

## Lowly Notions: Forgetting in William James's Moral Universe

In the opening lecture of *Pragmatism*, William James sets before us a dilemma. The dilemma is, according to the lecture's title, "in philosophy" but its genesis is not. The origin of the dilemma rests not with the professional philosopher, but with the layman, the "seriously inquiring amateur in philosophy," who turns to philosophy in the "fulness of his nature's needs"<sup>1</sup> and—finds her wanting. She confronts him with a hard and unwelcome choice, demanding that he choose between his demand for facts and science, and his demand for religion. She has no sympathy for his full needs, his scientific temper that is itself almost devout, and his craving for a religious philosophy that, while providing grounds for optimism, is yet wedded to actual things and actual experience. The empiricist philosopher offers him a materialistic and deterministic vision that lacks "romantic spontaneity and courage;" in it the higher is relentlessly explained in terms of the lower, ideals are reduced to "inert by-products of physiology," and he has no power to act of his own accord—he is an absorber, a submissive accommodator of nature, and only the material universe, only it, is law-giver (P, p. 15). Opposed to this vision is that of the rationalistic and absolutistic philosophers: their vision may, indeed, be *called* "religious" and in one of its versions may even include a theistic God. But whether of this theistic form or of the pantheistic mode assumed in the transcendental idealism of the

Anglo-Hegelians, the resultant vision is equally detached, equally remote and empty—unconstrained by, untouched by, unaffected by, our concrete and actual world. Seeking to elude the "depressing" materialism of "the reigning empiricism," the layman who turns toward rationalism and absolutism escapes depression only by escaping into another world altogether:

The more absolutistic philosophers dwell on so high a level of abstraction that they never even try to come down. The absolute mind which they offer us, the mind that makes our universe by thinking it, might, for aught they show us to the contrary, have made any one of a million other universes just as well as this. You can deduce no single actual particular from the notion of it. It is compatible with any state of things whatever being true here below. And the theistic God is almost as sterile a principle. You have to go to the world which he has created to get any inkling of his actual character: he is the kind of god that has once for all made that kind of a world. The God of the theistic writers lives on as purely abstract heights as does the Absolute. Absolutism has a certain sweep and dash about it, while the usual theism is more insipid, but both are equally remote and vacuous. (P, pp. 16-17)

The layman, being himself most often of neither a purely empiricist temperament, nor of a purely rationalistic temperament, is dissatisfied and ill at ease with the vision offered by philosophers who *are* radically "tough-minded" (empiricist, sensationalistic, materialistic, pessimistic, irreligious, fatalistic, pluralistic, sceptical) or who *are* radically "tender-minded" (rationalistic, intellectualistic, idealistic, optimistic, religious, free-willist, monistic, dogmatical) (P, p. 13). He wants to arrive at a way of thinking that will mediate between these systems, including elements of both; he wants a philosophy that will not go so much against the grain of his own—less positively marked but nevertheless still definite—temperament.

Offered "an empirical philosophy that is not religious enough, and a religious philosophy that is not empirical enough" (P, p. 15), the layman wants, as it were, to mix some with each and each with some but, being a philosophic rather than a "common" layman, he wants to do so while maintaining his intellectual integrity as well. Preservation of a good intellectual conscience has its own requirements, and it bars him from generating any concoction that he wishes, irrespective of consistency or coherence; it requires more than a comfortable indefiniteness of creed that might allow him to live "vaguely in one plausible compartment of it or another to suit the temptations of successive hours" (P, p. 14).

Dissatisfied and uneasy, this layman becomes, says James, a judge of philosophers. The layman's verdict—that philosophy, tender or tough, has been found wanting—is not, however, simply because it is a *layman's*, any easier to disregard. Not only was James's audience in these lectures largely comprised of laymen and women of just this sort, but, more seriously, it is largely by heeding the criticisms and dissatisfactions of laypersons of precisely this kind that James believes philosophy, including moral philosophy, and with it a moral community, can grow. In a statement that will be explored further later, James tells us that "his is the typically perfect mind, the mind the sum of whose demands is greatest, the mind whose criticisms and dissatisfactions are fatal in the long run" (P, p. 23).

The dilemma therefore, in one sense, both originates and terminates in the layperson—she is the source of the claim that a need is not met, and she will ultimately judge if the claim has been satisfied. However, in between, comes the work of the philosopher, and of James's pragmatistic philosophy in particular. For James holds that his own solution, that "oddly-named thing pragmatism" (P, p. 23) can, as a philosophy, satisfy the layperson's demand for an intellectually honest but "mediating way of thinking" (P, p. 26), one that can be religious, like "the rationalisms," but simultaneously intimately connected with our actual and finite life, with its sorrows and joys, terrors and hopes.

In his attempt to build, and embody, such a mediating way, James takes in hand any tools, and any substance, that might serve, assessing each according to its promise for helping us move between our ideas and our experiences, and for helping him un-stiffen the two great "columns" of philosophy—rationalism and empiricism—without thereby ousting, or too much unsettling, well established ideas, ideas already often tried and tested, and known to felicitously carry him among ideas and to felicitously re-immense him in concrete experience. Virtually all of the perennial problems of philosophy appear in one or more guises in these lectures: the problems of substance, of personal identity, of materialism, of free will and determinism, of design, of objective truth and verification, of forms of unity, of the nature of space and time, and James borrows freely from the distinctions and concepts others developed in grappling with those problems. However, he also brings to bear several more mundane or workaday concepts, that others might well hesitate to introduce in a serious philosophical discussion. His appeal to the notion of temperament is probably the best example here, and he himself anticipates objections to his use of such an apparently crude notion; "what a barbaric disjunction," "what a brutal caricature" (P, p. 23) he imagines hearing the professional philosopher exclaim. But there are also other, less immediately obvious, commonplace notions that he draws upon. One of these is the notion of forgetting. The other, which may in some ways be related to forgetting, is the idea of "moral holidays."<sup>2</sup> Seeing how James uses these lowly notions to give force and substance to his argument for a pluralistic and moralistic religion is the object of this paper.

*Even God Forgets—Forgetting in Morality  
and the Morality of Forgetting*

One workaday concept that James uses in defining and defending his pragmatistic and mediating philosophy is the notion of forgetting. There are three occasions in the lectures on *Prag-*

*matism* where he explicitly appeals to this very human form of "disjunctive" relation in experience. On each occasion he is struggling with the moral and religious implications of what he deemed to be the most central of all philosophic problems because it is so "pregnant" with consequences—the problem of "the one and the many" (P, p. 64).

One of these instances occurs early in the last lecture. In this lecture, "Pragmatism and Religion," James contrasts two ways of reading "this absolutely real world" (P, p. 135), and two ways it may give moral and religious sustenance. Under the monistic view adopted by rationalism, the unity of the world is given first, as an absolute principle. Here, the sense of what James calls "the more," that is, of the universe beyond the details of one's particular experiences, is not just that of a prolongation or an extension of the finite, of a quantitative addition, even if indefinite in amount, to our particular experiences. Instead, on the monistic view, the "more" that supplements one's particular experiences is taken "as totalizing and surrounding the finite," and therefore "altering the form of experience . . . (or rather presenting it in another form than that in which we get it): eternal or absolute form." <sup>3</sup>

This monistic principle, wherein the "totalizing" unity of the world is given first, provides, says James, limits on the realm of the possible and thence also a form of emotional and intellectual security for those who accept it. Construed in this way, the principle of unity, by making all good things certain, and—in the eternal—all bad things impossible, results in a "transmutation" of the "entire category of possibility into categories more secure" (P, p. 135).

But it is just this "transmutation" that James believes so decisively divides the rationalist's religious sense from the empiricist's, at least if the empiricist be not pessimistic but melioristic—treating the salvation of the world as really possible, but not inevitable. James clearly places himself, and pragmatism, on the melioristic side. The world's salvation, whether it be conceived as a

phenomenon that is "diffuse and distributive," or as a phenomenon "climacteric and integral" (P, p. 137), is, for James, a *possibility* only. Our particular ideals, the particular possibilities for which we seem to ourselves to look and wait, are, James insists, real possibilities that may, given complementary conditions, given our chance, become actual through our own acts. Each of our individual acts may contribute to and help create the world's salvation.

James attempts to make these two ways of viewing the world more concrete, setting each before us as an actual possible "taking" of the world, by himself reading and interpreting verses from Walt Whitman's "To You." On the one side, in this "fine and moving poem," James can uncover the monistic view, wherein the "you" of the poem is posed against a background of the "static One." On this view, whatever may happen to you, whatever defacements or failures or ignominies come upon you—you the reader or hearer of the poem, whoever you may be—still the "glories and grandeurs" are yours. They are yours absolutely; whatever appearances may be, inwardly you are safe (P, p. 133).

But this monistic way, although "useful" and "noble enough," is less agreeable to the pragmatic temper than the pluralistic way of reading the poem. Here, the you whom the poem honors is not a you cradled without exception in safe serenity, but a you more narrowly and more conditionally defined. Here "you" may point to "your better possibilities phenomenally taken, or the specific redemptive effects even of your failures, upon yourself or others." As in the monistic way, the you in this pluralistic reading is encouraged to show fidelity to himself or herself, but only a portion of the self is selected as worthy of fidelity; in adopting this stance, James urges us to "*Forget the low in yourself*, then, think only of the high. Identify your life therewith; then, through angers, losses, ignorance, ennui, whatever you thus make yourself, whatever you thus most deeply are, picks its way" (P, p. 133, emphasis added).

James asks us to take seriously—as a "live" hypothesis—the possibility that the world actually grows and changes in *our* acts

and our "turning-places." He asks that we think of the perfection of the world, not as inevitable or guaranteed, but as *conditional* only, "the condition being that each several agent does its own 'level best'" (P, p. 139). Should we, if faced with the possibility of participating in such a world—a world that may, but will not inevitably be saved, a world in which possibility is valid and real—reject the offer because it lacks guarantees? Could we reject the offer on those grounds?

Our answer to these questions, says James—unless we are at a particularly low and discouraged point in our life, where we are unable or unwilling to rise to the chances and risks of things, or unless we are of a temperament that habitually craves a haven from life's demands and experience and change—will be "No." No, we could not reject the offer, simply because its outcome is uncertain; the real risks of such a world will call forth a healthy fighting response within us, gladly will we take up the challenge.

But James pushes us, and himself, further than this, beyond this initial response, asking us: would we still accept the challenge if we knew that we are not permitted to change our creed—if, by now siding with the robust, pluralistic spirit, we are forever barred from later seeking the comforts of the monistic and "tender-minded" faith, with its necessary and not merely probabilistic salvation? What if the monistic-pluralistic disjunction is really and ultimately a final one, and only one side can be true? What if we were really blocked from moving between these two "compartments"—a monistic belief and a pluralistic belief—at our convenience; what if by choosing one we must unavoidably and irrevocably surrender the other?

Here James appeals most brazenly, most unabashedly, and most honestly, to our temperament. Couching his appeal literally in terms of our *tastes*, he asks us: how palatable, really, are the claims of the tender-minded? Might they not be "too saccharine to stand" (P, p. 141)? Too idyllic? Too optimistic? Don't these notions of a world entirely saved, of all, without exception, without price, granted salvation—ultimately ring false? Don't they be-

lie what we feel the very seriousness of life is, its real sacrifices and losses?

James's answer, given not from his official pragmatist position, but from his *own* pragmatism, is to fully surrender the notion of a complete reconciliation, to accept that, with regard to life as a whole, it is not right that we should adopt the attitude of prodigal sons—splurging our fortunes (not real *fortunes* they!) impervious to the needs of the morrow, confident that a return to an all-embracing, all-encompassing unity is imminent and all will then be good and right. No, says James, "I am willing that there should be real losses and real losers, and no total preservation of all that is" (P, p. 142). In this world, the place of real loss and, too, of real evil, of things that are and ought to be regretted, everything must not be preserved. In such a world, the belief that all is sweet, that all is "yes, yes," is impossible; here, says James, "The way of escape from evil on this system is *not* by getting it 'aufgehoben,' or preserved in the whole as an element essential but 'overcome.' *It is by dropping it out altogether, throwing it overboard and getting beyond it, helping to make a universe that shall forget its very place and name*" (P, p. 142).

These are plain and strong words. They are, I think, one of James's own "big summarizing acts"—the labor of the lectures almost accomplished, James himself here gives warrant to the claim he made in the first lecture that "temperaments with their cravings and refusals do determine men in their philosophies, and always will" (P, p. 24). James's own "peculiar sense of a certain total character in the universe" (P, p. 25) craves a philosophy that covers both a world of "uncertified possibilities" and ideals—ideals which he trusts and cherishes but may never entirely secure—and square and solid facts, the particulars of human experience, in all their diversity. From the first, we have felt James's complete intolerance for an extreme form of rationalism, such as that typified by Leibniz, coolly writing about the fitness of God's "properly vindictive justice" (P, p. 20) in condemning lost souls to eternal torment, in order to show the absolute and eternal per-



fection of all things. We have seen what James would oppose to that unreal optimism—the case of the Cleveland workingman, killing his children and himself, and the other cases described by the anarchistic writer Morrison Swift. Although they are Swift's words, we feel it is also James who affirms that that workingman is "one of the elemental, stupendous facts of this modern world and of this universe. It cannot be glozed over or minimized away by all the treatises on God, and Love, and Being, helplessly existing in their haughty monumental vacuity. This is one of the simple irreducible elements of this world's life" (P, p. 22). If, says James, someone claims that every deed and aspect of the world has a common purpose, such as goodness or justice, the good or god they conceive can ultimately not be a good or god for most of humanity:

We see indeed that certain evils minister to ulterior goods, that the bitter makes the cocktail better, and that a bit of danger or hardship puts us agreeably to our trumps. We can vaguely generalize this into the doctrine that all the evil in the universe is but instrumental to its greater perfection. But the scale of the evil actually in sight defies all human tolerance; and transcendental idealism, in the pages of a Bradley or a Royce, brings us no farther than the book of Job did—God's ways are not our ways, so let us put our hands upon our mouth. A God who can relish such superfluities of horror is no God for human beings to appeal to. His animal spirits are too high, his practical jokes too monstrous. In other words the 'Absolute' with his one purpose, is not the man-like God of common people.<sup>4</sup>

The ideal that James can conceive, and possibly believe in, is not an *origin* of everything but an *ultimate*—a state of successively evolving unity toward which the universe is growing (P, pp. 77-78). Construed in this way, the ideal could never be the whole of everything, but must always be a part, an "extract," possibly even

extracted from within our own struggling and motley selves by our deliberately forgetting the low in ourselves and thinking only of the high. The extract that is needed to "sanctify the human flux" is not necessarily the all-inclusive Absolute, but may be something much more "prosaic and earthborn" (P, p. 133). Implying possibles in the plural and a certain restlessness of conception, the needed extract may be any belief in *something* beyond the conscious self that is friendly to man, and to his ideals:

Anything larger will do, if only it be large enough to trust for the next step. It need not be infinite, it need not be solitary. It might conceivably even be only a larger and more godlike self, of which the present self would then be but the mutilated expression, and the universe might conceivably be a collection of such selves, of different degrees of inclusiveness, with no absolute unity realized in it at all. (VRE, p. 413)

This is true also when James takes the notion of unity noetical rather than teleologically. He takes a stand against a conception of God as what, elsewhere, he termed an "absolute all-experiencer." In "The Essence of Humanism," James described his own reading of humanism as theistic and pluralistic, and affirmed, "If there be a God, he is no absolute all-experiencer, but simply the experiencer of widest actual conscious span."<sup>5</sup> The noetic unity that James would attribute to God is not that of an "All-Knower;" James does not affirm, as did Josiah Royce, that "God's consciousness . . . forms in its wholeness one luminously transparent conscious moment" (P, p. 72). Rather, James asks for, and is satisfied with, a more limited, more "humanly familiar" form of noetic unity:

Everything gets known by *some* knower along with something else; but the knowers may in the end be irreducibly many, and the greatest knower of them all may yet not know the whole of everything, or even know what he does know at one single stroke:—he may be liable to forget. (P, p. 72)

Even the knower of widest actual conscious span—even he, is liable to forget.<sup>6</sup> Selectivity of consciousness is, indeed, at the very backbone of this worldview; in this pluralistic world, nothing is complete, nothing is eternally safe; even in the mind of God something may be forgotten and the world truly is "eternally incomplete, and at all times subject to addition or liable to loss" (P, p. 82).

### *Forgetting and Moral Holidays*

Thus we see one way that James uses the notion of forgetting to help construct a plausible "mediating way" between rationalism and empiricism in the moral and religious realms. Forgetting, especially willful or deliberate forgetting, provides us with a possible response to the existence of evil. Confronted with something that is evil, James does not ask us *always* to suppress our response,<sup>7</sup> to tolerate what it is not human or humane to tolerate, so as to testify for and not to slander, a rationally unified and final perfection in the world. Because the world is not, in its origin, an absolutely unitary fact, but, instead, a plurality, "an aggregate or collection of higher and lower things and principles," James need not see evil as essential, "it might be, and may always have been, an independent portion that had no rational or absolute right to live with the rest, and which we might conceivably hope to see got rid of at last" (VRE, p. 113). Opting for the "many" over the "one," at least as concerns the *origin* of this absolutely real world, James can to some degree identify himself with the position adopted by proponents of the gospel of healthy-mindedness:

Whereas the monistic philosopher finds himself more or less bound to say, as Hegel said, that everything actual is rational, and that evil, as an element dialectically required, must be pinned in and kept and consecrated and have a function awarded to it in the final system of truth, healthy-mindedness refuses to say anything of the sort.

Evil, it says, is emphatically irrational, and *not* to be pinned in, or preserved, or consecrated in any final system of truth. It is a pure abomination to the Lord, an alien unreality, a waste element, to be sloughed off and negated, and the very memory of it, if possible, wiped out and forgotten. The ideal, so far from being co-extensive with the whole actual, is a mere *extract* from the actual, marked by its deliverance from all contact with this diseased, inferior, and excrementitious stuff. (VRE, p. 113)

But there is another way in which questions about forgetting, and particularly intentional forgetting, arise in the moral domain. This other form of forgetting focuses less upon a refusal to attend to evil itself than upon a refusal to acknowledge some of the moral demands that may arise *from* evil, claiming our recognition and response. This is the problem of dividing the great expanse of actual ethical demands, of dividing the one great overwhelming throb of all-too-human prayers and all-too-wordless cries of sentient beings, into those that one tries to hear, and respond to, and those that one tries not to hear, to submerge under a more or less honest, a more or less resigned, a more or less sensitive, plea of the finite faced with the vaster-than-finite.

James at several points confronts this problem—the necessity and inevitability of line-drawing, of saying (somewhere, and sometimes) "here my responsibility begins, there my responsibility ends." He is particularly concerned with contrasting the answers, and the satisfactoriness of the answers, that he imagines might be given by a believer in the Absolute—one who takes the rational unity and perfection of the world as a necessary principle—and a believer in pluralism, or one who holds that a "pragmatically unified and ameliorated world" (P, p. 135) is a possibility only, and not a necessary or inevitable outcome. In dealing with this problem, James relies perhaps more extensively than usual on literary and rhetorical devices, particularly irony and overstatement. The irony is already abundantly apparent in his initial statement of

the problem. Applying his pragmatic method to the attempt to understand what believers in the Absolute mean when they tell us that their belief gives them comfort, James writes:

They mean that since in the Absolute finite evil is 'over-ruled' already, we may, therefore, whenever we wish, treat the temporal as if it were potentially the eternal, be sure that we can trust its outcome, and, without sin, dismiss our fear and drop the worry of our finite responsibility. In short, they mean that we have a right ever and anon to take a moral holiday, to let the world wag in its own way, feeling that its issues are in better hands than ours and are none of our business.

The universe is a system of which the individual members may relax their anxieties occasionally, in which the don't-care mood is also right for men, and moral holidays in order—that, if I mistake not, is part, at least, of what the Absolute is 'known-as,' that is the great difference in our particular experiences which his being true makes for us, that is part of his cash-value when he is pragmatically interpreted. (P, p. 41)

Few would disagree that, given appropriate caveats, the taking of holidays in the normal sense of temporary leaves of absence from study and work is good for one. Holidays are valuable as breaks from routine, as opportunities to become clear and start afresh, as times to recoup one's physical, intellectual and spiritual forces, and as a way to preserve "that capacity for irresponsible enjoyment which is like air space in the character."<sup>8</sup> But what of study and work conceived not in the usual sense, but in a broader sense as what one is doing in all of one's life, of study and work as comprising one's life—particularly as construed by such a philosophy as pragmatism? Might there not be occasions when one would want (need?) to escape the demands of life in this broad sense? If we are prepared to admit that it is "only human" to want breaks in the physical and occupational realms, what of these

other realms, that are often more demanding, more taxing, and more unrelenting—the sense of morality, of responsibility?

James does, I think, take these considerations seriously; he repeatedly emphasizes that it is not an inconsequential characteristic of the conception of the absolute that the contemplation and acceptance of it may, as it were, compensate one, and give one a kind of comfort and rest that is not possible to the pluralist. He acknowledges that the pluralist's world is "always vulnerable." In that world, it may always happen that some part, some of the several "possibilities" in it, may go astray so that, "having no 'eternal' edition of it to draw comfort from, its partisans must always feel to some degree insecure" (MT, p. 124). James says that it is a "serious deficiency" of his pluralistic philosophy that it is incapable of thus fostering any "quietistic raptures" (MT, p. 125)—one "permanent inferiority of pluralism from the pragmatic point of view" is just this: that it "has no saving message for incurably sick souls. Absolutism, among its other messages, has that message, and is the only scheme that has it necessarily" (MT, p. 124). Thus it is not that James is unwilling to admit this as a benefit of a belief in the Absolute, and a valuable one; rather, it is the "supernumerary features" of the Absolute—its peculiar logic, its engendering of further metaphysical paradoxes, that slam so hard against his other beliefs, and are so repugnant: "My disbelief in the Absolute means then disbelief in those other supernumerary features, for I fully believe in the legitimacy of taking moral holidays" (P, p. 43).

However, though James treats this need seriously (albeit, again, not without irony—"quietistic raptures" is not solely descriptive nor is its close rival, "a perfect sumptuousness of security" [P, p. 75] that James uses in a similar context in "The One and the Many,") one wonders about the method that James thought believers in the Absolute might adopt in order to reach or achieve that "very precious" comfort. In his descriptions, James appears to remain too much on the outside of the Hegelian believer's world, an observer looking in and relating the benefits that will accrue to the

actors by their decisions and activity. How much this, too, is deliberate and ironic, a feigned naivety, by James, I cannot say. For example, in the longer passage from "What Pragmatism Means" quoted earlier, James continues as follows:

The universe is a system of which the individual members may relax their anxieties occasionally, in which the don't-care mood is also right for men, and moral holidays in order—that, if I mistake not, is part, at least, of what the Absolute is 'known-as,' that is the great difference in our particular experiences which his being true makes for us, that is part of his cash-value when he is pragmatically interpreted. Farther than that the ordinary lay-reader in philosophy who thinks favorably of absolute idealism does not venture to sharpen his conceptions. He can use the Absolute for so much, and so much is very precious. He is pained at hearing you speak incredulously of the Absolute, therefore, and disregards your criticisms because they deal with aspects of the conception that he fails to follow. (P, p. 41)

Is not the distinction between what something appears to an external observer to be used for, and an agent's own reasons, or understanding of her own reasons, for its use glossed over here? And what of James's own way of thinking about the place of a belief in free will, especially the consequences of belief and non-belief for the likelihood that one could make a life-saving leap? What if, at the brink of the chasm, one reminded the would-be-jumper that he believes he can make the leap successfully only (or even merely "in part") because this will increase his likelihood of doing so? Would not this—at least for *some* individuals<sup>9</sup>—be a cruel undermining of their faith? Is James quite fair when he says of the ordinary lay-reader that he is pained at being exposed to incredulity of the Absolute *because* he will not refine his conceptions beyond the point of the Absolute's cash value? (Or does James use "therefore" here to mean something less

strict than "because"?) Does the lay-reader really disregard James's criticisms because they concern aspects of that notion that he fails to follow?

James acknowledges that the type of considerations he is advancing here for the acceptance or nonacceptance of the Absolute includes much that others would not consider appropriate "matter" in such a case—he speaks of pragmatism as widening "the field of search for God" and asserts, "She will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact—if that should seem a likely place to find him" (P, p. 44). Although later, especially in the preface to *The Meaning of Truth*, James embeds his idea of moral holidays in still deeper layers of irony, and jestingly speaks of having offered the notion as a "conciliatory olive-branch" to his "enemies," the ironic tone also conveys a degree of frustration at the failure of *others* to seriously consider the idea:

Using the pragmatic test of the meaning of concepts, I had shown the concept of the absolute to *mean* nothing but the holiday giver, the banisher of cosmic fear. One's objective deliverance, when one says 'the absolute exists,' amounted, on my showing, just to this, that 'some justification of a feeling of security in presence of the universe' exists, and that systematically to refuse to cultivate a feeling of security would be to do violence to a tendency in one's emotional life which might well be respected as prophetic. (MT, p. 5)

James, finding that this offered conception met with no stirrings in the hearts (or intelligences) of those for whom it was meant, takes his offering back. Yet that he at least originally saw the offering as a *real gift*,<sup>10</sup> a picture (one is reminded of Wittgenstein here<sup>11</sup>) that might have smoothly intersected with the "workings" of the minds of the absolutist thinkers he imagined receiving it, is itself interesting and worth reflecting upon. "Some justification of a feeling of security in presence of the universe" exists—so we need not feel ourselves always and forever, at every moment, re-



sponsible; it is all right, on occasion, to let the world go on its own way, of its own accord, this is what James thought his absolutist-minded (temperamented) critics could agree to. But does not such thinking on James's part but point to the gulf that can separate these two kinds of temperament—the absolutist and the (confound the absolute) pluralist? How could one of an absolutist temperament be even a hair's breadth satisfied with such an indefinite and vague—one might even say *grudging*—piece of meta-physical-ethical comfort? *Where*, for an absolutist, is the comfort in such a picture conceived and described as such—a picture? Does not the mere treatment of this as if it were only a picture cry out, to an absolutist mind, for further justification—for a meta-justification if you will, to then justify to men the ways of the Absolute *behind* the meagerness of the first order justification?

Yet these questions—questions about how conciliatory James's purported olive-branch really was, and how it could or could not have been perceived as such—are, for our present purpose, less important than the real difference that James sees in how an Absolute monist might "lay back" upon the Absolute, whereas the pluralist, if he would grant himself a moral holiday, can take only "provisional breathing-spells, intended to refresh us for the morrow's fight" (MT, p. 124). It is not that the pluralist never has any release from responsibility, nor that her responsibility stretches out ceaselessly, beyond even what she can ever know or even begin to acknowledge—there is a definite line-drawing of responsibility, but it is a definite line only temporarily, and the only way the lines can be drawn by us is indirectly—through our direct acts of bringing about "external good." If we ask, more directly, what this "philosophy of objective conduct" is, so "old-fashioned and finite, but so chaste and sane and strong" we learn:

It is the recognition of limits, foreign and opaque to our understanding. It is the willingness, after bringing about some external good, to feel at peace; for our responsibility ends with the performance of that duty, and the burden of the rest we may lay on higher powers.

"Look to thyself, O Universe!

Thou art better, and not worse,"

we may say in that philosophy, the moment we have done our stroke of conduct, however small. For in the view of that philosophy the universe belongs to a plurality of semi-independent forces, each one of which may help or hinder, and be helped or hindered by, the operations of the rest. (WB, pp. 134-135)

We, each of us in our several interrelated endeavors, living in our commonly shared world with partially dependent and partially independent moral responsibilities, are granted a brief respite from the press of moral demand by acting—by doing our deed to bring about external good. We may, for a moment, forget—or leave off remembering; we may, as James tells us in a footnote, lay further responsibility for the act, such as the task of "seeing to it that the *end* of all our righteousness be some positive universal gain" (WB, p. 134n), on "higher powers." We may—and in some cases even *should*—leave off remembering, for doing so may itself be a precondition for further acts, for preparing for the morrow's fight and succeeding in those outward duties that, left undone, bring "perdition." "No matter how we feel; if we are only faithful in the outward act and refuse to do wrong, the world will in so far be safe, and we quit of our debt towards it" (WB, p. 134). The final obligation we have, that to which we must, in the end, attend, the "ultimate fact for our recognition" (WB, p. 134) is neither our sensibility, nor our vain and doomed attempts to be omnisciently prescient in seeing what is beyond our limits of understanding. The final obligation is objective conduct, and to bring that about, we may and sometimes must, forego speculation about what may be or might have been:

When may a truth go into cold-storage in the encyclopedia? and when shall it come out for battle? Must I constantly be repeating the truth 'twice two are four' because of its eternal claim on recognition? or is it

sometimes irrelevant? Must my thoughts dwell night and day on my personal sins and blemishes, because I truly have them?—or may I sink and ignore them in order to be a decent social unit, and not a mass of morbid melancholy and apology? (P, p. 111)

*On A Moral Community of Remembering and Forgetting  
—Toward a Conclusion, or One Layperson's Response*

There is, I think, a subtle paradox that underlies James's defense, in the lectures on pragmatism, of a pragmatistic or melioristic form of religion. On one side, we have the situation which I described at the outset: we have this picture of James, resourceful and determined and eager to construct for us that mediating path that we need; we see James's hands, ready and willing to take up whatever tools, whatever substance, however humble, however human, to aid pragmatism in her "search for God." She, James has told us, has only one test to apply to inform us of the probable truth of all our endeavors, including our search for God: the degree to which what we take up leads us felicitously through our ideas, and through our experiences, taken as a whole, as a collectivity with nothing left out. "Her only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted" (P, p. 44). If an idea of God could meet this test, if the notion of God should result in "all this agreement with concrete reality" (P, p. 44), how could pragmatism deny God's existence? But, on the other side, when we ask how it is that James actually works this all out, the tools and concepts he actually employs to construct a God that will mold itself on our experience, as a collectivity with nothing left out are, in part—selectivity, refusal, rejection, forgetting. To construct a philosophy that is neither too meager nor too materialistic, that has neither the "skinny and emaciated" (P, p. 25) form of the rationalists, nor the fuller but still forever closed and determined

shape of the tough-minded empiricist, James needs a God that can forget. The noetic world of God that we, at this time and based on our experience, can conceive is not that ultra-monistic picture of God as an all-knower, where his world "must have all its parts co-implicated in the one logical-æsthetical-teleological unit-picture which is his eternal dream" (P, p. 74). James can only somewhat lamely offer such a total union, such an all-knower, as a possible hypothesis, a hypothesis that may eventually, upon the final empirical test, be found to be the most acceptable. Meanwhile, however, there is neither absolute monism nor absolute pluralism; insofar as there is any definite connection between things, whether noetically, teleologically, by practical continuity, or by any of several other possible forms of unity, *only* thus far is the world one. Insofar as there is any lack of such definite connection, the world is plural.

But in this neither purely monistic nor purely pluralistic moral world it is not only God who must forget. When James, in his struggle with the problem of "the one and the many," turns to the lowly notion of forgetting, "possibles in the plural" emerge, and each of these possibilities is itself subject to the dangers and risks that a melioristic religion entails.

We have seen how forgetting may be a response we take toward "the low" in ourselves, or to radical evil in the world. Elsewhere, however, James stresses that our own and society's *ideals* must be subjected to a similar form of selectivity: the "actually possible in this world is vastly narrower than all that is demanded; and there is always a *pinch* between the ideal and the actual which can only be got through by leaving part of the ideal behind" (WB, p. 153). From this broader perspective, morality is itself but a determined effort, engaged in by both individuals and the community, to arrive at an increasingly inclusive ordering of man's ideals, an ordering that creates or stirs up the least possible degree of dissatisfaction and that, through its particular forms of selectivity, its particular "forgettings," wounds the fewest possible souls.

If, then, on all sides, selectivity in our response to *good* and *evil*

emerges as inevitable, a pressing ethical requirement is for us to develop appropriate checks and counterbalances on that selectivity. The dangers here are often subtle: a rejection of evil that is too enthusiastic, or too far-reaching and indiscriminate, even though it stop short of absolute idealism, may yet undermine our own and others' sense of the seriousness of life, rendering it superficially sweet and wrongly denying that "something permanently drastic and bitter always remains at the bottom of its cup" (P, p. 141). And the refusal to acknowledge certain forms of radical evil as a necessary part of the universe so as to remain free "from all moral sophistry and strain" (VRE, p. 78) might but clothe a deeper level of moral sophistry if such freedom be attained at the cost of failing to hear the cries of the victim of evil (or of the perpetrator of evil, whose needs, like those of the sick-souled, may well be grave indeed).

Perhaps James's pluralistic and theistic God, the God who is no absolute all-experiencer, but simply "the experiencer of widest actual conscious span," entails a form of *superimposition of selectivities* and so allows a partial correction for the more wayward and harmful selectivities of any individual moral consciousness. (This may also be another non-totalizing way of reading the "you" in Whitman's "To You," the "better you" being that part of you that has more fully corrected for idiosyncratic and unworthy selectivities in our responses to others and the world.) Although James held that "if we look at religion with the breadth of view which it demands," we find "abundant reason for refusing to leave out either the sadness or the gladness" (VRE, p. 68), still the constitutionally sombre and the constitutionally sanguine onlooker will emphasize one or the other side, and the possible roles of "forgetting" will correspondingly differ.<sup>12</sup> The mediating way that James has constructed is not for everyone—neither the radically tough-minded nor the radically tender-minded is likely to find that his own "peculiar sense of a certain total character in the universe" is covered here. James's selectivities—his inclusions and exclusions, his rememberings and forgettings—may so completely

mismatch those of these more radical temperaments that no satisfactory superimposition is possible. However, for the less positively marked and more mixed temperament that James ascribes to the layperson, James's pragmatistic or melioristic type of religion with its finite god may constitute just that *conjunction of disjunctions* that is required.<sup>13</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. *The Works of William James: Pragmatism*, ed. Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 22. Hereafter referred to as "P." All references to James's writings (one letter excepted) are to this edition.

2. P, p. 41. I do not know if James himself coined the term "moral holiday" though this does seem probable from the text. The *idea*, however, was explored quite explicitly in Henry James's novel, *The Golden Bowl*, first published in 1904, two years before James delivered the lectures on pragmatism. The following passage, which occurs quite early in the book, is largely self-contained; the points of similarity are many and intriguing:

ADAM VERVER, at Fawns, that autumn Sunday, might have been observed to open the door of the billiard-room with a certain freedom—might have been observed, that is, had there been a spectator in the field. . . . We share this world, none the less, for the hour, with Mr. Verver; the very fact of his striking, as he would have said, for solitude, the fact of his quiet flight, almost on tiptoe, through tortuous corridors, investing him with an interest that makes our attention—tender indeed almost to compassion—qualify his achieved isolation. For it may immediately be mentioned that this amiable man bethought himself of his personal advantage, in general, only when it might appear to him that other advantages, those of other persons, had suc-

cessfully put in their claim. It may be mentioned also that he always figured other persons—such was the law of his nature—as a numerous array, and that, though conscious of but a single near tie, one affection, one duty deepest-rooted in his life, it had never for many minutes together been his portion not to feel himself surrounded and committed, never quite been his refreshment to make out where the many-coloured human appeal, represented by gradations of tint, diminishing concentric zones of intensity, of importunity, really faded to the impersonal whiteness for which his vision sometimes ached. It shaded off, the appeal—he would have admitted that; but he had as yet noted no point at which it positively stopped.

Thus had grown in him a little habit—his innermost secret, not confided even to Maggie, though he felt she understood it, as she understood, to his view, everything—thus had shaped itself the innocent trick of occasionally making-believe that he had no conscience, or at least that blankness, in the field of duty, did reign for an hour; a small game to which the few persons near enough to have caught him playing it, and of whom Mrs. Assingham, for instance, was one, attached indulgently that idea of quaintness, quite in fact that charm of the pathetic, involved in the preservation by an adult of one of childhood's toys. When he took a rare moment 'off' he did so with the touching, confessing eyes of a man of forty-seven caught in the act of handling a relic of infancy—sticking on the head of a broken soldier or trying the lock of a wooden gun. It was essentially in him the *imitation* of depravity—which for amusement, as might have been, he practised 'keeping up.' In spite of practice he was still imperfect, for these so artlessly-artful interludes were condemned, by the nature of the case, to brevity. He had fatally stamped himself—it was his own fault—a man who could be interrupted with impunity.

3. This explanation of William James's view of the relation between the Absolute and possibility is found in a letter that James wrote to Elizabeth Glendower Evans on December 11, 1906, following the Lowell Lectures on pragmatism. William James to Elizabeth Glendower Evans, reprinted in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935), vol. 2, p. 473. See also Note 10 below.

4. P, p. 70. For James, certain acts, certain deeds, demand our refusal, our entire being shrinks from them, and from any implication with them that would arise from admitting them as "necessary" or logical elements of the universe:

When, for example, I imagine such carrion as the Brockton murder, I cannot conceive it as an act by which the universe, as a whole, logically and necessarily expresses its nature without shrinking from complicity with such a whole. And I deliberately refuse to keep on terms of loyalty with the universe by saying blankly that the murder, since it does flow from the nature of the whole, is not carrion. There are *some* instinctive reactions which I, for one, will not tamper with.

William James, *The Will to Believe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 136. Hereafter referred to as "WB."

Compare with James's position in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he writes:

It may indeed be that no religious reconciliation with the absolute totality of things is possible. Some evils, indeed, are ministerial to higher forms of good; but it may be that there are forms of evil so extreme as to enter into no good system whatsoever, and that, in respect of such evil, dumb submission or neglect to notice is the only practical resource. This question must confront us on a later day. But provisionally, and as a mere matter of program and method, since the evil facts are as genuine parts of nature as the good ones, the philosophic presumption should be that they have some rational significance, and that systematic healthy-mindedness, failing as it does to ac-



cord to sorrow, pain, and death any positive and active attention whatever, is formally less complete than systems that try at least to include these elements in their scope.

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 137-138. Hereafter referred to as "VRE."

5. William James, *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 72. Hereafter referred to as "MT."

6. In *The Principles of Psychology*, James had said that the only reasons we might countenance "the extravagant opinion that nothing we experience can be absolutely forgotten" are transcendental ones. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), vol. 1, p. 643. Here, in this notion that even God may be liable to forget, we see the extent to which he really was unpersuaded by arguments of that form. Indeed, in "Hegel and His Method," James argues that the idealistic conception of the absolute as the all-knower, if thought out consistently, "leads one to frame an almost ridiculous conception of the absolute mind, owing to the enormous mass of unprofitable information which it would then seem obliged to carry":

*All facts lead to him. If it be a fact that this table is not a chair, not a rhinoceros, not a logarithm, not a mile away from the door, not worth five hundred pounds sterling . . . the absolute must even now be articulately aware of all these negations. Along with what everything is it must also be conscious of everything which it is not. This infinite atmosphere of explicit negativity—observe that it has to be explicit—around everything seems to us so useless an encumbrance as to make the absolute still more foreign to our sympathy.*

And, in a footnote, drawing an analogy between the relation which our central consciousness appears to bear to the nervous system with what might be expected in the absolute, James suggests, "whatever superhuman mental synthesis there may be, the neglect and elimination of certain contents of which we are conscious on the human level might be as

characteristic a feature as is the combination and interweaving of other human contents." William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 61-62 and p. 62, note 15.

7. The *probabilistic* note here is significant: if we could always or completely suppress our response to evil we might stand in danger of forgetting what should *not* be forgotten—the victim, and the need to respond to the victim. The potential for forgetfulness brings with it real hazards and responsibilities. If I am right in hearing something of James's own voice in Morrison Swift's, then it seems that the forgettings that we and a humane god may morally undertake must themselves be selective, amenable to correction (extension or contraction) as new moral demands arise.

8. William James, "Vacations," in *Essays, Comments, and Reviews* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 4.

9. I thank a reader for sensitizing me to the need for qualification here. Persons most inclined to a certain form of strenuosity might even find such a reminder at the brink of the chasm *helpful*.

10. That James was at first surprised at the cold reception with which his notion of the Absolute as a giver of moral holidays was met is suggested by his response to Elizabeth Glendower Evans when she objected that, in this notion, James had caricatured absolutism. In his letter, James again emphasizes how a totalizing view of the universe leads to the conclusion that, as realized eternally, everything is good:

If you take it as totalizing, your consolations are certain or necessary and your world a dogmatic optimism. It flows from the very form of totality that it should lack nothing, for it does n't refer beyond itself. You surely don't mean *this* when you accuse me of caricaturing! . . . You yourself write of issues being "guaranteed" by the larger order. Guaranteed *anyhow*, without specification of remedy. It permits equally of strenuosity, of course. It *dictates* nothing, but *justifies* all *fact* qua element of absolute experience. It thus helps sick souls more than pragmatism does; and as their needs are the sorest it has always seemed to me that this is a towering merit, to be

Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* pp. 473-474.

11. I am especially thinking of the "Lectures on Religious Belief," in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966). The sense of looking on at people who "think entirely differently" and have "different pictures" is, for me, very strong throughout much of James's treatment of the notion of moral holidays.

12. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James is explicitly concerned with the question of how much "superseding" of the sombre, the painful, the sad and the dreadful, may legitimately occur in the religious person's attitude:

The constitutionally sombre religious person makes even of his religious peace a very sober thing. Danger still hovers in the air about it. Flexion and contraction are not wholly checked. It were sparrowlike and childish after our deliverance to explode into twittering laughter and caper-cutting, and utterly to forget the imminent hawk on bough. Lie low, rather, lie low; for you are in the hands of a living God. . . . If we turn to the sanguine onlooker, on the other hand, we find that deliverance is felt as incomplete unless the burden be altogether overcome and the danger forgotten. Such onlookers give us definitions that seem to the sombre minds of whom we have just been speaking to leave out all the solemnity that makes religious peace so different from merely animal joys. In the opinion of some writers an attitude might be called religious, though no touch were left in it of sacrifice or submission, no tendency to flexion, no bowing of the head. (VRE, pp. 68-69)

13. I would like to thank Hilary Putnam for his new, and renewing, readings of James.

