

WILLIAM JAMES
by Suragarn Tangsirisan

I. William James: the person

- b. 1842 d.1910
- **Education:** early school in New York (1852-55); private tutors in France and England (1855-58), in German and Switzerland (1859-60); painting with William Morris Hunt in New port (1860-61); Lawrence scientific School at Harvard (1861); Harvard Medical School (1864); M.D., Harvard (1869)
- **Teaching career:** Physiology at Harvard (1872); anatomy and physiology at Harvard (1873); psychology course at Harvard (1875); Philosophy (1879); Gifford Lecture at U of Edinburgh (1901-02); Hibbert Lecture at Oxford (1908-09);
- **Health:** suffered ill-health from 1867 throughout the remaining life, always seek recuperation in Europe
- **Family:** Married to Alice Howe Gibbens in 1878, has four sons and one daughter
- **Publication:** The Principles of Psychology (1890); The Will t Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (1897); Talk to Teachers (1899); The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902); Pragmatism (1907); A Pluralistic Universe (1909); The Meaning of Truth (1909)

I. William James: his concerns

- A. "Great Men and Their Environment" expresses, "the concern with social change or evolution and the central role of individual behavior in that process" (Rambo 1982); "The Importance of Individuals"

"a particular normative ethic for optimal development of individuals and their contribution to the evolution of the community." (Rambo, 1982)

- B. "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" expresses the concern of moral ideals.

C. Response/reaction to the philosophical trends

Two philosophic trends of the 19th century which displeased James:

1) the absolute idealism of Hegel and its right wing followers, Christianity is lumped into this trend; His view of God: early and later in life

2) the mechanistic scientism/determinism.

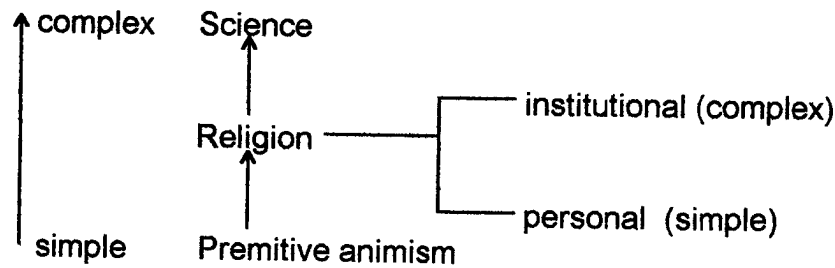
“But the whole feeling of reality, the whole sting and excitement of our voluntary life, depends on our sense that in it things are *really being decided* from one moment to another, and that it is not the dull rattling off of a chain that was forged innumerable ages ago.” (Meyers p.57)

III. William James: his religion

- A. Occasion for writing “Varieties of Religious Experience,” the Gifford lecture
- B. Purpose/presupposition of “Varieties of Religious Experience

“The problem I have set myself is a hard one: first, to defend . . . ‘experience’ against ‘philosophy’ as being the real backbone of the world’s religious life . . . and second, to make the hearer or reader believe, what I myself invincibly do believe, that, although all the special manifestations of religions may have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories), yet the life of it as a whole is mankind’s most important function.” (Varieties 17)

- C. The influence of evolutionary theory on his study of religion



science not elementary religion

- D. The influence of Empiricism in his study of religion

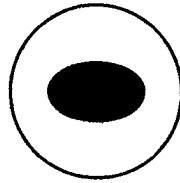
- British empiricism represented by John Locke, Berkeley, and Hume
- applies empiricism to the study of personal religion..

- E. The definition

“the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” (Varieties 49)

- F. Religious hypothesis

- bringing into play both the psychological and empirical elements



Consciousness

Subconsciousness

Subliminal consciousness

More

- Subliminal Consciousness, adopted from Gerald E. Meyers, which proposes, "Each of us is in reality an abiding psychical entity far more extensive than he knows an individuality which can never express itself completely through any corporeal manifestation." (Varieties p.492)

Example: the experience of religious conversion

Presupposition resulted from his empiricism/pragmatism: Religious idea (God, divinity) is true because of its practical consequence

IV. Sources

James, William. The Varieties of Religious Experience. Garden City, New York: Image Book, 1978.

Levinson, H. S. The Religious Investigation of William James. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981.

Perry, R. B. The Thought and Character of William James. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948.

Rambo, L.R. Evolution, Community, and the Strenuous Life: The Context of William James' "Varieties of Religious Experience." Encounter 43 (3): 239-253, 1982.