatically changes. In this case it does not strictly function as a methodological position that harps on the rationalist, or only offer an epistemic challenge of the ideals of objective evidence and certainty. Instead, as I have argued above, it demands that we take into account the social and moral implications of its epistemological and methodological critique.

Through the attention drawn by the spirit of inner tolerance I have re-contextualized James's early radical empiricism in light of epistemic, moral, and social concerns for what I am calling "fringe sensitivity." By this I am referring to a type of locative awareness, or consciousness of epistemological place(ment).<sup>51</sup> It functions as an awareness of the epistemic relations within a given paradigm. More specifically, fringe sensitivity is cognizant of the epistemic interactivity which takes place at the borders, or fringe, of a monolithic belief system and how it relates to minority belief.<sup>52</sup> In James's case this sensitivity translates into an epistemic sympathy for the marginalized point of view, i.e. the epistemic underdog, due to the perceived social and psychological suffering as a result of being deemed an outcaste by the blind monist.<sup>53</sup>

Through the lens of fringe sensitivity James's methodology can be

displayed in [at least] two manners.<sup>54</sup> First, it suggests that he is epistemologically concerned with monitoring the discourse of truth and knowledge. For example, in *The Will to Believe* writings and elsewhere, James is directly concerned with the dogmatic manner that blind monists monopolize their own perspective as infallible and universal. In this way, radical empiricism employs a fallibilistic methodology that actively challenges dogmatism and foundationalism, and thus functions as a referee on the pragmatic field of truth and the question of what constitutes “good” science.<sup>55</sup> While this theme is pervasive throughout his mid to late 1890s writings, it is most prominent in the infamous essay, “The Will to Believe,” where James defends the legitimacy of the faith by providing a rational justification for it.

Secondly, inverting the perspectival critique leads to a robust pluralism and to the possibility of seeing a direct connection between his critique of epistemological monism(s) and ways that dogmatic claims affect individuals socially. Apart from the epistemic fallibility of a particular position, James seems to be intimately aware of the role that an “irrational” or “alogical” perspective plays within the social and cultural arena.<sup>56</sup> In fact, it becomes increasingly clear that James is also trying to defend the irrationality of the so-called alogical other—that is to say, he is trying to rationalize the irrational, or normalize the non-normal. What is inward clarity to one point of view may easily translate into discrimination and injustice from another. For James, to deem particular facts of experience as inessential datum or as being meaningless and without value is a natural consequence of the plurality of opinion. However, to universalize this perspective and deem it truth is tantamount to immoral and unsound epistemology. As James pointedly remarks in “The Will to Believe”: “[o]bjective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found?”<sup>57</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Madden, "Introduction," xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere I argue that we need to be more critical with respect to how we differentiate between James's early and mature radical empiricism, see Algaier. It is critical to note that many other scholars, e.g. Wilshire, Wild, McDermott, Edie and Lamberth, have convincingly argued that one can trace the dominant themes of James's mature philosophy of radical empiricism back into *Principles* and other early writings.

<sup>3</sup> The earliest of these essays, "The Sentiment of Rationality," was composed seventeen years prior, while the most recent, "The Will to Believe," was written in 1896. Nevertheless, this should not deter readers from seeking out radically empiricist themes in these collected essays. The fact that James chose to compile these essays, not others, into a collection which is self-characterized as radically empiricist is itself a significant factor. The fact that Madden does not find such themes makes sense when it is clear that he was looking for themes that were part and parcel of James's mature standpoint.

<sup>4</sup> Bordogna, *William James at the Boundaries*, 6. According to Bordogna's "boundary worker" analysis, James devoted much of his career to "transgressing the

boundaries between fields of knowledge, groups of knowledge workers, and realms of discourse.” For Bordogna, both pragmatism and radical empiricism functioned as “new epistemological regimes” that crossed presupposed boundaries with the goals of achieving a fluid “social geography of knowledge” and to introduce new conceptions of how to do philosophy and science (119).

<sup>5</sup>For a list of where James published and/or delivered these essays, see Fredson Bower, “The Text of *The Will to Believe*,” 311-341.

<sup>6</sup>William James, “Preface” in *WB*, 7.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 233.

<sup>9</sup>Baldwin, “Philosophy,” 290.

<sup>10</sup>James, “Teaching of Philosophy,” 4.

<sup>11</sup>James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 20

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. Ironically, the remainder of the text goes on to discuss the nature of philosophy from the point of view of metaphysics.

<sup>13</sup>For a well-rounded examination of the relationship between science and pseudo-science, see Wrobel, *Pseudo-Science and Society*; Lightman, *Victorian Science in Context*; and Clifford, *Repositioning Victorian Sciences*.

<sup>14</sup>Perry, *Thought and Character*, Vol. 1, 155.

<sup>15</sup>Amongst the biographical texts that explore James’s life and philosophy, Simon’s *Genuine Reality* and Richardson’s *William James* are unsurpassed when it comes to addressing James’s engagement with alternative therapeutics. For a thorough discussion of James’s involvement with the mind-cure movement, see Sutton, “Interpreting ‘Mind-Cure.’”

<sup>16</sup>Gavin, *William James in Focus*, xi-xii. Utilizing this strategy, Gavin argues that James’s will to believe “should not be relegated to specific domains” such as the “hard” sciences, as opposed to the “soft” sciences; “rather, it should be employed wherever choices between options are ‘forced, living, and momentous’” (xi).

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., xii.

<sup>18</sup>Classic examples of this narrative are Perry and Hester. Lamberth adds more depth to this discuss by aligning James’s perspective with the “methodological empiricism of modern science” (11-17); similarly, Bordogna associates this perspective with the practices of “good science and good philosophy” (119).

<sup>19</sup>Setting aside the controversial nature of James’s pragmatism, for the purposes of this project, we need only concern ourselves with nature of James’s implicit critique of certainty.

<sup>20</sup>James, “Preface,” 5.

<sup>21</sup>Pringle-Pattison, “Monism,” 92-93.

<sup>22</sup>That is not to say, however, that James does not suggest his own solution. He does, but it must be differentiated from radical empiricism. For example, in his 1897 Ingersoll lecture on Human Immortality, which was written shortly after having announced his radical empiricism, James employs the methodological critique as a means of challenging the certainty of physiological psychologist’s positions regarding the production theory of consciousness. He suggests a pragmatic alternative, e.g. the transmission theory, but is careful to point out that there is no clear-cut solution. In this light, it would seem that the controversial issue of the relationship between radical empiricism and pragmatism is fairly straightforward. However, as he develops both positions it becomes less clear as to their relationship, e.g. compare and contrast his comments in the preface of *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth*.

<sup>23</sup>Bordogna, *William James at the Boundaries*, 58.

<sup>24</sup>James, “Preface,” 6.

<sup>25</sup>In “The Will to Believe” James writes, “The thesis I defend is, briefly stated, this: Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided upon intellectual grounds...” (20).

<sup>26</sup>James, “Preface,” 6.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>I wish to express my gratitude and appreciation to Kyle Bromhall for sharing one of his conference papers that addresses this point. While I was already clear as to the

psychological angle of James's argument, Kyle's work further solidified this point. Bromhall, "More to Rationality."

<sup>29</sup> James, "Preface," 6.

<sup>30</sup> James, *Talks to Teachers*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> James, "Preface," 6.

<sup>32</sup> James, "A Pluralistic Mystic," 189.

<sup>33</sup> James, "Preface," 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> James, "Address of the President," 134.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>37</sup> In a letter to the editor of *Transcript* James writes, "I assuredly hold no brief for any of these healers and must confess that my intellect has been unable to assimilate their theories, so far as I have heard them given. But their *facts* are patent and startling; and anything that interferes with the multiplication of such facts, and with our freest opportunity of observing and studying them, will, I believe be a public calamity." James, *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 148.

<sup>38</sup> As Robert McDermott notes, James was a "weaver of intellectual and experiential threads" who "labored for the removal of those ideas, beliefs, and habits of mind that block insight and imagination" and that, on this account, "[t]he year 1896 is instructive." McDermott, "Introduction," xxvii.

<sup>39</sup> James, "Preface," 8.

<sup>40</sup> James, "The Will to Believe," 33.

<sup>41</sup> James, "Preface," 8.

<sup>42</sup> See James, *Talks to Teachers*, 244. Also, see James, Correspondence vol. 8, 521-522.

<sup>43</sup> James, *Talks to Teachers*, 4.

<sup>44</sup> This distinction between two types of individuals is perspectival—that is to say, it is conditionally dependent upon both context and content. A contemporary example of this dichotomy is illustrated by the stereotypical conflict between allopathic and naturopathic medicine. What is important to note is that from the perspective of the former, naturopathic medicine is irrational, folkloric, and unscientific; however, when the perspectives are reversed, a similar dichotomy arises insofar as the latter is inwardly blind to the rationality of the former.

<sup>45</sup> James, *Talks to Teachers*, 132.

<sup>46</sup> James, "Preface," 5.

<sup>47</sup> Exemplified by the Brooklynite of James's "On a Certain Blindness."

<sup>48</sup> James, "Preface," 6.

<sup>49</sup> James recognizes this point and in fact supports it wholeheartedly. Nevertheless, he felt that punishing those "vampire quacks" could be done more directly and more efficiently. He writes, "I can only reply that I sympathize most heartily with that vindictive purpose, but that a direct way must be invented. It is a poor policy to set fire to one's house to broil mutton chop, or to pour boiling water over one's dog to kill his fleas..." (James, *Essays, Comments, and Reviews*, 148).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> It is important to note that any analysis of fringe sensitivity must be relational and context-dependent, as appearing on a sliding scale within the given epistemic framework.

<sup>52</sup> Throughout his writings, both public and private, James was keenly aware of the reality of relations. Often scholars note the metaphysical or technical epistemic features of this phrase, thereby subverting its social (and/or political) dimension. Recently, however, a growing number of scholars have taken an interest in James's radical empiricism by critically re-examining its political aspects. See Coon, MacGilvray, Segrest, Stob, and Livingston.

<sup>53</sup> My suspicion is that this type of awareness arose in James through the combination of physical and cultural contact with various subaltern groups, but also in conjunction with his intellectual developments. See Taylor, Simon, and Knapp.

<sup>54</sup> Paralleling this view, James's 1896 pluralism functions in two different manners. Manifestly understood, he challenges the idea of *noetic monism*, or the standpoint that subjectivity can achieve complete unity (see Slater, "William James's Pluralism.") A



latent reading suggests that James implicitly advocates a *noetic pluralism* that embraces the multiplicity of various forms of knowledge as well as a reconsideration of the types of knowledge producers. Here we need only recall James's advocacy of the mind-curers, the importance of psychical research, and his defense of mysticism.

<sup>55</sup> On the latter point, see Bordogna, *William James at the Boundaries*, 119.

<sup>56</sup> We can see a strong parallel between James's radical empiricist attitude, with its epistemic sensitivity to the fringe facts and Gavin's analysis of James's reinstatement of the vague. Gavin writes that "When James talks of the need to preserve the vague, he is arguing against certainty, that is, against the usurping of the privileged positions of center stage once and for all by any formulation of the universe..." (Gavin, *Reinstatement of the Vague*, 2).

<sup>57</sup> James, "The Will to Believe," 22.