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ON A CERTAIN BLINDNESS IN WILLIAM JAMES

M. C. OTTO

The hundredth anniversary of the birth of William James has doubtless occasioned a considerable re-reading of his writings. Some of us have been stimulated by the centenary to study his output as a whole in the perspective of the century of which he was so characteristic an American expression and to the cultural enrichment of which he made so notable a contribution. For myself, this has been a rewarding experience. I did not need to be introduced to the subtle and chivalrous quality of his mind, to the revolutionary character of his philosophic exploit, or to the honesty and solidity of his scholarship; and I had long admired his valiant battle for an interpretation of life satisfying to both intellectual and aspirational needs. Yet it seemed good to be reconvinced that L. P. Jacks was quite right when, over thirty years ago, he called James "a thinker of the first rank . . . with a clear vision ahead of him, a rich and varied philosophical experience behind him, and with a great human purpose in his heart."2

Nevertheless, the rereading was in my case haunted by a vague sense of something lacking; by a feeling—for it was no more than a feeling at first—that something important was being overlooked in James's unusually successful attempt to envisage ongoing life in its concrete fullness. Gradually it became clear what this something was. The diary of James's sister Alice helped to bring it into focus. An entry made when she was an invalid in London shows that she saw an aspect of the human landscape, and saw it in the vivid colors of reality, which her brother either missed altogether or saw only in pale outline. The entry was made under date of May 5, 1890:

The Standard this morning devotes the first paragraph of its summary of news to the thrilling fact that the infant daughter of the Duke of Portland was christened in Windsor Chapel in presence of the Queen; toward the end of the column comes mention of the "impressive" gathering in Hyde Park of the workingmen on the eight-hours question—the first shall be the last, and the last shall be first! How I wish I could have seen a few of the faces of these masters of the world in whose hands our material future lies, who can say how immediately? I shall always be a bloated capitalist, I suppose,—an ignominy which, considering all things, I may as well submit to gracefully, for I shouldn't bring much body to the proletariat; but I can't help having an illogical feminine satisfaction that all my seven per cents and six per cents with which I left home have melted into fours; I don't feel as if four per cent is quite so base!

Could anything exhibit more beautifully the solidarity of the race than that by combining to walk through the streets on the same day, these starvelings should make emperors, kings, presidents, and millionaires tremble the world over? Those who have every opportunity for acquiring wisdom, and of inheriting noble, human, and generous instincts, have found no more inspired means of allaying their mutual capacities than shooting down vast hordes of innocent men, as helpless as sheep; whilst these creatures, the disinherited, with savage instincts all un subdued, have divined that brotherly help is the path to victory. What one of us, with his sentimental, emotional sympathy, ever stood by his fellow starving, and watching his dwindling wife and children for weeks? And yet every

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1 For the title of this paper I am indebted to my colleague F. H. Burkhardt.

2 Contemporary Review, XCIX (1911), 20. This article is one of the most understanding appraisals of William James and pragmatism that I have read.

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strike thousands of the unfed, the unclothed, and the unread stand or fall together and make no boast.³

Is it true that William James remained strangely blind to what his sister is here pointing out? Was he all but oblivious to the character-forming significance of the economic conditions under which men live and work? Did he underestimate the depressing, degrading effects of having to exist in poverty, day in and day out, in an atmosphere of economic insecurity, subject to being thrown on the scrap heap of unemployment when no longer wanted? Was he morally unimpressed by the militant union of workers to improve their lot and by class-conscious movements to reconstruct society radically from the bottom up?

All these questions must, I believe, be answered in the affirmative. I wish there were evidence to justify an answer in the negative, but I have been unable to find it. James's pre-eminence as a philosophic thinker will still be indisputable even if it should turn out that, like every mortal, his vision of life fell short of perfection; and his magnificent stature as a human being is secure in the long run against any misrepresentation. We owe it to his memory, however, and we owe it to those of our contemporaries in whom his pragmatic method has kindled or may yet kindle a lively hope of making philosophy fruitful in the conduct of everyday life, to determine, as precisely as we can, what his outlook embraced and what it disregarded. For only by so doing are we able to decide in what respects that outlook continues to be meaningful and vital. Moreover, if those of us who reverence him for what he was and did, shrink from such critical appraisal, we shall in all probability help to perpetuate weaknesses in his position and be guilty of adding deficiencies of our own.

In the well-known address, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," which James himself regarded as in a peculiar sense typical of his special insight,⁴ and in the companion address, "What Makes a Life Significant?" he touches upon the problem of a just society and shows interest in "some newer and better equilibrium" of life's privileges. But it is not the darker side, it is the sunny side, of the prevailing social arrangement which he seeks to make graphic. The burden of his appeal is for sympathetic appreciation of the color, the drama, the romance, and the heroism present in lives which are generally regarded as inherently barren and mean and disreputable. Consider these quotations from the second address:

We are suffering to-day in America from what is called the labor-question; and, when you go out into the world, you will each and all of you be caught up in its perplexities. I use the brief term labor-question to cover all sorts of anarchistic discontents and socialistic projects, and the conservative resistances which they provoke. So far as this conflict is unhealthy and regrettable,—and I think it is so only to a limited extent,—the unhealthiness consists solely in the fact that one-half of our fellow-citizens remain entirely blind to the internal significance of the lives of the other half.

Society has, with all this, undoubtedly got to pass toward some newer and better equilibrium, and the distribution of wealth has doubtless slowly got to change: Such changes have always happened, and will happen to the end of time. But if, after all that I have said, any of you expect that they will make any genuine vital difference on a large scale, to the lives of our descendants, you will have missed the signifi-


cance of my entire lecture. The solid meaning of life is always the same eternal thing,—the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man’s or woman’s pains.—And, whatever or wherever life may be, there will always be the chance for that marriage to take place.

Perhaps these quotations sufficiently define James’s astigmatism; but, to make doubly sure, it may be advisable to contrast his analysis with that of still another writer of the same period. When James was contending that “one half of our fellow-countrymen remain entirely blind to the internal significance of the lives of the other half,” Jacob A. Riis was proving it—proving it, however, by lifting into view the side of innumerable lives which James neglected, the seamy side. “The story is dark enough,” Riis wrote, “to send a chill to any heart.” He took tenements as an example, calling them “the evil off-spring of public neglect and private greed,” and he backed up the charge in these words:

Because they are the hot-beds of the epidemics that carry death to rich and poor alike; the nurseries of pauperism and crime that fill our jails and police courts; that throw off a scum of forty thousand human wrecks to the island asylums and the workhouses year by year; that turned out in the last eight years a round half million beggars to prey upon our charities; that maintain a standing army of ten thousand tramps with all that that implies; because, above all, they touch the family life with deadly moral contagion.6

This was the time, too, when at Chicago a new social approach to philosophy was taking form under the leadership of John Dewey and when his colleague James H. Tufts was finding himself drawn, as philosopher, into recognizing the importance of moral ideas shaped by economic forces, which were in turn growing into programs of social reconstruction, sometimes of a revolutionary nature; the time when Jane Addams, moved by “the sight of the emaciated hands of the London poor reaching for bits of half-rotten foods in the market,” was inaugurating her social experiment known as Hull-House and when John Elliott, diverted from an academic career by hearing Felix Adler, began his work with the Ethical Movement to counteract the debasing influences of sweatshops and tenements, of enforced idleness among longshoremen, truck drivers, and freight-handlers, of the reek of saloons, the violence of gang life unafraid in the city streets, of the vast sum and variety of unhappiness due to deprivation and disease. “Once you’ve heard the people calling,” Elliott later declared, “you can never hear aught else.”7 It was the time, finally, when men like Walter Wyckhoff were telling the public that great sections of the laboring class are wage slaves and nothing more, compelled to sell their brawn for whatever the market offers, and that their lives are “hard, barren, and hopeless lives,” devoid of “every element which constitutes the nobility of labor.”

Luckily for the present study, James read the Wyckhoff book and commented upon it. And his comment shows that, unlike the persons just cited, his thinking was practically unaffected by the unjust functioning of institutionalized society and that it was not seriously disturbed by the disastrous impact of a niggardly environment upon the physical and moral energies of men and women. He was naturally interested in Mr. Wyckhoff.


5 Talks, pp. 297–98.

6 How the Other Half Lives (1892), p. 3.
ckhoff's experiment "to enlarge sympathetic insight into fellow-lives" by temporarily working with a group of unskilled laborers. "For this," he said, "his sweat and toil acquire a certain heroic significance, and make us accord him exceptional esteem."\(^8\) Yes, an experiment "to enlarge sympathetic insight into fellow-lives"—that was always desirable, especially so if it led to the discovery of unsuspected human worth and dignity. And it was in this latter respect, James was sure, that Mr. Wyckhoff fell short in his observation of these workingmen. He overlooked "the current of their souls" which ran underground and which he failed to see because "he was too steeped in the ancestral blindness to discern it."\(^9\) Had he not been thus blind, he would probably have been impressed by such spiritual qualities as the following:

To say nothing of wives and babies, one may have been a convert of the Salvation Army, and had a nightingale singing of expiation and forgiveness in his heart all the while he labored. Or there might have been an apostle like Tolstoi himself, or his compatriot Bondareff, in the gang, voluntarily embracing labor as their religious mission. Class-loyalty was undoubtedly an ideal with many. And who knows how much of that higher manliness of poverty, of which Phillips Brooks has spoken so penetrately, was or was not present in his gang?\(^10\)

One who reads between the lines of this passage for its social implication can hardly fail to become aware of James's own kind of "ancestral blindness." He had an uncanny aptness for catching the luster of a life wherever and however it was lived, which is surely an admirable bias, considered solely in itself; but it was in his case the correlative of a tendency to slight the environmental cir-

\(^{8}\) *Talks*, p. 289.

which James read with high approval.” That he did, indeed, read it with high approval is beyond doubt. “Be happy,” he wrote to Wells, “in that such power has been put into your hands! This book is worth any 100 volumes on Metaphysics and any 200 of Ethics, of the ordinary sort.” And that he agreed with Wells is made evident in the same letter: “I have been 35 years on the way to similar conclusions—simply because I started as a professional and had to débrouiller them from all the traditional school rubbish.” 12 More in the same tenor could be added. It may seem, therefore, that the thesis of this paper is shaky.

It may seem so; nevertheless, it is not. The political interests of James do not change the picture in the slightest. An examination of them shows that they scarcely touch upon the issue here involved. Nor does his enthusiastic approval of Wells’s socialism. Had James lived to read Wells’s latest book, Phoenix, and had he given unqualified indorsement to its philosophy, the problem would be a more complicated one; but the foregoing interpretation of James’s philosophy would still stand up. As James knew the socialism of H. G. Wells, it is a socialism of the spirit, a socialism not directly concerned with economic processes, institutions, or arrangements. These are referred to as mere “passive effects,” not causal forces. 13 That is probably why James found it a congenial conception. It is, moreover, worth noting that James hesitated to go all the way with Wells. He complained of a little too much monism. One may guess that he found a little too much plan in affairs—not enough freedom to sink or swim in reliance upon one’s individual powers.

At all events, I am persuaded that if James himself could read this paper he would admit the fact but reject the interpretation. I can imagine him restating the criticism, as he frequently did under such circumstances, giving it the benefit of every doubt, as was his wont, and lending it the unique force of his own incisive thinking and vivid presentation, so that it would seem unassailable—the case closed, finished, airtight—with only the question left over how anyone could have entertained any other view and why all of us had not read his philosophy in this light from the beginning of our acquaintance with it. This done, I can imagine him taking off his coat, rolling up his sleeves, and demolishing the structure of my argument, thus approved, piece by piece, until nothing remained of it but verbal debris. The upshot of it all would turn out to be his admission that the designated aspects of human experience did not enter functionally into his philosophy, coupled with a denial that this constituted a flaw which needed to be repaired.

Rather than continue in this vein, which is, after all, rather speculative, let us return to the point of this paper, namely, that James treated certain important social facts as he might have brushed against strangers in a crowd. There must have been some reason for this. We may conclude the argument with an attempt to decide what the reason was. The problem whether he simply missed seeing those social facts for what they are or intentionally averted his eyes in the belief that they were philo-


13 Wells declares himself antagonistic, it will be remembered, to the philanthropic socialism of kindly persons, to the class-hated socialism of fierce people, and still more to “that furtive Socialism of the specialist which one meets most typically in the Fabian Society” (First and Last Things [New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1908], pp. 138–39).
sophically irrelevant is one we are not required to solve.

This much is certain. The explanation is not that James was indifferent to human suffering or frustration. On the contrary, he was almost abnormally sensitive to distress and impulsively sympathetic. He was compassionate, abhorred cruelty, and could be counted upon always and instantly to take sides with the underdog in a struggle. Nor were those who do the hard work of the world beyond the reach of his imagination. "Not in clanging fights and desperate marches only is heroism to be looked for" he once said, in an address, "but on every railway bridge and fire-proof building that is going up to-day. On freight-trains, on the decks of vessels, in cattle-yards and mines, on lumber-rafts, among the firemen and the policemen, the demand for courage is incessant; and the supply never fails. There, every day of the year somewhere, is human nature in extremis for you." He confesses that, as he awoke to these unidealized heroic lives around him, the scales seemed to fall from his eyes, and "a wave of sympathy greater than anything [he] had ever before felt with the common life of common men began to fill [his] soul." It seemed to him "as if virtue with horny hands and dirty skin were the only virtue genuine and vital enough to take account of."

But he was, at the same time, strongly antipathetic to regimentation or control. It would be an exaggeration to accuse him of recoiling from harnesses and bridles exactly as he did from whips, but an exaggeration which communicates truth. For, like Emerson, he was captivated by the ideal of absolutely unentangled and unfettered individuality. He, too, could have written: "I cannot find language of sufficient energy to convey my sense of the sacredness of private integrity." It is here, I believe, that we begin to get the explanation we seek. Social institutions endangered the purity of individuality. Even organizations formed to combat economic injustice and to win for deprived men and women a better chance at the basic requisites of a satisfying life were likely, by encroaching upon "the sacredness of private integrity," to be a greater evil than the evil they were intended to remedy. His social credo, announced in a letter to Mrs. Henry Whitney, has been frequently quoted and for different purposes. The context throws light on the quotation. It was written apropos of the chapter, "Democracy," in Woodberry's Heart of Man, and presumably as a reaction against the doctrine there expounded that democracy is for the nation a true embodiment of the ideal life, because in it "the individual mingles with the mass, and becomes one with mankind, and mankind itself sums the totality of individual good in a well-nigh perfect way." Here is James:

As for me, my bed is made: I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms, and with the invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, and yet rending the hardest monuments of man's pride, if you give them time. The bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed. So I am against all big organizations as such, national ones first and foremost; against all big successes and big results; and in favor of the eternal forces of truth which always work in the individual and immediately unsuccessful way, under-dogs always, till history comes, after they are long dead, and puts them on the top.

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14 Talks, pp. 274-75.  
15 Ibid., p. 275.  
16 The Letters of William James, II, 90. Of the chapter in question (G. C. Woodberry, Heart of
This, then, is the positive reason for James’s unconcern in matters so desperately important for human welfare and worth. It serves to explain why a man of the humanity of James was satisfied with a philosophy which ignored the remediable social ills from which great numbers of his fellow-men suffered, why the keenest of psychologists was not struck by the tragic results in these lives of physical, intellectual, and moral undernourishment, and why, consequently, the philosopher who insisted that all ideas, to be meaningful, must be translated into actual goings and doings, failed to apply his pragmatism to economic society.

There are, in addition, at least two negative reasons that confirm the conclusion. For one thing, James’s battleground was the cosmos, not society; he was—to borrow and slightly mishandle Horace Kallen’s discerning phrase—“a metaphysical democrat.” The point at issue for him was the right to believe in the authenticity and significance of ideals, of “over-beliefs,” in the face of advancing scientific knowledge which many thoughtful people feared might eventually altogether invalidate any such beliefs and which every informed person knew to constitute at least a serious threat to them. He took the field and kept the field to win freedom for man’s spirit, freedom from the paralyzing effect of scientific mechanism and philosophic rationalism, each of which in its own way imprisoned mankind in a rigidly closed system of events, theoretically leaving no room for personal initiative or creativeness.

For another thing, the time had not come—for most people it has not yet come—to recognize the vital interdependence of the individual and the environmental objects and procedures by means of which he lives and achieves. This truth was still to be elucidated by John Dewey. In James’s philosophy man is in, but not of, the environment; the social situation, the social institution, of whatever kind or grade, is a “secondary” phenomenon, because it is merely a “ministerial,” not a “fundamental,” phenomenon. “Wherever a process of life,” he held, “communicates an eagerness to live it, there the life becomes genuinely significant.” Nobly said. But the word “Wherever” covers up the profound fact that this eagerness is not achievable everywhere. In James’s view it is achievable anywhere and everywhere. One can almost hear him say, again with Emerson: “These benefactors hope to raise man by improving his circumstances: by combination of that which is dead, they hope to make something alive. In vain.” Is not this the burden, in essence, of his own words?

There are compensations: and no outward changes of condition in life can keep the nightingale of its eternal meaning from singing in all sorts of different men’s hearts. That is the main fact to remember. If we could not only admit it with our lips, but really and truly believe it, how our convulsive inconsistencies, how our antipathies and dreads of each other would soften down! If the poor and the rich could look at each other in this way, sub specie aeternitatis, how gentle would grow their disputes! what tolerance and good humor, what willingness to live and let live, would come into the world!\(^{19}\)


\(^{18}\) Talks, p. 234.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 301.
Granting everything for which this paper has contended, the deficiency is more than offset by James's contribution to the enrichment of our common life. and the correction of the deficiency, it is certain, does no violence to the principles at work in that contribution but carries them forward to ampler fulfilment. Even in the field of social effort, "the Jamesian attitude and the pragmatic method," as Horace Kallen has put it, "with their emphases on individuality, spontaneity and novelty, their stress on free initiative and real action in time, offer salutary correctives." Mr. Kallen speaks on this theme with peculiar authority; and his challenging words, with which we end, are as relevant as they are timely in this day of world-wide perplexity and revolutionary change:

The philosophy of William James opens for the children and victims of this civilization in the twentieth century, a clear way out of its levelings and enslavements. It is a map of life for us modern men, a lamp to light our steps upon the hillroad of freedom, courage, and creative endeavor. It expresses what is most deeply inward in our nature, and shows us how to meet the untoward event in hope without illusion.  

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20 Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, VIII (1932), 369.