

**TRANSFORMING  
THE SELF AMIDST  
THE CHALLENGES  
OF CHANCE**

WILLIAM JAMES

ON “OUR  
UNDISCIPLINABLES”

COLIN KOOPMAN

Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1852 novel *The Blithedale Romance* offers a fictionalized portrayal of the author's 1841 immersion in the utopian commune of Brook Farm. The experiment in sociality begins as the narrator sets out through a "pitiless snowstorm, in quest of a better life" consoling himself against the storm with the following meditation on the moral meaning of his efforts: "The greatest obstacle to being heroic is the doubt whether one may not be going to prove one's self a fool; the truest heroism is, to resist the doubt; and the profoundest wisdom, to know when it ought to be resisted, and when to be obeyed."<sup>1</sup> Hawthorne's moral meditation, and indeed the novel on the whole insofar as it is riddled with all manner of indecision, offers a paradigmatic statement of a nineteenth-century problematic to which conceptions of chance then still being solidified would soon be seen as offering a response. If doubt was of deep moral concern for Hawthorne and those of his milieu, then it should be unsurprising that an emerging obsession with chance and probability soon came to be regarded with equal moral gravity.

According to Ian Hacking in *The Emergence of Probability* (1975), modern sciences and technologies of probability stabilized sometime around 1660. Hacking offers Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) as a representative figure.<sup>2</sup> Continuing this history in *The Taming of Chance* (1990), Hacking shows that it would not be until the late nineteenth century, as paradigmatically represented in Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), that technologies of probability were able to tame chance enough to defeat the moral and epistemological specters of determinism.<sup>3</sup> A sea change separates Peirce from Leibniz.

To gain a sense of that sea change, consider that Hawthorne's concern with doubt is just one historical configuration of a long-term obsession of Western modernity. Hawthorne helps mark the erosion of a kind of generalized anxiety over doubt that stretches back before Leibniz, at least as far as René Descartes. In seeking to refute doubt, Descartes implicitly presented it as something to be argued away. For Descartes, this involved refiguring doubt as a purely mental affair. The Cartesian difference is always the difference that mind makes. Doubt could become a moment to be reasoned away in that new space of the interiorized mind. Meanwhile, other philosophers less rationalist and more empiricist in bent, yet as committed as Descartes to the importance of mentality, would position experience as the posit that defeats doubt. For Hawthorne, in contrast to such philosophical predecessors, doubt and its dealings were not so much affairs of the mind as matters of action. Descartes was mentally anxious beside his warm fire, while Hawthorne was hesitant in his capacities to act as the snow blustered about him. These are two radically different forms of doubt.

In Hawthorne doubt is a condition of possibility of a certain kind of potency or agency. Doubt is not so much to be defeated as to be worked through. We resist doubt, but we need it as a term of resistance through which we may act. The Cartesian theatrics of mind according to which doubt can be nullified by reason alone had come to seem unworkable to Hawthorne and many of his American contemporaries. For many Americans of the generation following Hawthorne's, and perhaps most notably the pragmatist philosophers, purely mental defeat of doubt would become, in actual fact, impossible. The middle decades of nineteenth-century America were witness to a new

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relationship to doubt that swiftly spread throughout American culture.<sup>4</sup> Following the fiery furnaces of the Civil War, doubt in America came to be seen less as an invitation to wary skepticisms and more as an antidote to violent dogmatisms. One way of formulating the pragmatist response to this transformation of doubt would be to follow Hacking's narrative of how chance (and related notions of probability and possibility) came to be seen as a viable response to doubt. Whereas for Descartes chance is part of the problem, for Peirce, "chance itself pours in at every avenue of sense" as a fund of a new mode of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Peirce's pragmatist epistemology thus punctuates the end of one phase of modern philosophies of doubt and the beginning of another.

Why should chance have poured into Peirce when Descartes was wholly numb to it? Consider how radically different the conduct of their lives must have been. By the end of the nineteenth century it would have been enormously difficult for the ordinary person not to take chance seriously. For us today, more than a hundred years later, we are thoroughly ensconced in probabilistic chances. Think of the enormous practical trust we place in probabilities of all kinds whenever we account for such likelihoods as contracting a disease, suffering an accident, winning a lottery, indeed even the likelihood of finding someone with whom we might fall in love (perhaps via an online matchmaking site that employs probabilistic algorithms). Nothing could be further from Descartes's quest for certainty. Descartes could propose to refute skepticism by meditation and disputation, but doubt was built right into Peirce's life in the form of odds and ratios that were increasingly everywhere. Chance was by Peirce's time what it remains for us now: an obdurate arrangement that had invaded practical realities such that it could no longer be reasoned out of existence.

A vivid example of this can be found in the measurements that Peirce spent much of his life making as a coast surveyor for the federal government. No two measurements of relative positions along a shoreline will be exactly identical if the surveyor shrinks or expands their scale enough.<sup>6</sup> Thus the coast surveyor must figure out averages so as to account for various kinds of probability of difference and error. Peirce spent much of a career doing just this. Today he is remembered as a philosopher, but in fact the only book Peirce ever published was titled *Photometric Researches: Made in the Years 1872-1875*. For Peirce the scientific surveyor, there could be no question of simply arguing away the kinds of doubt that are built into sciences of probability. For Peirce the philosopher, it followed, knowledge and even reality itself tended to be imbued with this surveyor's sensibility: "every proposition which we can be entitled to make about the real world must be an approximate one . . . approximation must be the fabric out of which our philosophy has to be built."<sup>7</sup>

Peirce's philosophy could not admit of a Cartesian geometry because life had taught him that no truth can be exact. In virtue of a whole raft of new cultural assemblies that came into being across the nineteenth century, Hawthorne's quest for resolve had become for Peirce's generation a far better model for dealing with doubt than Descartes's quest for certainty. And we today continue to live on the other side of this divide from Descartes, for whom most forms of modern probability would have been practically unthinkable.

Peirce's epistemology helps bring into view the scientific aspects of coming to live in terms of chance, but we also need an account of the moral dimensions of these same transformations. For this we would do well to turn to Peirce's contemporary and friend, William James.

To explore the modern morality of chance, I begin by reviewing the recent historiography of these transformations in a way that will clarify the stakes of considering their specifically moral dimensions. This review suggests the possibility of engaging the morality of chance by way of a sideways shift from Peirce's epistemology of modern probability to the other founding figure of pragmatism, the one whose work was always more centrally moral in orientation.<sup>8</sup> I interpret James's moral writings as developing an ethics of self-transformation that fosters resources for meeting the new challenges engendered by chance. I conclude by considering self-transformation as not only a means for adjusting to modern chance but also as an energy for resisting its normalization.

#### >> A MORAL RECKONING OF MODERN CHANCE

Hacking has ably charted the epistemological and social significance of the taming of chance in which my discussion will be embedded, but many of its moral and political meanings await fuller exploration. I here seek to inquire into the probabilistic revolution as a wider context through which we can begin to understand the shifting sands of moralities of selfhood in late nineteenth-century America. Hacking, at the outset of his book, presents his history of the taming of chance as part of the same story of what he calls the "erosion of determinism."<sup>9</sup> The historiography of American pragmatism bears out Hacking's largely European account, for in that literature it is commonly observed that both James and Peirce sought to develop a philosophical sensibility that was tightly tailored to determinism's denial and chance's affirmation, two philosophic shifts that are frequently placed under the broader headings of contingency and uncertainty.

George Cotkin, in his intellectual history of James's public thought, claims that determinism was "James's chief philosophical nemesis in the 1860s and 1870s" and that "the dilemma posed by determinism haunted him throughout his life."<sup>10</sup> Cotkin shows how James's preoccupation with determinism was situated in the broader context of the late nineteenth-century problematic of Hamletian doubt.<sup>11</sup> James, dissatisfied with determinism and searching for freedom in some still undefined sense, was by dint of disposition a perfect candidate for his era's tussles with chance. Inveterately indecisive, James was possessed of a character and mind so wide open that he was almost unable to believe in anything, though he desperately wanted to find his way to faith in matter after matter, from career to marriage to the afterlife to psychical phenomena.<sup>12</sup> Such wrestling matches with doubt, Cotkin shows, were the late nineteenth century's version of the Hamlet problematic. Yet it is all too easy for us to overlook the simple fact that in Shakespeare's time, action in the midst of probabilities was as yet inconceivable (that is, impossible to either affirm or deny, and a fortiori not denied). James and his contemporaries could respond to Hamlet anew only as they felt the force of a new problem. It was

thus not so much that determinism was an intellectual dead end for James. Rather, his rejection of determinism was on practical and moral grounds.<sup>13</sup> Reading this biographically, one might suggest that the argument against determinism was but an afterimage of James's own experiences of determinism's erosion.

If Hacking's history focuses on Peirce as a kind of culminating figure in whose writings a first witness was born to the scientific and epistemological implications of probability's emergence and chance's taming, then I suggest with Paul Croce that James provides an exemplary companion case study of how we first came to terms with the specifically moral terms of "the eclipse of certainty."<sup>14</sup> Croce notes in tracing the intel-

lectual antecedents of James and Peirce that, "some pointed to the connection between probabilities and chance-filled uncertainty, while others emphasized lawful patterns in the midst of chance."<sup>15</sup> He is right that James was of the former persuasion and Peirce the latter. Indeed, a committed moral response to chance was barely present in Peirce's scientific

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musings on probability. Of course, both responses deserve our attention as resources for figuring out how to live with who we have become. We find ourselves almost everywhere enrolled in assemblages, or better, arrangements (*agencements*) of chance. We have become probable beings. And yet we still find probabilities problematic. We rely on them, but hesitatingly and all too often without grasping their significance.

The multiple threads of doubt, probability, and indeterminacy I have been considering are woven together by other historians of pragmatism, including David Hollinger and James Kloppenberg, into narratives of the emergence of a culture of contingency and uncertainty.<sup>16</sup> A related but importantly different kind of synthesis explored in some of the most recent histories of pragmatism, most notably by James Livingston and now Francesca Bordogna, involves pulling these threads through the eye of the cultural fault line cracking apart the sovereign self of early modernity.<sup>17</sup> Without disputing any of this pragmatist historiography, and indeed taking much from it, I shall here draw these multiple perspectives together by framing them through Hacking's broader narrative of the taming of chance. This will provide me with the occasion to explore the late nineteenth-century (and still ongoing) construction of a practical apparatus of chance, in forms that began to condition the very kinds of persons we moderns could become. This motivates in turn my argument that James's entire philosophical vision from his pragmatist epistemology to his naturalistic psychology to the exhortative ethics of his infamous "Will to Believe" argument can be seen as a response to the challenges of modernity's eventual confrontations with contingency and uncertainty, a reshaping selfhood, and above all the obligation to pour chance into our very being, thinking, and doing.

Consider straightaway a few pieces of evidence that motivate my framing of James through such a history. A first is found in a letter from James to James Mark Baldwin,

editor of the widely consumed *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*: “Belief, in your sense, of resolved doubt, is almost never complete, when its object is abstract. The only discussion which is of practical importance is discussion of *probable* things.”<sup>18</sup> This much James seemed to have shared with Peirce and others of his period. But there is an aspect of James about which Peirce was always shy, expressed for instance in the closing lines of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: “No fact in human nature is more characteristic than its willingness to live on a chance.”<sup>19</sup> It is James’s moral project of living, and also living well, on chances that I aim to excavate below.

In addition to this task of *historically* locating James in his context of the emergence of a cultural obsession with chances, a further theoretical claim I will develop concerns James as an *ongoing* resource for a revisioning of our moral selves. James develops a conception of freedom amid uncertainty as the work of self-transformation. His focus is on practices or acts of freedom in terms of self-transformation in contrast to an emphasis on the capacity for freedom construed as giving the law to oneself.<sup>20</sup> James’s freedom thus forms an alternative to a more familiar account, running from Descartes through Kant and down to today, of freedom as autonomy and mastery. Where Kant and Descartes were simply not in a historical position to confront the problematics of probabilities squarely, James’s alternatives to modern moral theory are potential resources for us today.

My proposed excavation of James’s conception of freedom as action in process finds parallels in recent theoretical interventions. Catherine Malabou’s philosophical elaborations of plasticity, for instance, form one adjacent edge. Plasticity for Malabou is both a generalizable philosophical metaphor and also—crucially—a neural fact. In its latter aspect, I find it important that James was one of the first theorists of human plasticity, which led him to formulations that anticipated Malabou’s fecund insight that “normal identity is a changeable and transformable entity right from the start.”<sup>21</sup> Another edge with which I seek adjacency is Elizabeth Grosz’s recent return to the work of Henri Bergson (for whom James had much affinity) in which freedom “is not the contemplation of abstract possibilities of choice” but is rather habit construed as movement and is as such “associated with acts . . . which help form a self.”<sup>22</sup> James, like Bergson, was a philosopher of process and transition. His thinking, like Bergson’s, is therefore most at home on a plane where everything is always a rumble: the plane of action or, to employ the nineteenth-century vernacular, the plane of conduct.

In offering a specifically pragmatist inflection of ideas of process and plasticity, I hope to explain why James’s account of rumbling self-transformation is a provocative and preferable alternative to traditional accounts of freedom as autonomy and mastery. The ruts of these traditional conceptions are well worn by the idealizing transcendental pursuits that have sought—of course unsuccessfully—to capture them. This is not to say that James’s conception of self-transformation is unequivocally successful. Rather, my claim is that both its advantages and its shortcomings are better suited to the practical realities of our present.

## &gt;&gt; WILLIAM JAMES'S ETHICS OF SELF-TRANSFORMATION

Why the long faith in liberty in our liberal culture? Most of us today just assume that freedom is a good. But if we are content to let freedom be no more than a mere assumption, it may perhaps come to pass that we will fail to grasp freedom's occasional discontent. If we better grasped why freedom is the good that we hold it to be, then we could perhaps better understand what forms of freedom are worth defending and which ones we ought to relinquish.

Many of James's philosophical contributions revolve around the central problematic of the will. Given this focus, some critics have suggested that a Jamesian moral and political philosophy would simply amount to a classically liberal defense of voluntary freedom or willful liberty, or even a classically romantic defense of the power of spontaneous will.<sup>23</sup> These interpretations are, however, difficult to square with James's transformationalist conception of the human subject. If we want to remain open to the possibility of finding a resource in James's thought, then we should be prepared to recognize that the core commitment of his liberal outlook is to an idea of freedom as self-transformation that stands in contrast to self-legislative and self-mastering conceptions pervading much of classical liberal political and moral theory.

Like many of his contemporaries, James thought of freedom in terms of energy, effort, and what the common vernacular of his day often referred to as strenuousness: "the pragmatism or pluralism which I defend has to fall back on a certain ultimate hardihood, a certain willingness to live without assurances or guarantees."<sup>24</sup> But James's strenuous attitude was not that of his contemporary Theodore Roosevelt, for whom energetic freedom was all about riding rough over that which one takes as an opposition.

Roosevelt's metaphors are swaddled in a militaristic outlook that was central to his many manner of campaigns. Commenting on Roosevelt, his former student, James once quipped, "Mr. Roosevelt's attempt to turn this concrete political issue into an abstract emotional comparison between two types of personal character, one strong and manly, the other cowardly and weak, is an evasion unworthy of the student of history which he is."<sup>25</sup> For James, the strenuous life was about the transformability and preparedness of the self, not the raw

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power of the self over a weaker external challenge.<sup>26</sup> For James, the greatest challenge to ourselves is always our own self, such that what we meet with in our most strenuous moment is not the power of our self against the other, but the effort of our will against our own entrenched habits. This is why I suggest that the central index of freedom in James is self-transformation.

I turn now to a summary of self-transformation as featured at its most explicit in a selection of James's moral writings. Remaining merely summary here, I develop a more detailed interpretation of these ideas in a companion paper, where I show how self-transformation is central to at least two crucial domains of James's work.<sup>27</sup>

First, self-transformation structures the moral psychology developed in James's 1890 masterwork *The Principles of Psychology*. A notion central to the entire book is what I refer to as willful rehabilitation. The self, says James, just is a bundle of habits.<sup>28</sup> The habits that we are exhibit plasticity, to employ James's own terminology.<sup>29</sup> Thus our habitual nature is one that admits of, even at times demands, transformation.<sup>30</sup> Will was James's name for the function of these occasional, but real, transformations. Willfulness, then, is an ingredient in both who we are and who we can become. Will is not a metaphysical substance sufficient unto itself, but is rather the functional relation a complex bundling of habits can have with itself. The willful transformation of habit, on James's account, is thus not a mysterious inborn power; it is the functional activity of the effort of attention we bring to bear when we attend to the reworking of our own habits of conduct.<sup>31</sup>

Second, self-transformation is central to James's normative ethics, specifically his infamous 1896 contribution to the ethics of belief titled "The Will to Believe." Widely criticized as a defense of fantasy and fancy,<sup>32</sup> the will to believe is in fact not at all about our believing that we can effortlessly transform outward reality by wish, but is directed at that other more recalcitrant object of our ethical attention, namely the self. What do we believe in willing to believe other than our power to transform our selves, through deed, against our doubt and dread?

I bring together these two aspects of James's moral philosophy with the suggestion that his contributions to moral psychology and normative ethics are both similarly oriented around self-transformation. "The Will to Believe" normatively endorsed what James in the "Will" chapter of the *Principles of Psychology* had descriptively asserted: "I want more than anything else to emphasize the fact that volition is primarily a relation, not between our Self and extra-mental matter (as many philosophers still maintain), but between our Self and our own states of mind."<sup>33</sup> This is quintessential James. But to understand it properly we must recall that mind for James named a kind of activity that is always emplaced, engaged, and enrolled. Self-transformation is thus not a merely mental matter of reason, a matter of thought engaging its own limits in a Cartesian mediation or Kantian antinomy. It is rather a matter of activity engendered by an expanded sense of mindedness. Specifically, it is the activity of reflexive recomposition. What makes this reflexivity possible is the complexity that constitutes the self (for example, as gaining its integrity as a bundling of plastic habits), not the endurance of a substantial self (for example, as essentially either a thinking thing or a material body).

James's notion of freedom as the self-transformative activity of reflexively remaking ourselves might well be summarized as a *conduct of conducts*.<sup>34</sup> This idea involves an assembling together of two aspects of conduct. There is, first, reflexiveness (self-) and, second, reconstruction (-transformation)—or, to put it otherwise, there is conduct turning upon itself to do its work and then also conduct as turned upon and thereby redone.

James was not only witnessing selfhood in transition, but he was more importantly envisioning the self as essentially transitional. This conception was one of the self as neither unified nor divided, but always as an approximation—a chancy sort of thing. The shorelines bounding the self could never be pinned down with exactitude. In this way, James was suiting up the self for an engagement with the new arrangements of chance he found himself in the midst of. In what forms was chance then stabilizing?

#### >> ASSEMBLING APPARATUS OF CHANCE

The Jamesian idea of freedom as self-transformation can be understood as a response to some of the most knotted problems of moral modernity: the difficulty of indecision, the dissemination of probabilities, and the unavoidability of chance. These were among the many trials that would have plagued James as a practical agent navigating the emergent assemblages of the late nineteenth century. Consider in the light of such practical contexts the forcefulness with which James must have felt one of the most probing questions he

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raised in “The Will to Believe”: “Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found?”<sup>35</sup> This question suggests that James was not so much intellectually opposed to certainty itself as he was actively opposing reliance on certainty in conditions where it hardly applies. This thought helps parse two ways of interpreting James’s more general criticisms of certitude. We can understand James’s briefs against certainty as based on a theoretical criticism to the effect

that champions of the indubitable such as Descartes were simply wrong, or we can understand them as historical criticisms to the effect that the philosophy of certainty had outlived its usefulness. My view is that the historical argument suffices for James, such that there is really no need to see him as forwarding an ahistorical theoretical argument on this point.

Adherents of certainty are not wrong according to James, but just passé. In a world where adjusters, actuarial agents, and other such auditors were beginning to roam everywhere, a world where every year the state spawned new agencies of statistical enumeration, and where life itself was increasingly an object of probabilistic management, what would you expect a philosopher to say about an ideal like certainty?

Consider, as a first illustration, that James probably suffered from that paralysis of indecision which in his day was diagnosed by clinical psychologists as neurasthenia and by cultural critics as “Americanitis.”<sup>36</sup> The important point here is not about James’s biography so much as a broader cultural problematic of rampant indecision in which he was caught up. Thus he warned of “paralysis of [academic audiences’] native capacity

for faith and timorous *abulia* [i.e., inability to act] in the religious field.”<sup>37</sup> The dreaded difficulty of decision is not foreign to us today, passing as it does in contemporary pop psychology under such monikers as “decision fatigue.”<sup>38</sup> But what was the context in which James’s own will may have felt fatigued? What made him strive so incessantly, in book after book for an entire career, for a will that could strive?

In a series of 1908 lectures later published as *A Pluralistic Universe*, James spoke of his historical moment as “one of those gradual mutations of intellectual climate, due to innumerable influences, that make the thought of a past generation seem . . . foreign to its successor.” He explicated this shift in terms of the obsolescence of “theological machinery” in light of “the vaster vistas which scientific evolutionism has opened, and the rising tide of social democratic ideals.”<sup>39</sup> This passage suggests that the cultural moment to which James saw himself contributing had grave concerns with the conflict between two outlooks: religious voluntarism and scientific evidentialism. Much of what the new scientific outlook was thought to be ushering in, and to which traditional religion was not well adjusted, had to do with ideas of chance and probability. James sought to mediate between religion and science too easily pushed to their extremes; he did so by emphasizing the chance in which both could quickly come to be saturated. Scientific probabilities need not always be so far from religious faiths if we come to recognize both as occupying a terrain other than that of certainty, assurance, and absoluteness. James’s proposal was promising because science and religion both could increasingly be understood as conditioned by chance.

Chance was not just a new philosophical point to be debated, and then affirmed or denied. It was rather a new cultural option—a new matrix inflecting what could be intelligible, perceptible, and actionable. Only sixteen years after James had marked out this shift, John Dewey could assert, indeed even without bothering to argue the point, that “man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble.”<sup>40</sup> James, perched on the crest of that onrushing aleatory crash, found himself witness to his own increasing saturation in what he once called, in an essay on emergent social sciences, “the dynamic belt of quivering uncertainty.”<sup>41</sup>

James thematized his cultural moment in terms of big ideas like democracy and Darwinism, today quite familiar to us, but new and exhilarating for him. But to gain the proper focus, it may help to attend to more humble arrangements that seem less capable of claims to grandeur. Consider, then, as a further illustration of James’s context, something so mundane as health insurance.

Late nineteenth-century America was witness to the ongoing explosion of a number of new kinds of contracts that we today bundle together under the single heading of health insurance.<sup>42</sup> Personal health insurance in America goes back to at least the early eighteenth century, but insurance as a widespread form of stable social organization did not begin until shortly after the Civil War. The Gilded Age was soon after witness to an explosion of health insurance policies, products, and of course consumers. It was in this period that nascent health insurances, or sickness insurances as they were frequently called, began to be issued in a dizzying variety of forms.<sup>43</sup> The first “establishment funds” for sickness, created for (and often by) employees of individual companies, began to be set

up during the Civil War. The first commercial health insurance enterprise opened in 1847 when the Health Insurance Company of Philadelphia began selling policies to individuals. In 1877, the Granite Cutters' Union established the first union sickness benefit fund.

A staggering problem for all forms of sickness insurance was the underdeveloped nature of actuarial information and methods. The nineteenth century may have been witness to what Hacking calls "an avalanche of printed numbers," but even so, the paperwork and its analysis was very much a mess.<sup>44</sup> Despite this messiness, which landed squarely on the shoulders of James's generation, practical instrumentalities like health insurance soon enjoyed quick takeoff, thus guaranteeing the onrush of all manner of other paper avalanches. By the time of the Progressive Era, almost one-third of the labor force was covered by health insurance, and this just a half century beyond the close of the Civil War when almost nobody had health insurance coverage, not even the very rich, who may have simply thought that they had no need for it.<sup>45</sup> A century later, health insurance has long been a right in many countries, as well as a requirement in many U.S. states (and much more recently, at the national level), at least for many purposes. The solidity of sickness insurance as a cultural form is almost nowhere disputed, even if its status as a social right and political project is the subject of ongoing contestation. The stability of many forms of insurance is historically conditioned by the taming of probabilities, such that the everydayness of insurance is a symptom of, among other things, a deep confrontation with the doubts embodied in the probability technologies that make insurance rational.

James, whose mind was always madly wandering, simply could not have failed to wonder at such strange new apparatuses as personal health insurance. For here was a truly fantastic hybrid of economy, science, and ethics. As a financial instrument that necessarily presupposes uncertainty, insurance indeed well fits the broad themes of James's pragmatic attitude. Nobody would buy or sell insurance on an event taken to be fated in its particular details (even life insurance presupposes the uncertainty of precisely when one will die). And yet in another sense insurance is just one more modern technology for defeating doubt. One may not know if one will contract an illness, but one sometimes has a sense of the odds, and so enters into a bargain that affords the hedge of a surety. Insurance is premised on chance, but at the very same time can annul it for the insured, who gets a guarantee against losses from chance.

Seeing into this angle on insurance, James's Harvard Philosophy colleague and Irving Street neighbor Josiah Royce fully embraced the insurance form as a social model that could function to fulfill the rational promise of the Absolute.<sup>46</sup> Royce praised insurance as he despised chance: "the worst tragedy of the world is the tragedy of the brute chance to which everything spiritual seems to be subject."<sup>47</sup> For Royce, chance was but a chaos that could be tamed only by the Absolute, which shines through us in such forms as insurance communities. Not only Royce, but Peirce too, flirted with a metaphysics of community in trying to make sense of probability.<sup>48</sup> Peirce once even went so far as to speculatively reckon the quantitative probability of a divine being: "The existence of a God as metaphysically defined and on metaphysical considerations, is perhaps not more than .93."<sup>49</sup>

Such an attempt to render probability in metaphysical terms is likely to strike most contemporary readers as rather quaint. Quaintness aside, the real problem with such a proposal is that it would be morally debilitating. We often enough find ourselves stuck in chancy conditions and without an insurance contract whereby we might hedge. To turn insurances and bets into metaphysical requirements was only to assume away the actual living problems to which actuarial contracts could be a response. If God made insurance a mandate, or if we had insurance on God's existence, then we would not find ourselves in a world in which insurance contracts would be negotiable. James understood this when many of his contemporaries would not. This was the point of his argument that we may commit to action even in those risky conditions where our chances are uninsured, perhaps even uninsurable. We may do so, he argued in "The Will to Believe," if action involves not a heroic mastery but rather a humble yet significant transformation of the self.

James returned late in life to the arguments of "The Will to Believe" in an essay fragment he was preparing as the introduction to his final book, to be titled *Some Problems of Philosophy*. Titled "Faith and the Right to Believe," this fragment, like the book it would introduce, was left unfinished at James's death. In this text we find James gnawing one final time at the challenge of coming to grips with the determination implicit in action amidst a world that is saturated with indeterminacy.

In a section of the fragment titled "How We Act on Probabilities" James encapsulates a crucial problematic: "In most emergencies we have to act on probability, and incur the risk of error."<sup>50</sup> Following this, James offers short discussions of frequency, statistics, and then finally, insurance. Whereas Royce, and to some extent Peirce too, saw in probability a hope of redemption, James construed the presence of probability altogether differently. Chance for James fundamentally has to do with doubt and uncertainty, which is what we are left with once modernity unmoors from its former ideals of certitude. For James, what is important is that there cannot be insurance guarantees for everything. As he forcefully put it in an earlier 1906 address, portions of which appear verbatim in the fragment, "In no complex matter can our conclusions be more than *probable*."<sup>51</sup> The emergence of widespread insurance in the late nineteenth century led to neither the absolutization nor even the generalization of the form, as Royce had hoped. Rather, it simply made all the more glaring the stakes of those practices where insurance arrangements could not be brought to bear.

James squarely faced the practical problems that the idealists sought to avoid: "But for most of our emergencies there is no insurance company at hand, and fractional solutions are impossible. Seldom can we *act* fractionally. If the probability that a friend is waiting for you in Boston is 1-2, how should you act on that probability? By going as far as the bridge?"<sup>52</sup> Probabilities, James is noting, cannot always be traded in for stable insurance products. Doubt, it is James's point, cannot always be defeated. What do we do when the friend *may be* waiting for us? In response to this question James returns to the very argument advanced in "The Will to Believe": "In such questions as that of the *character* of the world, of life being moral in its essential meaning, of our playing a vital part therein, etc., it would seem as if a *certain* wholeness in our faith were necessary."<sup>53</sup> This, then, is

the practical challenge of probability and chance for James. How to muster wholeness of will where we can only manufacture uncertainty of intellect? How to act, which always requires fullness, where there is no belief (and no insurance) proportional to that fullness?

James's response to this challenge, as I described it in the preceding section, involved a reconceptualization of free action. Action in James's vision aims not at mastery but rather at reflexive recomposition, or self-transformation. For where the complexities of context render all eventualities into probabilities, we can nonetheless conduct ourselves by committing wholly. That reality itself is fractional does not mean that we must inevitably be divided in our relations to ourselves.

#### >> TRANSFORMING THE SELF AMIDST APPARATUS OF CHANCE

James's ethics of self-transformation can now be set against the historical moment with which I opened, namely the nineteenth-century problematic of action in the face of doubt. James is frequently credited as the source of his idea of the will to believe, but the crux of the argument was by no means his exclusive conception. For the problem to which it was a response, the debilitation of indecision, was a generalized concern of his generation. James's contemporary and friend William Dean Howells thematized the matter in his 1890 novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* in writing of a "chance-world" in which one can find "a comfort in irretrievably committing [one]self, and exchanging the burden of indecision for the burden of responsibility."<sup>54</sup> But perhaps the period's most poignant statements of this problematic were those of Edith Wharton, also a good friend of the Jameses (especially her fellow transatlantic migrant brother Henry). Many of Wharton's heroines personify the vacillating motions of doubt. Anna Leath, of Wharton's 1912 *The Reef*, changes her mind about her ability to trust George Darrow with each new sunrise. Lily Bart, of Wharton's masterful 1905 *The House of Mirth*, is a figure about whom one character in the novel can quite rightly say to another, "it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study."<sup>55</sup> All of these figures inhabit a space voiced in a signature Wharton line in her 1903 novella *Sanctuary* referring to "those indeterminate moments when the soul floats between two tides."<sup>56</sup>

Before receiving such fine expression by Wharton and Howells, the problem of whole action in the face of uncertain belief had already been circulating in the generation prior. Recall how it featured in Hawthorne. Soon after Hawthorne, George Eliot in her 1871 *Middlemarch* (a book that a young William James praised in 1874 as "fuller of human stuff than any novel that was ever written . . . the moral depth of the book is wonderful")<sup>57</sup> expressed the theme of wholeness of faith in her signature style of a passing simile: "as absurd as a faith that believed in half a miracle for want of strength to believe in a whole one."<sup>58</sup> Eliot, Hawthorne, and others of their generation had already articulated for Howells, Wharton, and their generation the challenge of wholeness in the face of uncertainty. Yet it was not until the latter generation came of age that this challenge could be figured against the specific background context of calculable probabilities, actuarial risks, and an entire wilderness of chances.

Mustering wholeness of conduct has always been a trial for us moderns. In the face of fractional belief the courage required for action became that much more difficult. The additional difficulties are not insignificant, for they make a difference with respect to the comforts that might be taken in chances. If James sought to settle himself to chance in advocating for wholeness of faith, a thinker such as Eliot from only one generation away could still write comfortably of the issue from a perspective inclined to cast aspersions on an as yet untamed chance: “Favorable Chance, I fancy, is the god of all men who follow their own devices instead of obeying a law they believe in. . . . [H]e will adore that same cunning complexity called Chance . . . his religion will infallibly be the worship of blessed Chance.”<sup>59</sup> Eliot was of a generation generally dubious about chance even if that generation expressed even greater dubiety about any certainty blustery enough to consider itself capable of toppling all doubt (Melville’s Ahab is the exemplar). James, Wharton, and Howells were as dubious of certainty as were Eliot, Melville, and Hawthorne. But they were also enthralled and excited by, because more fully enmeshed in, chance.

Although it was common to many of James’s pragmatist generation, this enthrallment with chance worked itself out in strikingly different ways. Contrast again the two founding figures of pragmatism. Peirce sought to focus attention on how to figure our chances of regaining control, and looked into chance to see if he could find the law of the long term. James looked toward situations where we meet our limits and exhorted us to not be debilitated where all we have as a basis for our action is the slimmest of probabilities. For James, acting on probabilities involves committing to conduct oneself with confidence where no certainty is to be found. Such action delinks conviction from certitude in a manner that Alexander Livingston aptly names James’s “stuttering conviction.”<sup>60</sup> Without finding full assurance, still we sometimes act. Action, for James, was thus almost always a kind of betting, and (here comes the interesting part) no worse for it.

James’s ethics of self-transformation was both an affirmation and an enactment of a new vision of freedom suited to the challenge of acting on shaky grounds. With his will to believe and his moral psychology of willful rehabilitation (as well as with his pragmatist theory of truth as a credit system and his pluralistic metaphysics of ever-unfinished transitions), James embraced the new arrangements of chance in which he found himself otherwise hesitating. In these new conditions, even the highest grades of truth take the form of probabilistic inferences rather than deductive nomological explanations. Beliefs come to seem less like representational mirrors of a stable world and more like bets placed on underdetermined futures. James’s response to the world he postulated in “The Will to Believe,” all moonlit and devoid of certitude, could thus be this: “When as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself.”<sup>61</sup>

James’s ethics of self-transformation was both an affirmation and an enactment of a new vision of freedom suited to the challenge of acting on shaky grounds.

James's writings are among the first responses to an understanding that we moderns are in need of a new set of moral and political conceptions attuned to new cultural conditions of chance. Making oneself at home in a world of chance would presumably be well facilitated by founding a form of freedom as self-transformation. Herein lies the ongoing importance of James's contributions. The value of freedom, if there is to be anything like freedom at all, has everything to do with acts of transforming ourselves in the context of the extraordinarily chancy conditions to which we find ourselves given.

#### >> MORALITY AGAINST DEMORALIZATION

*The transformation of the self amidst the challenges of chance:* here is a viable vision for our moral modernity. According to this vision, freedom is not giving a law to oneself, but is the activity of fashioning new selves. While freedom in the form of autonomy may have been attuned to an era of certitudes and absolutes (for instance in the form of absolute sovereign powers), we find in Jamesian self-transformation a conception of freedom more fit for later, modern milieux of uncertainty.

I can now conclude by considering an additional dimension of James's conception of self-transformation. For if we restrict ourselves, as I have thus far done, to a small handful of James's more famous moral writings, then we may be too easily exposed to an impression of Jamesian self-transformation as a means of vindicating statistical bureaucracy, enterprising managerialism, and a rowdy but rigid "American" success. This would leave us with a view of James's proposal to act on chance as but one more modernist ploy to master contingency by converting it to necessity.<sup>62</sup> Contrary to such a possibility, I want to show that James positioned self-transformation not only as a means of accommodating freedom to a modernity of chance but also as a work of emboldening freedom for restlessness and resistance. James's lesser-read political and social commentaries more effectively reveal these complexities than do his more widely known contributions to moral thought. In these lesser-read texts, self-transformative action may yet manage resistance to the administrative arrangements that colonize our modernities. By closing with them, I intend to leave an afterimage of James not as celebrating the culture of chance, but rather as occupying it in order to take it on in the myriad and uneven ways in which it demands to be negotiated.

To draw attention to these complexities I turn again to the historiography of the nineteenth century. Having already paired Hacking's history of the taming of chance with histories of pragmatism, I would like to conclude by pairing it now with Michel Foucault's genealogies of power. As I read them both, Hacking's history of chance has its political correlate in Foucault's genealogies of disciplinary normalization and biopolitical regulation.<sup>63</sup> Foucault's accounts, of course, provoke a much more severe skepticism about the machinery of management built on top of modern chance. This skepticism prompts in turn a search for usable models of resistance to such machinery. In searching for such models, it perhaps should not surprise us that, like James, Foucault recognized in self-transformation a work of freedom that may be strategically positioned to mount

resistance to normalizing and regulatory techniques of power.<sup>64</sup> In light of this, one might fairly wonder if it was James or Foucault who wrote that “our undisciplinables are our proudest product”?<sup>65</sup>

James’s undisciplinables are exemplary of the counter-conduct of self-transformation made available in his work.<sup>66</sup> Inhabiting chance for James involves instigating alternatives, provoking differentia, becoming undisciplined and even undisciplinable. If James has been criticized for forwarding an anemic or even a conservative politics, then perhaps it is because his critics have been looking for a politics of rule in his work rather than a work of unruly politicization.<sup>67</sup> I offer just one example of his politics of indiscipline by considering James’s protestations against later nineteenth-century regimes of standardization, regimentation, and normalization. A fuller review of these themes in James’s work would include a much wider range of engagements with what he once called the “tone of human assemblages.”<sup>68</sup> It would include, to restrict my selection of examples to the single year of 1899: James’s response to American imperialism in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War,<sup>69</sup> his excoriations of sweetness and light in the emergent leisure class,<sup>70</sup> and his epistolary protestations against the suffocating “bigness” of emergent managerial culture.<sup>71</sup>

It would only be a few years later when James would deliver his proud homage to “undisciplinables” as part of one of a number of addresses on the public value of higher education in America. In this address, delivered at a June 1903 Harvard Commencement Dinner at which he was being awarded a diploma from the same institution where he was already a professor, James positioned himself as always having been one of the “outsiders” not truly in on “the club aspect” of Harvard College.<sup>72</sup> James spoke up against, without managing to talk down to, such “club loyalty” by emphasizing the greater importance of Harvard’s “tolerance of exceptionality and excentricity” such as the kinds he himself had exhibited.<sup>73</sup> For James, such tolerance formed a bulwark against what he registered as the source of the “bosom-vices” of the age: “that extraordinary idealization of ‘success’ in the mere outward sense of ‘getting there,’ and getting there on as big a scale as we can.” What distinguished an institution of higher education for James was not student success but rather the fact that “you cannot make single one-idea’d regiments of her classes.”<sup>74</sup> A university does its work when it allows its students to not all be the same, when it enables their eccentricities, and fosters in them the kind of indiscipline through which they might muster a life of ceaseless self-transformation.

The most well-known of James’s essays on higher education is “The Ph.D. Octopus,” published in *The Harvard Monthly* in March of 1903, a date that piques curiosity about James having been awarded the LL.D. only a few months later in June. James’s “Octopus” was searing in its critique of academic standardization. Its specific focus was on what he called “the Doctor-Monopoly in teaching,” namely the growing trend to require members of university faculty to hold a Ph.D., a trend that is by today well complete.<sup>75</sup> James is unreserved in exhibiting the consequences he foresees. His dark vision is that, “America is thus as a nation rapidly drifting towards a state of things in which no man of science or letters will be accounted respectable unless some kind of badge or diploma is

stamped upon him.” This would create “a tyrannical Machine with unforeseen powers of exclusion and corruption.”<sup>76</sup> He asks: “is individuality with us also going to count for nothing unless stamped and licensed and authenticated by some title-giving machine?”<sup>77</sup> Anticipating his address at Harvard a few months later, James’s proposed defense against these tendencies is for “our universities . . . to regard themselves as the jealous custodians of personal and spiritual spontaneity.”<sup>78</sup> The spontaneity James sought to save is recognizable as an index of those acts of self-transformation that dive into chance and resist its normalization. This freedom takes the form not of a masterful autonomy that would guarantee its own success, but rather the form of a reflexive remaking that stands on nothing more than chance and thereby holds it intact.

These and other of James’s criticisms of normalization’s exclusions invite a way of reframing the decisive issue of self-transformation amid the challenges of chance. I call the issue decisive because it concerns a question that we have all been taught to ask: what is freedom’s value for our moral modernity? Perhaps, however, we have been taught (and continue to teach ourselves) to ask the question poorly.

The Jamesian conception of freedom as self-transformation invites us to reframe the matter of freedom’s value not in terms of morality-versus-immorality but rather of morality-versus-demoralization. We tend to think of morality as the good and the right in contrast to immorality as the bad and the evil. This leads in turn to a conception of freedom’s value in terms of its status as unequivocally and indivisibly on the side of morality. But for James, morality more appropriately contrasts with demoralization.<sup>79</sup> In one of his earliest essays, James elegantly urged the contrast as follows: “*Anaesthesia* is the watchword of the moral sceptic brought to bay and put to his trumps. *Energy* is that of the moralist.”<sup>80</sup> Morality involves energy, effort, attention, will, and action: all

with an eye toward the transformation of the self. The lack of morality is the lack of energy, the lack of willfulness, the lack of hope, and the victory of despair.<sup>81</sup> This is why so much of morality turns on actualities, and acts, of self-transformation. Self-transformation names the self when energized and abundant, copious in its own reflexivity. Freedom’s value amid assemblages of probability, risk, statistics, and chance is to be found not in the ability to control either environment or self, as if we can just make happen whatever is

Freedom on this view involves not so much being a partisan of morality against immorality, but rather being active and resistant against the deadening drill of discipline, habituation, repetition, and a life rendered rote.

most wanted or needed, but rather in the practice of transforming our self and hence our relations to the chancy universe we inhabit. Freedom on this view involves not so much being a partisan of morality against immorality, but rather being active and resistant against the deadening drill of discipline, habituation, repetition, and a life rendered rote.

Energy against anomie involves nothing more, but also nothing less, than acts of transforming selves in the midst of multiplicitous chances. In his *Pragmatism* lectures James honestly acknowledges of our moral ideals that “we are their live champions and pledges” such that if “complementary conditions come and add themselves, our ideals will become actual things.” And what are these complementary conditions? James names two: “They are first such a mixture of things as will in the fulness of time give us a chance, a gap that we can spring into, and, finally, *our act*.” This is no trivial matter for James, who introduces the discussion by writing that, “Every such ideal realized will be one moment in the world’s salvation.”<sup>82</sup> James throughout his life sought ways of expressing the advantages of acting within atmospheres of chance. He even once suggested, on the final page of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, that, “For practical life at any rate, the *chance* of salvation is enough.”<sup>83</sup> Perhaps it is in our chances for self-transformation that we can locate the beginnings of an ethics that would be exceptionally well oriented to the challenging task of living well within the many manners of managing uncertainty characteristic of our moral modernity.

## Notes

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- 1 Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, 6.
- 2 Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability*, chap. 15.
- 3 Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, chap. 23.
- 4 Similar stories, no doubt, apply in other modernizing milieux, but my focus here will be restricted to the specificity of American doubt.
- 5 Peirce, "Reply to the Necessitarians," 560.
- 6 Louis Menand makes this point about Peirce through the example of astronomical measurement (see *The Metaphysical Club*, chap. 8).
- 7 Peirce, "A Guess at the Riddle," 274.
- 8 On James as a thoroughly moral philosopher see Sarin Marchetti's recent *Ethics and Philosophical Critique in William James*.
- 9 Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, 1.
- 10 Cotkin, *William James, Public Philosopher*, 53.
- 11 *Ibid.*, chap. 3; see also James Livingston, *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy*, chap. 5.
- 12 James must have been thinking of himself when he wrote, "There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, and for whom the lightning of every cigar, the drinking of every cup, the time of rising and going to bed every day, and the beginning of every bit of work, are subjects of express volitional deliberation" (*The Principles of Psychology*, 1:122).
- 13 James claimed that "the question of free-will is insoluble on strictly psychological grounds" such that it can only be taken up as "a moral postulate" (*ibid.*, 2:572, 573).
- 14 See Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, the subtitle of which I quote; a promised and much-awaited second volume proposes to explore the specifically moral meanings of these shifts.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 131; see also 223.
- 16 On the centrality of uncertainty and contingency for pragmatism two standard historiographies are Hollinger, "William James and the Culture of Inquiry," and Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*; no one in recent philosophy develops this theme better than does Richard Rorty in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.
- 17 See Bordogna, *William James at the Boundaries* (esp. chap. 6), and Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution* (esp. chap. 10).
- 18 James to Baldwin, ca. January 1899, in *The Correspondence of William James*, 8:477.
- 19 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 408.
- 20 I explicate James's pragmatism as focused on conduct in Koopman, "Conduct Pragmatism."
- 21 Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 31; I also seek resonance with Malabou's emphasis on plasticity's duality "as an accurate balance between the ability to change and the resistance to change" ("Go Wonder," 56).
- 22 Grosz, "Habit Today," 226.
- 23 See Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 64, for one such criticism of James. For more sympathetic discussions that take account of the difficulties noted by West see Loren Goldman, "Another Side of William James," Alexander Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!*, and my own earlier

attempt at a review of such criticisms in Koopman, "William James's Politics of Personal Freedom."

24 James, "The Absolute and the Strenuous Life," 124.

25 James, "Governor Roosevelt's Oration," 166.

26 See Erin Tarver, "Lady Pragmatism and the Great Man," on the dangers of James's celebrations of strenuousness and greatness in their proximity to a masculine discourse of heroism; see Richard Shusterman, "Thought in the Strenuous Mood," for a revisionary rereading of Jamesian strenuousness.

27 See Koopman, "The Will, the Will to Believe, and William James."

28 James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 1:104.

29 *Ibid.*, 1:105.

30 *Ibid.*, 1:126.

31 *Ibid.*, 2:561.

32 See L. T. Hobhouse, "Faith and the Will to Believe," 91; and Bertrand Russell, "Pragmatism," 84, for early examples.

33 James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2:567–68.

34 I refer here to Foucault who once described power as the "conduct of conducts" ("The Subject and Power," 341), or "conduire des conduits" ("Le sujet et le pouvoir," 237).

35 James, "The Will to Believe," 14.

36 See Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903*, 63–98, on James's neurasthenia; on the emergence of neurasthenia as a diagnosis, see Linda Simon, *Dark Light*, 113–22.

37 James, preface to *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, x.

38 See John Tierney, "Do You Suffer from Decision Fatigue?"

39 James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 29, 30.

40 Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 41.

41 James, "The Importance of Individuals," 259.

42 The details of this paragraph are indebted to John Murray, *Origins of American Health Insurance*. For histories of the related industry of life insurance at the turn of the century see JoAnne Yates, *Structuring the Information Age*, and Dan Bouk, *How Our Days Became Numbered*, the latter confirming my more general point here in noting that "by 1905 . . . very few insured Americans now escaped risk-making practices" (107).

43 Murray, *Origins of American Health Insurance*, chap. 4.

44 Hacking, "Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers."

45 Murray, *Origins of American Health Insurance*, 91.

46 Royce, "The Hope of the Great Community," 1160–63.

47 Royce, *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, 465.

48 See especially Peirce, "A Guess at the Riddle," and "Evolutionary Love."

49 Peirce, "A Treatise on Metaphysics," 71.

50 James, "Faith and the Right to Believe," 737.

51 James, "Reason and Faith," 125.

52 James, "Faith and the Right to Believe," 738; also on insurance see James, "Is Life Worth Living?," 55.

53 James, "Faith and the Right to Believe," 739.

54 Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, 436, 97.

- 55 Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, 227.
- 56 Wharton, *Sanctuary*, 128.
- 57 James to Catherine Elizabeth Havens, March 23, 1874, in *The Correspondence of William James*, 4:486; see also a December 8, 1872 letter to his brother Henry in *ibid.*, 1:183.
- 58 Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 163.
- 59 Eliot, *Silas Marner*, 73.
- 60 Livingston, "Stuttering Conviction," and *Damn Great Empires!*, chap. 4; one difference in our views is that Livingston is focused on how James makes action and conviction stutter, whereas my focus is on how James musters action in contexts where stuttering is already assumed as a condition.
- 61 James, "The Will to Believe," 17.
- 62 My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to the importance of this difficulty.
- 63 See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*; Hacking marks his indebtedness to Foucault in *The Taming of Chance*, 217n12.
- 64 For recent work bringing together Foucault and James in terms proximate to my own see Elizabeth Povinelli, "The Will to be Otherwise/The Effort of Endurance," and José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*. For readings of Foucault's ethics as focused on self-transformation see Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault*, and my own contribution in Koopman, "The Formation and Self-Transformation of the Subject in Foucault's Ethics."
- 65 James, "The True Harvard," 77; Bordogna also emphasizes James's undisciplinables (*William James at the Boundaries*, chap. 8) though she places them in more comfortable relation to disciplinarity than I, in reading the term through Foucault, can do.
- 66 On counter-conduct in Foucault see Arnold Davidson, "In Praise of Counter-Conduct"; also notable for my purposes here is that Davidson compares Foucauldian counter-conduct and a Millian "eccentricity of conduct" (*On Liberty*, 268) that is not unlike that voiced by James in his social commentaries.
- 67 For a recent revisionist interpretation of James's political thought that finally strikes the right tone see Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!*
- 68 James, "Drafts and Notes for Addresses to Graduate Clubs," 113.
- 69 See for instance James, "The Philippine Tangle."
- 70 See for instance James, "What Makes a Life Significant?"
- 71 "The resounding idol of mere empty 'bigness' and 'success' is killing every genuine quality and ideal," wrote James to Henry William Rankin on February 22, 1899 (in *The Correspondence of William James*, 8:499).
- 72 James, "The True Harvard," 75.
- 73 *Ibid.*, 75, 76 [unique spelling in the original].
- 74 *Ibid.*, 75, 76.
- 75 James, "The Ph.D. Octopus," 71.
- 76 *Ibid.*, 69, 70.
- 77 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 78 *Ibid.*, 73.
- 79 Gerald Myers offers the fantastically suggestive thought that for James, "the opposite of *moral* is not *immoral* but *demoralized*" (*William James*, 51); Sergio Franzese takes this theme as central in his book on James (*The Ethics of Energy*).
- 80 James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," 107.

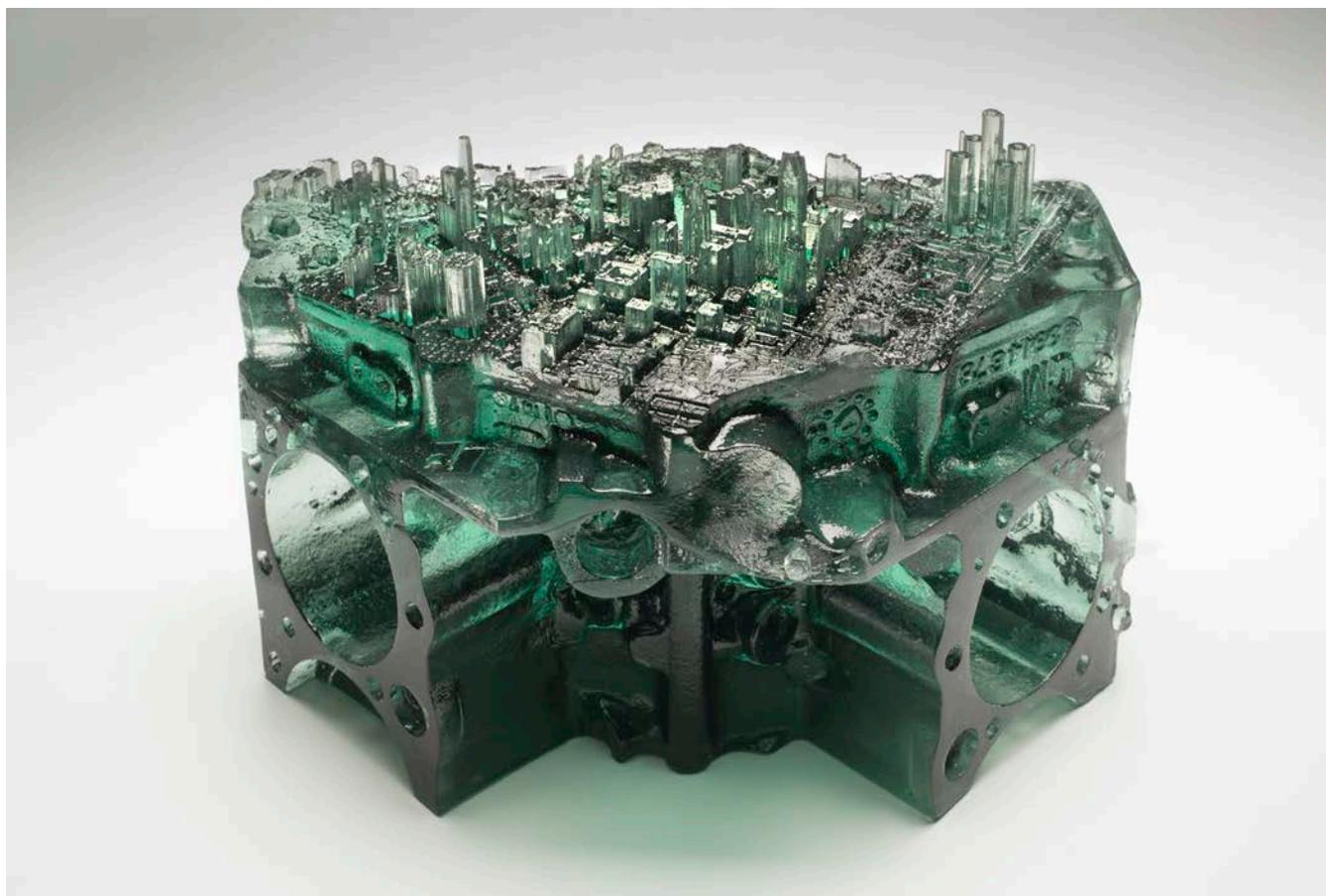
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RECASTING DETROIT (detail), 2017  
Rapid prototyped pattern kilncast glass,  
11 x 16.5 x 13.5 in.

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Transforming the Self amidst the Challenges of Chance:  
William James on "Our Undisciplinables"

Colin Koopman

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