

William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic. By Trygve Throntveit. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 244 pp. \$90.00

William James is sometimes criticized for focusing on the individual at the expense of the social and political. Perhaps because this characterization is commonplace, relatively few scholars have considered James's impact on social ethics and political thought. *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic* by Trygve Throntveit is an innovative and persuasive look at the Jamesian social and political legacy in the United States. Throntveit attends to the moral quest he sees underlying all of James's works and challenges the judgment that James is apolitical by situating James amidst his family, contemporary public intellectuals, and religious inquiries (cf. Banks, 2015).

Throntveit examines how James's thought developed in the context of his family life by leveraging the archives of the James family, including those of his brother, novelist Henry James, Jr., and father, theologian Henry James, Sr., to illustrate how William's unfocused educational program affected his vocation and intellectual commitments. Throntveit presents a perceptive study of the James family pedagogy. In light of Henry James Sr.'s incessant pursuit of the ideal education for his eldest sons, William and Henry, and his chronic rejection of William's vocational aspirations, Throntveit observes that "...in encouraging experimentation, the father discouraged choice, in the sense of conscious decision to commit to something concrete and define one's personal and social character.... Meanwhile, paradoxically, their philosopher father gave the impression of unstinting devotion to a cause...." (p. 14). According to Throntveit, William could not adopt his father's theological anthropology, which called for the dissolution of the self (see pp. 17-26), but the son took to heart the sincerity of his father's religious quest that in turn animated the family's character. This tension not only shapes William's personality; it motivates his lifelong consideration of the varieties of selves and their mutual obligations (cf. Throntveit, 2003). The

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historical counterpoint to Henry Sr.'s mysticism was the Darwinian revolution and the emerging triumph of experimental, empirical science. William's dialectical integration of these views resulted in a new ethical appreciation of the uncertainty of one's own positions and openness to the positions of others.

Throntveit traces James's intellectual development by reading his work chronologically and relationally, drawing attention to the public intellectuals with whom he corresponded and was personally acquainted. Throntveit's innovation lies in tracing the ways in which others applied, and sometimes modified, Jamesian moral ideas during the Progressive Era. For instance, although James did not involve himself directly in politics, he taught, corresponded with, and debated many of the most influential policy shapers of the period, including W.E.B. DuBois, John Dewey, Jane Addams, Louis Brandeis, Theodore Roosevelt (his former student), and many others. These public figures directly responded to James through their intellectual leadership, policymaking authority, and access to the highest levels of elected leaders in Washington. Throntveit imagines a continuum of Progressivism and tethers William James at one end, Woodrow Wilson at the other. Between these poles is the celebrated society of progressive public intellectuals. Throntveit's careful step-by-step tracking of the thought of these leaders lends further support to his theses that James promulgated a political ethic of American public life and that this ethic was vibrantly applied in the Progressive Era.

Throntveit also links James's writing about religion with his pragmatism and ethics. Given that James defines religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine" (1985, p. 34), why take religion into consideration as a matter of public concern? In Throntveit's reading of James, "religion *is like* the countless informal social contracts made by men and women daily" (57, emphasis added). Throntveit contends that James used religion and the option of belief as a sort of middle-ground term between philosophy and

ethics, between the individual and the collective; it is by analogy a social unit that is always unfinished and contingent upon the choices of actors within it. By committing to a pragmatic ethic that could accommodate varieties of religious experience, James envisioned how a democratic society should regard the individual. Instead of arguing that a religious believer should be a virtuous person, James turns that idea around and says that an enlightened *society* should make room for those individuals who claim a variety of religious beliefs and experiences. The category of personal experience, which Throntveit believes is what James means by “religion,” becomes a field for testing ethics. After examining the biographical sources, Throntveit makes the case that James’ insistence on the unfinished character of the universe creates a field for ethical action in the public sphere at its broadest. This is “The Ethical Republic.”

For each of the above three perspectives—James’s family, public intellectual, and religious lives—there are parallel puzzling omissions. They do not affect the overall argument, however. In the area of James’s family life, there is the puzzling omission of William’s three siblings—Alice, Robertson (“Bob”), and Garth Wilkinson (“Wilky”)—because their inclusion would have strengthened the author’s thesis. The same idiosyncrasy reemerges when the author analyzes William’s 1897 speech at the dedication of the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial (pp. 136-137). William James himself does not mention in his speech that his brother Wilky fought under Shaw’s command (1982, pp. 64-74) but Wilky could not have been far from mind for William or for those in the audience who knew the James family. His brother Bob also served in and was damaged by the Civil War and his sister Alice, a young teenager at the time, sewed bandages for the Newport Women’s Aid Society. Through his three youngest siblings, at least in part, William viscerally knew the ethical cost and obligation of protecting the republic.

Regarding James as a public intellectual, Throntveit declares that *Pragmatism* is James’ “most famous work” (p. 9). That honor, however, belongs to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

(McDermott, 2013; Snarey, 2003). In fairness, Throntveit likely meant that most philosophers would identify *Pragmatism* as his most famous work, just as most psychologists would likely identify *Principles* as his most famous work. Nevertheless, an important omission remains. William James studies are maximally useful when we follow the advice of John J. McDermott (1967, 2011) to rise above our disciplinary boundaries, reach beyond ourselves, and remain open to experiencing the full breadth of James's intellectual life across philosophy, psychology, and religion.

Throntveit concludes his analysis of James's use of religion by asking the question, "Did James believe in God?" Throntveit answers, "No. He believed in the human capacity to combine audacity and humility in the face of uncertainty" (p. 81). First, of course, Throntveit is answering a somewhat *different* question from the one he asked. Second, although James *was* more sure of human ways than of those of the Divine, he often, and never unambiguously, articulated what he called an "over-belief" or hypothesis of "the Reality of the Unseen," the "More," "supreme reality," and a plurality of other appellations for God (e.g., 1985, pp. 405-407). If he lived today, James would find satisfying discussants among many existential, process, and liberation theologians who hold to similar theism hypotheses (Snarey & Bridgers, 2011). So readers might puzzle whether the "God question" is as settled as Throntveit thinks.

These minor caveats aside, this is a strong and compelling book. Throntveit successfully challenges the biased judgment of James as apolitical, primarily by lifting up James's social history and political legacy. Page after page, the text is packed with insights and food for thought. The final fruit of *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic* is that it enriches the fields of William James studies, American studies, ethics, and even political science.

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