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William James's Politics of Personal Freedom

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Contemporary pragmatists often describe politics as primarily an exercise in social organization. Our tendency is to see the task of political philosophy in terms of the conceptualization of social, governmental, and legal institutions that will protect and deepen the core liberal values of freedom and equality. John Patrick Diggins could thus confidently and truly assert in 1994 that pragmatism “embrace[s] society as almost redemptive ... no other modern philosophy has so dignified the social” (Diggins 1994, 160–61), I do not see this claim as untrue so much as the unfortunate residue of recent pragmatism’s narrow emphasis on a social conception of a pragmatist politics. This emphasis has been at the expense of early pragmatists’ skepticism toward the idea that social institutions are the tool most useful for deepening democratic freedom and equality. In articulating pragmatist politics within frameworks with decided biases for the social over the individual, recent pragmatists have obscured a novel element central to early pragmatists William James and John Dewey: the philosophical and political idea of a *personal* action that is reducible to neither *individual* power nor *social* relations.

Recent pragmatism’s social bias is perhaps clearest in the case of Richard Rorty.¹ In his early work, Rorty defended a conception of knowledge as a social product, describing his position as “explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say” (Rorty 1979, 174).² In Rorty’s later work on politics, this social conception of epistemic practice is rephrased in terms of a social authority of consensus. In the first instance, political authority rests on the weight of social consensus: “nothing save freely achieved consensus among human beings has any authority at all” (Rorty 1998, 18). Further, democratic politics is mostly a matter of finding ways of broadening consensus, of bringing more persons into the authoritative social fold: the resolution of disagreement always requires “widen[ing] the range of consensus about how things are” (35). Rorty thus often slides toward a conception of democratic politics as purely social and consensual—individual dissensus is accommodated in private rather than explicitly invited or cherished as a valuable aspect of democratic political culture.

Rorty is not alone in voicing this position—his work skillfully condenses themes entrenched over the last twenty-five years of pragmatist political theory (these themes are equally prevalent in non-pragmatist liberal and socialist theory). According to Richard Bernstein, the value of pragmatism is that it articulates social insights such as the following: “the institutionalization of democratic forms of life require[s] a new understanding of the genesis and development of practical sociality” (Bernstein 1991, 48).³ Cornel West, who describes his envisioned “Emersonian culture of creative democracy” as one “in which human participation is encouraged and for which human personalities are enhanced,” tends to view participation and personality in decidedly social terms. According to West’s vision of Emersonian culture, “social experimentation is the basic norm” because “once one gives up on the search for foundations and the quest for certainty, human inquiry into truth and knowledge shifts to the social and communal circumstances under which persons can communicate and cooperate in the process of acquiring knowledge” (West 1989, 213).

Pragmatists should not accept these arguments. Once we abandon the quest for certainty, the balance of interest does not necessarily tip toward the social. My argument is that our interest should shift, rather, to the synergy between individual and social forces that alone cultivates democratic practice. Only in this way can we hold in vision a conception of democratic practice that both originates and terminates in human personality.

Dewey wrote that democracy “is, as we often say, though perhaps without appreciating all that is involved in the saying, a way of life, social and individual. . . . In one word, democracy means that *personality* is the first and final reality.”⁴ We are social insofar as we always constitute ourselves in terms of our relations to others. We are individual insofar as we are free to alter the terms of these relationships, and in a way that is not fully determined by the social relations preceding our free acts. Freedom can only be practiced *in* society and it can only be practiced *by* individuals. Recent arguments to the effect that “social practice” fully captures the essence of democratic politics unnecessarily exclude the political relevance of “individual practice.” I thus find a theme of continuing relevance in the early pragmatists’ conception of democracy as a political practice that focuses both the social and the individual. I here refer to this democratic synergy between the *social* and the *individual* as the *personal* or the *interpersonal*.

Before further expanding upon the concept of personal freedom as it was developed in the political and psychological theories of William James, I first briefly turn to the cultural criticism of Henry James in order to highlight the importance for our times of a conception of freedom that holds together individuality and sociality. The younger James brother clearly throws into relief the dangers implicit in mistaking the comforts of good social management for the accomplishments of personal practices of freedom.

Henry James on Democracy in America

Upon returning to America after an absence of twenty-two years, Henry James was struck by the extent to which America is guided not by substantive traditions, but rather by the force of its own democratic activity. James discerns a curious fact about America: here one must wholly make oneself. "The constituted blankness was the whole business, and one's opportunity was all, thereby, for a study of exquisite emptiness" (H. James 1907, 30); America is a "struggle in the void" (122);⁵ here one's "curiosity is fairly fascinated by the sense of the immensity of the chance" attending the democratic consistency (44).⁶ The opportunities of democratic blankness are the very stuff out of which James produces his own critical and aesthetic reflection on America.⁷

James realizes the magnitude of the risk associated with democratic opportunity. In an early visit to New York City's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, James finds himself in the "presence of a revelation of the possibilities of the hotel—for which the American spirit has found so unprecedented a use and a value; leading it on to express so a social, indeed positively aesthetic ideal, and making it so, at this supreme pitch, a synonym for civilization" (78–79). This "ubiquitous American force, the most ubiquitous of all," is described by James as a perfectly stable equilibrium between "the element of ingenuous joy below and of consummate management above" (81). Here in the hotel one witnesses a total fluidity between docility and discipline—democratic opportunity is abandoned for the comforts of a well-managed life, a democracy of freedom exchanged for a democracy of desire.

I see the whole thing overswept as by the colossal extended arms, waving the magical baton, of some high-stationed orchestral leader, the absolute presiding power, conscious of every note of every instrument, controlling and commanding the whole volume of sound, keeping the whole effect together and making it what it is. What may one say of such a spirit if not that he understands, so to speak, the forces he sways, understands his boundless American material and plays with it like a master indeed? One sees it thus, in its crude plasticity, almost in the likeness of an army of puppets whose strings the wealth of his technical imagination teaches him innumerable ways of pulling, and yet whose innocent, whose always ingenuous agitation of their members he has found means to make them think of themselves as delightfully free and easy. (82)⁸

The organizational spirit of the hotel produces the "reduction of everything to an average of decent suitability" (325). Normalization tragically empties blank freedom of all the intellectual and aesthetic potential that James recognizes in the democratic consistency. Yet the "master-spirits of management" are not forces of oppression—their entire production is an effect of their patrons' desires for a

managed experience.⁹ The waste of democratic opportunity is the tragedy of apathy.

If democracy's blankness can be occupied by a fluid synthesis of apathy and management, it can also be occupied by aesthetic energy and the limitless realization of life's "margin." Ross Posnock argues that James was "convinced that modernity does not announce the degradation of the human spirit but is a compelling and uncompleted project with the potential to be creatively revised in less disciplinary directions" (Posnock 1992, 48).¹⁰ The democratic experiment depends, James suggests in terms reminiscent of his older brother, on the energies reserved in "the Margin," that ever-expanding perimeter of the materially possible, that field in which is harbored the chance of future.¹¹ Wherever one finds oneself in America, one is always fully "submerged in the immense fluidity" of the margin (H. James 1907, 296). For good or for bad, "nothing here is grimly ultimate" (H. James 1898, 246). The margin is a "perpetual increase," an "immeasurable muchness," and a "fathomless depth" that cannot possibly be anticipated by any technique of control. It is here in the margin that one can *with effort* draw up reserved energies to experience "the mere looming mass of the *more*, the more and more to come" (H. James 1907, 296). Upon his initial arrival in America, James had already described this "monstrous form of Democracy" in these terms: "*the will to grow* was written everywhere large" (43, 44).

The democratic challenge consists in refusing to cede this hope for the seductive simplicities of managed existence. If growth is written across democracy, the surrender of engaged effort equals the management of apathy, which is but a step away from the worst degradation of the democratic margin: imperialism. In the final pages of *The American Scene*, James laments from his Pullman car window the desecration of the American landscape by the locomotive spread of materialism. He takes the very train he rides as a symbol for crass expansionism. The Pullman cars are a grand hotel made mobile.¹² As passengers observe the countryside from behind the transparent windows that shelter the expert management of their desires, the will to grow degenerates into a docility that covers the land with what James forcefully decries as "ugliness."¹³

William James on Freedom as Self-Creation

Upon the publication of William James's *A Pluralistic Universe*, Henry wrote to him: "I'm *with* you, all along the line—& can conceive of no sense in any philosophy that is not yours! As an artist & a 'creator' I can catch on, hold on, to pragmatism, & can work in the light of it & apply it."¹⁴ It is not inconsequential that Henry appreciates the value of William's philosophy in terms of his own role as a "creator." It is above all in terms of their conduciveness to self-creation that William James's reflections on freedom are valuable.

These meditations on the creative value of freedom are unique in that James explicates freedom in terms of its potential to overcome both the ethical problem of determinism and the political problem of complacency. That James addressed the importance of freedom as a means for overcoming the paralysis of determinism is well-known from papers such as “The Dilemma of Determinism” and the “Will” chapter in *The Principles of Psychology*.¹⁵ Regarding freedom's value for transcending political quietism, James was not often as direct. The subtleties of his political vision have led commentators to a multiplicity of critical interpretations, from dismissive charges of apathy to assimilation of his thought to extant political traditions.¹⁶ The relevance of James's political thought is both more nuanced and more radical than these standard interpretations suppose.

I find this radicalism easier to grip if we employ a quintessential Jamesian approach in our interpretation of James himself: that of dissolving a venerable distinction into a harmless tension. In this case, we ought to read James as holding together the political and psychological aspects of freedom. The theme unifying James's philosophy and politics of freedom is a refusal of complacent inaction—in philosophical psychology inaction is known as determinism and in politics it is known as complacency.

In numerous letters James unequivocally connected the problem of complacency to the institutional and social biases that were, in his day, increasingly pervading the American scene:

The organization of great machines for “slick” success is the discovery of our age; and, with us, the individual, as soon as he realizes that the machine will be irresistible, *acquiesces* silently, instead of making an impotent row. One acquiescence leads to another, until acquiescence itself becomes organized. ... We get to live under the organization of corruption, and since all needful functions go on, we next treat reform as a purely literary ideal: We defend our rotten system. Acquiescence becomes active partnership.¹⁷

James's thought is that the institutions commonly supposed to secure our freedom tend instead to make us impotent. More than this, though, they manage our impotence and transform it into the positive contribution of cultivated docility. We live as if within Pullman cars—we do not so much contribute to America as we silently watch it pass us by, the cheerful patrons of a meticulously organized hotel society.

Following his discontent with the rise of American imperialism in the 1890s, James more and more expressed concern with the political problem that he, in his characteristic preference for simple language, labeled as the problem of “bigness.”

The resounding idol of mere empty “bigness” and “success” is killing every genuine quality and ideal.¹⁸

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 monument’s 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.¹⁹

*Every great institution is perforce a means of corruption—whatever good it may also do.*²⁰

The larger the institution, the more easily our freedom is rendered ineffective.²¹ Greater masses channel our energies through mechanisms that hollow them of all creative force. James’s concern is that we too readily institutionalize our social relationships in forms that supersede, and later extinguish, the actual energies they were supposed to cultivate.

Although it is tempting, we should be careful to not misinterpret James’s antipathy toward bigness as rooted in a classical liberal defense of the purity of the individual: this is no crass individualism through which James disguises a lack of serious political nerve. The “bigness” that he opposes is a figure for the disciplinary constitution of socialized individuals, not a figure for the material oppression of sacred individuals whose rights precede the institutions of their production.²² James is not defending the purity of the individual from its corruption by social institutions; he is defending the creative energies that individuals can inject into institutions.

The decisive question is one of prioritization. Should politics be a matter of institutional crafting? Or should it be a matter of ethical practice, a way of life?²³ James is unequivocally in favor of the latter. He defends freedom as an ethic based on the creative potential that is, he thinks, the only means to melioration. Freedom is James’s radical alternative to the docility implicit in all bigness. James offers nothing less than a reconstruction of the axis around which political theory and practice revolve. That axis is actual living persons. This is a very democratic axis indeed—it is the idea that goods and truths must always originate *and* terminate in vital human interests.

James thus unceasingly sought to defend our right to believe in freedom and thus our right to place hope in ourselves. James thought of freedom as “a moral postulate about the Universe, the postulate that what ought to be can be, and that bad acts cannot be fated, but that good ones must be possible in their place” (W. James 1890a, 2:573). Thus, in addressing the “Dilemma of Determinism,” James does not seek to prove that we are free.²⁴ To prove freedom is to force a belief in freedom, to compel it. A mind compelled to be free is by defini-

tion not free. That is why the question of freedom is as much ethical as it is psychological. Confronting the common inaction of determinism and complacency, James famously asserted that “our first act of freedom, if we are free, ought in all inward propriety to be to affirm that we are free” (W. James 1884, 146).²⁵ James does not demonstrate the existence of a freedom that we must already possess. He affirms a possibility: we too may create ways of acting freely. Freedom is an ethical relation to ourselves and others. It is a relation, moreover, that persons must assume for themselves. We *assume* freedom not only in the rational sense of postulating it, but also in the ethical and political sense of taking it upon ourselves and accepting our responsibility to it. Freedom is thus lived by persons.

Living a Philosophy of Freedom

It is an essential quality of James's thought that his philosophical theses emerged from within the very texture of his own living experience. James asserted that the first act of free will ought to be an affirmation of our own freedom because he had himself experienced freedom in this very way. James lived his philosophy—his philosophy can thus only be understood as an artifact of the life that produced it. “In James, personality and philosophy are inextricably connected” (Myers 1986, 53). “He was thus a philosopher in Emerson's sense. He was Man Thinking, as a result of the impact of life and of the need to find his directions” (Matthiessen 1947, 210). “[James identified] philosophy with personal conviction. His philosophy was never a mere theory, but always a set of beliefs which reconciled him to life” (Perry 1935, 122). “The mud of life's beginning and the heaven of its hopes stain his pages with the glad, sweaty sense of life itself” (Lippmann 1910, 257). In James's case in particular, one is acutely aware that understanding his philosophy requires exercises in biography. Reading James's philosophy of freedom as a function of biography enables recognition of an essential quality of his concept of freedom: it is an action or experience of persons rather than a possession or an attribute of people.

If this is true, we ought then to expect that James lived his own conception of freedom. And indeed one of the most notable features of James's personal practice of freedom was his opposition to institutional and social biases wherever he saw them replacing the striving energy of people. James revolted wherever he saw a rule being substituted for a personality: in medical licensing mandates, in imperialism, in degree requirements for university professors. These causes and others James opposed through action within political organizations, through lectures and addresses carefully crafted for a popular audience, through a poetic practice of philosophical writing that at every possible opportunity

stretched the potentiality of his words and the actions that they performed, through newspaper editorials that were reprinted throughout the country, and in a voluminous correspondence through which he impressed his convictions on the best minds of the day.

James's politics could not have been, for him, only a matter of an institutional reform that he could glibly codify in an elegant treatise of political theory. And yet this is precisely what his critics blame him for in calling him apolitical, individualistic, cynical, or complacent. James was not apolitical, but political in a new key. James turned away from the prevailing intellectualisms in which philosophical ideals are made the measure of political action and toward the genuine realities in which philosophical values and ideals are daily forged in sweat and effort. In constant opposition to that hotel spirit of management (where the population does nothing for itself), James sought to practice a democratic politics on a personal level. This means a politics of and between persons—it is difficult to imagine a more democratic conception of politics.

Personal Freedom as Social and Individual

The *personal* practice of freedom I discern in James thus brings together *social* and *individual* considerations, but without degrading into pure socialism (utilitarianism) or pure individualism (romanticism). We are at this point a long way from most contemporary pragmatists, who, if they can even recognize the value of both utilitarian and romantic ideals, can do so only by cultivating strict separations of the two. James's pragmatism seeks to hold together our instrumental social goals and our romantic individual goals—he thus sought synergy and tension where other philosophers are too often content with separation, division, and purification. Individual spontaneity contributes to community just as communal environments shelter individuating impulses: “Both factors are essential to change. The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community” (W. James 1880, 232).²⁶ Important in this thought, and too often glossed over, is the essentiality of the individual contribution:

There is a zone of insecurity in human affairs in which all the dramatic interest lies; the rest belongs to the dead machinery of the stage. ... The zone of the individual differences, and of the social “twists” which by common confession they initiate, is the zone of formative processes, the dynamic belt of quivering uncertainty, the line where past and future meet. It is the theatre of all we do not take for granted, the stage of the living drama of life; and however narrow its scope, it is roomy enough to lodge the whole range of human passions. (W. James 1890b, 258, 259)

Freedom is this living combination of social and individual forces.

What matters most is the particular energies we contribute. Do our actions inject additional value into the world or do they deform it and make life wretched? Do we acquiesce in complacent partnership with flattening bigness? Or do we assume the infinite task of freedom, the creation and government of ourselves? Do we make ourselves or do we allow that others may make us? The difference made by freedom over determinacy is that made by our effort over our inaction.²⁷

It is only through personal effort with and for others that we create and sustain better futures. This is the political and ethical worth of James's meliorism. It yields and strengthens the efforts through which we assume the very freedom requisite for a democratic existence. Effort is one of the centermost concepts in James's vision of democracy as a personal, that is, interpersonal, practice of freedom. As at the turn of the last century, it is again, at the turn of our own, needed now more than ever as counteraction to our expanding complacencies.²⁸

Notes

1. Following up on Diggins's claim, Barry Allen writes of pragmatism's social bias that it "has been present since the beginning of American philosophy, though Rorty takes it further than ever" (Allen 2004, 148).

2. Rorty more recently writes "Seeking objectivity is just a matter of getting as much intersubjective agreement as you can imagine" (1993, 15).

3. Cf. Bernstein (1980, 771) and Kai Neilsen's characterization of Deweyan pragmatism as giving "social problems a rational and penetrating treatment" (Neilsen 1991, 140).

4. Dewey (1937, 217; 1888, 244). Dewey scholars have commented on this theme before. Most of the time, however, they tend to err on one side or the other, emphasizing either individual or community. Stuhr emphasizes the society as formative of the individual: "Individuality is a social product, a result of social relationships ... an achievement, the result of an irreducibly social development of forces" (1998, 92). The risk here is, of course, reducing individual agency, a trap that Stuhr appears to avoid, but not without some undue difficulty. Rosenthal clearly explicates the self as individual and social: "Any self thus incorporates, by its very nature, both the conformity of the group perspective and the creativity of its unique individual perspective" (Rosenthal 1993, 60). See also Westbrook (1991, 44).

5. Robert Pippin writes that "in James's mythic landscape" American blankness names "a collapse of the reliability of traditional form"—yet this "uncertainty" is not mourned by James as pure loss, for it also creates "radical possibility" (Pippin 2000, 5). Pippin locates James's conception of the moral life in terms that strongly parallel the conception of personal practice that I below explicate in William James: "the achievement of free subjectivity requires a certain sort of social relation among subjects ... a genuine reciprocity" (172–73, 176).

6. Cf. H. James (1898, 247).

7. Cf. Gunn (2001, 93); Stevens (1955, 30); Pippin (2000, 44).

8. The hotel is a figure found throughout James's text (cf. James 1907, 31, 77ff., 299, 322ff., 329, 338).

9. Cf. H. James 1907, 82.

10. Cf. Posnock 1991a.

11. Cf. H. James (1907, 295). Henry's interest in the margin is specifically reminiscent of the figures of the "fringe" in William's *The Principles of Psychology* (cf. W. James 1890a, 1:258ff.)

and *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (cf. W. James 1912, 207) and the “margin” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (W. James 1902, 190–91).

12. Cf. H. James 1907 (299–300); trains are another frequent figure in *The American Scene* (cf. 11, 24, 30, 36, 57, 108, 118, 186, 243, 299, 319, 340ff.).

13. Cf. H. James 1907, 341.

14. Henry to William James, July 18, 1909 in William James, *CWJ* 3:393; cf. Matthiessen (1947, 344) and Gunn (2001, 87ff.).

15. Cf. W. James (1890a, II.571ff.).

16. The most common interpretation of James’s political writings and practice is that he is deeply complacent. The majority of commentators see him either as straightforwardly apolitical (cf. West 1989, 60; Diggins 1994; Kloppenberg 1986, 161, 189, 453n62; Kuklick 1977 311ff.; Kuklick 2001, 167; Matthiessen 1947, 617ff.) or as a staunch individualist with little regard for the social plight of others (cf. Mumford 1926; Otto 1943; Posnock 1991b, 584; Cotkin 1990, 141; Garrison and Madden 1977). Most who do take seriously James’s politics unfortunately do so by reading him into mainstream liberal and socialist traditions (cf. Lentricchia 1988, 128; Kloppenberg 1986, 174; Kloppenberg 1996, 122; Smith 2004, 144ff.). Worth noting is the small contingent who have read James into minority political traditions such as republicanism (cf. Malachuk 2000) or communitarian-anarchism (cf. Coon 1996; Cotkin 1990). Also similar in some ways to my own readings of James’s politics are Randolph Bourne’s early recognition of the striking originality of James’s political thought (cf. Pettegrew 2000, 115) and Harvey Cormier’s too-brief description of James’s pragmatic politics of personal effort (cf. Cormier 2001, 176).

17. James to Josephine Lowell, Dec. 6, 1903 quoted in Coon (1996, 91).

18. James to Henry W. Rankin, Feb. 22, 1899 in W. James, *CWJ* 8:499.

19. James to Sarah Wyman Whitman, June 7, 1899 in W. James (1920, 2:90).

20. James to William M. Salter, Sept. 11, 1899 in W. James (1920, 2:101).

21. Thus James opposed not only Roosevelt’s expansionist imperialism, but also the consolidation of medical practice in licensing boards that would effectively ban non-allopathic medicine (cf. James to Putnam, Mar. 2, 1898, in W. James 1920, 2:66), as well as the increasing standard of universities hiring only candidates with a Ph.D. degree (cf. W. James 1903); cf. Stuhr (2003, 89–92) for some interesting suggestions following James on this.

22. Cf. Coon (1996, 80) for a similar point of view.

23. Andrew F. Smith summarizes the relevance of this distinction for James’s thought, locating the value of James’s contribution not as one to “questions of institutional design, or of the constitution and character of an adequate scheme of social and political institutions,” but to “questions regarding *political morality*, or what principles of morality should inform political action” (Smith 2004, 137).

24. Cf. W. James (1884).

25. Cf. W. James (1890a, 2:573).

26. For directing my attention to this passage in particular I thank Harvey Cormier.

27. “Effort,” wrote James, “may be needed to keep the faith in freedom” (W. James 1890a, 2:574); “James’s pragmatism is above all an effort, in the spirit of Emerson, to keep us human agents struggling to fashion and refashion ourselves and our world” (Cormier 2001, 176).

28. I would like to thank Barry Allen, Jessica Beard, Harvey Cormier, Thom Donovan, G.B. Madison, and two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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