

I AM AN IMPURE THINKER

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INTRODUCTION BY

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CHAPTER 2

THE SOUL OF WILLIAM JAMES¹



I. On The Significance of The Term "Soul"

THE PLACE: LA VERDETTE, a modest country mansion near Avignon, the city of medieval Papacy, in southern France. The time: the end of August, 1903, five months before the Russian fleet was attacked at Port Arthur by the Japanese fleet, and sixteen months before the First Russian Revolution broke out. So, in August 1903, the ideas of the French Revolution drew to a close. And truly, their era was embodied in the old man at La Verdette who filled the last days of his life with sublime conversations on three topics: Freedom, Justice, and the Fall of France. That sage was Charles Renouvier, "the director of French conscience for a quarter of a century," "the inspirer and teacher" and converter of William James.

Renouvier was 88 years old. On his deathbed, he confessed his sadness: "The French may cease to be a nation; a Prussian General may come to rule them. We await the beginning of an intellectual and moral decadence which will lead us quickly to a new night of the spirit as well as of the heart. . . . Mechanisms and gadgets made by the work of man will make life easier, and will make man the worker proud of himself; no serious literary, philosophical, scientific culture will remain. This night may last long." William James had proposed that this Frenchman who thus spoke on the last day of his life should be a candidate for the Prussian Academy of the Sci-

¹ An address delivered on the 100th birthday of William James, January 11, 1942, at Dartmouth College.

ences. For James recognized Renouvier as the dean of European thinkers.

Our greatest American philosopher owed his own emancipation to his meeting with Renouvier. During the tragic era when God died, James had sunk deep into moral depression. In 1869 he shared the heresy of industrialism that not a wiggle of our will happens save as the result of physical laws. Then he met "the inspirer, Renouvier." "Yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished Renouvier's definition of free will. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will." Three years later, by Renouvier's teaching, he was renewed "in the mood of hopefulness and buoyant self-expression." "Charles Renouvier," he also said, "was one of the greatest of philosophical characters, and but for the decisive impression made on me (by him), I might never have got free from the . . . superstition under which I had grown up." And later again he wrote: "Since, years ago, I read Renouvier, the center of my *Anschaung* has been that something is doing in the universe and that novelty is real."

The last European philosopher of classical coinage saved the soul of the first absolutely American, absolutely New World, philosopher. Renouvier could not save the soul of France. However, a transnational, transcontinental, stream of consciousness made him continue the conversation within the human family. Thought is just as frail as family life, as all life. Life cannot be begotten without succession. And here the succession literally rested on Renouvier looking with both eyes on that young, deterministic American, and inspiring him to break his chains. Great history always is a story between real people. This case, Renouvier-James, is like a testament to the American collegés to believe in personal education. Mark Hopkins' log remains our symbol. Any inspiring education is propagation. If we propagate ideas instead of selling them, we shall not be in need of that sad substitute for propagation—propaganda.

James has all the freshness which only those men retain who have bathed in the "mother-sea" of thought. Whereas Renouvier's France died, Renouvier's William James was called

at the time of his death "the prophet of the nation that is to be." He is the American of letters who has a message for the future of humankind beyond this world upheaval. Simply compare James and Henry Adams, his contemporary. Adams embodied the American who despaired of his own country and was ruined by Europe. James was built up by Europe, and believed in America. He was the prophet of an America which is not New England nor Newfoundland, not New Rochelle nor New Haven, but New Europe—a Europe reinvigorated and transformed, a New Western World.

When I asked a friend of William James what kind of man he was, she said: "With him, anything seemed possible. The whole world began every day anew when one was in his presence." "He seemed to be born afresh every morning."

William James recognized no limitations for the human soul. And nothing illustrates this better than his own handling of the term "soul." It occurs incessantly in his conversation and correspondence. Yet in his psychology he insisted that it was a useless term. He defined the science of the soul, psychology, as the science of the mental processes, and said that in psychology he had no use for a soul. Yet such was the majesty of his own freedom that he wrote: "Some day, indeed, souls may get their innings again in philosophy—I am quite ready to admit that possibility—they form a category of thought too natural to the human mind to expire without prolonged resistance. But if the belief in the soul ever does come to life, after the many funeral discourses preached over it, it will be only when someone has found in the term a pragmatic significance that has hitherto eluded observation. When that champion speaks, as he well may some time, it will be time to consider souls more seriously."

This centenary of William James, which finds the world at war, is reason enough to consider souls more seriously, to consider the soul of William James more seriously. The result, of course, may be something like his own description of his father. Once the old spirit of mischief revived in his breast and he described the baldness of his majestic father in these terms: "My modest father with his rippling raven locks." I

tremble lest I paint a bald James though his hair rippled, and a solemn soul, though he rocked with laughter. But if this moment, in this country and in our whole world, demands proof of souls, nobody better than James himself can offer it.

In times of crisis, the term "soul" is of "pragmatic significance" because it signifies our power to survive mortal fears. When Thomas Paine exclaimed: "This is a time that tries men's souls," he did not mean men's bodies or men's minds. And we know it. And at the end of his speech before Congress, Winston Churchill suddenly dropped all pretense of being slangy, witty, superior, and struck at his audience suddenly: "If you will allow me to use other language." And then he did use their language indeed. For he continued: "I will say that he must indeed have a blind soul who cannot see that some great purpose and design is being worked out here below, for which we have the honor to be the faithful servant."

These words are semantic blanks for the logical positivists; they swept Congress off their feet. Neither bodies, athletic bodies, nor minds, the most subtle minds, perceive honor, faithfulness, service, the things which count in war. Soulless men could not prevent the Japanese at this moment from being in San Francisco or the Germans from hovering over New York. Men could not go to war if they had no souls. For war is a struggle for the survival of others than ourselves, in honor, faith and service, a struggle for a purpose which is not of our making and which can only be accepted after we have thrown off mortal fear. In the peaceful years between 1865 and 1910, William James held that "however rare heroic conditions might be in fact, the true creed must be adapted to them. For only the extremes of heroic action and belief cover the whole range of life." "Heroic" signifies the absence or the neglect of the fear of losing our lives. And so I now turn to a "more serious consideration" of the soul of William James.

II

You have heard of William James' work in the field of science. He ruined his health at this work. Work was the

gospel of his age. "It works" was the famous catch phrase of pragmatism itself, the school to which James seemed foremost to belong. The vocabulary of labor—toil, work, production, results—colored the industrial era. James paid his toll to the religion of his time. Compared to Montesquieu, who composed his *Esprit des Lois* in indescribable nonchalance and insouciance compared with any man of the eighteenth century, William James worked like a laborer in a modern tool shop.

James did his hard work in the service of science, in the classrooms of a university and of a great college. All work has its code of specialization, and this code requires resignation. In the industrial system work is not done by the whole man. James suffered more than any man I know from the routine of work and from its destruction of wholeness, yet he accepted the code; he resigned himself even when he hurt his own subject. For instance, in his "Will to Believe," he argued about the energy called "faith" in such a manner as to exasperate John Jay Chapman, who blurted out to James: "The course of reasoning, or say state of mind, of a man who justifies faith by the consideration you mention, is well enough. But he'll never convey it, arouse it, evoke it—in another." There are forces in life which are murdered when they are not conveyed, aroused, evoked in others. And the gospel of objective work in science does not allow for growth, expansion, transmission of the powers of man. You might expect that James would have contradicted Chapman's accusation that he falsified these forces simply by bringing them to a standstill. Not at all. Humbly, James replied: "Damn me, if I call that faith, either. It is only calculated for the sickly hotbed atmosphere of the philosophic, positively enlightened, scientific classroom. To the victims of spinal paralysis which these studies superinduce, the . . . treatment, although you might not believe it, really does good."

Through resigning himself to the "atmosphere" of scientific work, James the expert won the admiration and love of his psychological and philosophical confreres. Taking upon himself the limitations of the gospel of work, joining hands with all

the millions who in those decades increased and expanded our means of intellectual and material production, he became the exponent of his era, the outstanding thinker of America at the turn of the century.

However, mere work would not have made him such a leader, if he had not tempered the iron age of work by a glow from another quarter. He was a gentleman through and through. And he could get very angry at plebeians. The gentleman, the man of independent means, and the hard-working plebeian do not go together easily. In work, things have to get done. There is a ruthlessness in work, as in any objective activity of man. How can it be mitigated by qualities which stem from social intercourse? Work can be done in a gentlemanlike fashion, even in modern society, by the most scrupulous respect for any other man's contribution to the work. James became famous for cultivating this trait to a sublime degree. Although not a team worker like one in a modern laboratory, he breathed the spirit of a team. He saw greatness, usefulness, memorability, everywhere. In him two opposite types were fused: in him were perfectly united the natural type of his age, Meunier's worker, and the social type of his age, the sensitive gentleman.

By such achievements, we obtain a passport throughout one time only. But James is still with us. How is this possible? When Stanton said of Lincoln: "Now, he belongs to the ages," he linked his hero with times, people and manners far distant. In a similar manner, we celebrate our hero today because he is linked to people of the past and of the future, outside his code of work or manners. James' roots went down in the soil of time before the great French Revolution; the branches, if I may say so, of his thought will stretch beyond the coming peace conference. Though a citizen of the peaceful era—between our Civil War (that last wave of the French Revolution) and the next great wave of the two World Wars,—William James belongs to the ages. In order to do him justice, we must connect the worker and gentleman of 1900 with the non-conformist and free thinker of the 18th century and the soldier of the 20th century.

Since you all know hard work and fair play, you can all

identify yourselves with the worker and gentleman in James. You sympathize perhaps less readily with the non-conformist or the soldier. The free thinker in James, at least, is no stranger among us.

Like the "enlightened" men of the 18th century, James possessed an uncanny and sometimes absurd curiosity about anything and everything under the sun. He also was quite sure—at least most of the time—that all that man could say dealt with "things" in the universe. It was left to the generation after James to show that man and the world and God are not reducible to each other, and that they can not even borrow language from each other. Yet James belonged, with Bergson, to the generation that sought deliverance from mere worldliness and mere things. Though he actually defined man as "a thing which," he at least disliked that state of affairs.

The free-thinker is often confused with the non-conformist. But the two differ as widely as the worker and the gentleman. The free-thinker, like the worker if left to himself becomes ruthless; he feeds on his objects like a bird of prey. The non-conformist emigrated to America for his conscience' sake. He created there a non-conformist environment—a church, a congregation—at terrible expense: the non-conformist incarnated himself in his every breath and act and step, in the home, the school, the meetinghouse. Is William James such an "expensive" thinker and professor of his faith?

Listen to the words he asked to have repeated to his son: "Tell him to live by yes and no, yes to everything good, no to everything bad." And: "I can't bring myself to blink the evil out of sight, and gloss it over. It is as real as the good; and if evil is denied, good must be denied, too. It must be accepted and hated and resisted while there is breath in our bodies." The non-conformist knows that evil exists (a fact which the "enlightened" age so often forgot), and that evil increases automatically. Inertia, laziness, cowardice, death, are self-multiplying. The Methodists, Baptists, Quakers, Shakers, the Jehovahs Witnesses, all agree in this, that good "is" not, except by propagation; it is not in any man, but

originates only between teacher and student, between father and son, between a Renouvier and a James.

Exactly as children are begotten, so the gifts of the spirit, the fertility of goodness, the contagion of enthusiasm, the fecundity of thought, the influence of authority, are interhuman processes which spring to life only between people. No man is good. But the word or act that links men may be good. And by link-work evil has to be constantly combatted. Whereas the dogma of hard work and the pride of free-thinking ignore this constant reproduction of the good, and leave the arousing, evoking and conveying of goodness to accident, the non-conformist in James checked the abnormal curiosities of the free-thinker, and the reckless experimentation of the worker.

This power came to him from a rare relation to his family. Of his father, our hero had this to say: "He was a religious prophet and genius if ever there was one." Without anything else to do, Henry James senior poured out a whole original system of theology in home and family. For forty years, William James and his brothers and sisters were exposed to an inspirational pressure of unique volume. Speech and thought came to him not as the individual gifts of an upstart but they entered him as they enter or should enter, all of us, as rays from the radiant crown of a gigantic family conversation. Out of this cone of rays, William was the ray which fell upon philosophy. His father's theological refraction still has a future. It seems to me that because God was the most certain reality to James senior, William could overemphasize the world and its naturalness and could make extreme statements like "the thing which" when speaking of Hamlet or, equally horrible, that "the universe engendered our intelligence."

In this sentence and in many others, he gave man over to the world too completely, in line with the American secular tradition. But his father's freedom from the world came to life in him again through Renouvier, and he checked himself by interpolating freedom, novelty and goodness into this man-engendering universe. In an era of factory pragmatism, of more means for the sake of more means, James remained free to

resist trends, to combat tendencies. And when the era of feverish, ruthless work also began to destroy the fiber of the intensive groups built up by the non-conformists in family, church, and small minorities—when a coarse nationalism replaced all the more delicate groups—James stayed on the side of the small “oozing capillaries” between persons.

III

Against the madness of nationalism, small groups fight a losing battle. Renouvier implored his French colleagues to become members of small Protestant churches, but he was not able to save France. James, too, would still belong to the past only, if he had no message for the armies that must overcome fruitless, sterile work for work's sake, production for the sake of production, bigness for the sake of bigness. Fortunately he has such a message. In fact, there is in William James a legacy which is pernicious unless he is seen in his twentieth century promise. The twentieth century William James must help us against his admirers styled 19th century. These admirers know everything about James and ignore his call to action.

James the lover of the universe, and James the pragmatist may be misconstrued as the American Spengler and the American father of Fascism. Mussolini read James, and many Americans have admired Mussolini. Fascism “works” as the Nazi victories show. And I see many American liberals falter and bow in admiration to mental cocktails like Rosenberg's *Myth of the 20th Century* and similar pluralistic humbugs, because James accustomed them to “a pluralistic universe” and to an impotent, finite God. Polytheism is rampant in our days, as a consequence of James' resolve, however misunderstood, to give up logic squarely. Bradley warned James: “You are going back from Christianity to something lower.” And James Ward wrote: “Your use of the word “consciousness” seems utter nonsense, and leads to disaster.” The masses may be made conscious of anything; if “consciousness” is man's whole

pride, you can fill man's consciousness with the intent to murder as the Nazis do, and make them feel fine. And James' "Will to Believe" ushered in the revolt of the masses, because it withdrew from our faith in God its prop: God's faith in Man.

The masses are plunged into night when the word "faith" is made dependent on human will, instead of meaning that God holds us in the palm of his hand. The Greek and Hebrew word for faith means God's faithfulness and trust. Your belief and mine is but the poor reflex of God's faithfulness to all of us together. If God did not keep his promises to mankind, nobody could talk to anybody else with any hope of success. Hence, we may admit that a pluralistic universe, with a finite, object-like God in it, is the American edition of all the heresies that devour Europe before our eyes. They also teach that "will to believe" in any kind of God or in many gods, instead of in the true God who does not trust in one man or one nation, but in us all, and thereby unites us.

However, the dangerous crest of this wave may soon pass, because the generation that followed James will correct his misinterpretation of God. God is not a concept but the right name; and the whole Bible is nothing but the search for God's right name. On the other hand, Man is not found except in his conversation with his brothers. God and Man are not found as long as we use language about "things," "world," "nature," certainly not in laboratory tests. Henry James senior could not reach the world because he started with God. William James could not reach God because he started with things. The third corner, man, of the triangle God-World-Man, James did reach, but only by "giving up logic squarely and forever"; in other words, James made a break between World and Man, but did not make the same break between the universe and God. The principle, however, is the same. Neither the right names for God nor the vital dialogues of Men can be deduced from concepts used for the things of this world. Concepts cannot be "experienced," words and names can. Man makes the world work, not pragmatically for his own ends, but as the faithful servant of some higher

design and purpose, in honor and valor, with the eyes of the soul wide open.

William James owed to his theological father the inexhaustible power of his language, although James did not admit any unshakeable truth, eternally begotten, historically made known once and forever, and applicable daily. He did not admit such truth, only because he knew that theological language was gone for good; his own father's life and work had proved this. From his father's frustration, William James knew of the deadlock of theology from the start. That philosophy was in a similar impasse he was able to learn only through a struggle of forty years. But in the process of learning this he begat in himself two qualities which the new century needs and which must fill our veins if western man shall survive at all. And the mobility of his soul led him to a more and more complete mobilization towards that twofold end.

IV

We are at war today. Please, therefore, face the simple question: what loyalty keeps us here together, in the unselfish company of education? Obviously not theology or a dogma any longer. But neither have we a philosophical system from which the many sciences receive their orientation. So where do we get any common orientation? It is easy to see that our loyalty at this juncture is largely renewed by common danger. The most primitive loyalty rests on the common defense against an enemy. It is not enough to be a thinker or a worker, the two shibboleths of 1776 and 1900. The third secular branch of man's government over the earth is his being a soldier. Philosophy cannot omit from its tenets the phenomenon that man must be ready to die in the war against an enemy. Any philosophy which glosses over your duty or mine to die for a cause is eyewash.

And William James recognized this claim of the soldier to be accepted on his own terms. He worked on a book on the military virtues for two years. He never finished it. But at the same time,

he addressed clerks and educators, pacifists and women, so that they might become aware of this quite different mode of life. The soldier, he said, represented the heroic qualities of our soul, the Sunday qualities which alone gave meaning and substance to our week-day routine in work. Our untapped resources of energy, our "second wind" became the most vital problem for all individual or national education in his eyes. He began to see that the cities of Man would not survive unless every citizen was made to act as their founder or refounder. In the face of effeminacy, self-castration, prohibition, he exclaimed: "Fie upon such a cattle yard of a planet." In this spirit, saluting the soldier as an essential element in human nature, he wrote his "Moral Equivalent of War." The Carnegie Foundation for Peace twice declined to reprint it. I don't wonder, for here we enter into a soldier's society—but a soldier's who embraced the heavenly combat and the earthly, both under the one term of war. In making every man a partner of war, James did practical repentance. He restored the solidarity and brotherhood of all Men which his theory left undefended and indefensible.

Only the man who has once done the impossible, who has once moved in the sphere of the infinite risk, can return safely to his city as a law-abiding citizen. James saw the nonsense of an absolute either-or-ness between war and peace. *The more people go to war in peacetime, the fewer people have to go to war in wartime.* The difference of soldier and worker is the difference between mobilization of the whole man and specialization of a part of man. And so James' "Moral Equivalent of War" is the bridge from the 19th to the 20th century, from the millennium of statehood to the millennium of one unified Society. As long as wars were external, between states and nations, philosophers could ignore the essence of war. James made the soldiers' heroism the perpetual and indispensable check on the worker's utilitarianism. In this way, warfare was sublimated from an accidental role in wars between states, to an eternal quality of human society as a whole. He made war a special application of the attitude which makes man man,—*the attitude of conquering the impossible, in freedom from fear.*

V

Desirous to become a citizen of this New Europe, this Western World, I have walked with the spirit of William James during the last nine years. He has been the star of my Americanization. In the Old World I had not known his works. He gave me hope even when I saw him forgotten by his own New England and, alas, his too-New England environment. This environment finally rose to fulfill his will. Young men from Dartmouth and Harvard lifted the ban from William James' alleged impracticality. At the thirtieth anniversary of his death, in founding Camp William James,² they made his Moral Equivalent of War work. They realized that total mobilization should prevail, not only in armies or in times of so-called war, but just as much at the domestic front and in times of so-called peace. They believed as our prophet who ominously said: "Until an equivalent discipline is organized, I believe that war must have its way."

In that sentence, he prophesied this war. And he himself embodies his conviction. As early as 1887, one of William James' friends interpreted his portrait to him in this way: "You could not have done a nicer thing for me than sending your picture. It is a head for anything; but if seeing it, I had been asked, 'What manner of man is this?' I should have said, 'A soldier in the larger sense' . . . If you will put shoulder straps on it, most people would take it for a picture of General Sherman."

"A soldier in the larger sense . . ." Yes. As Sherman marched through Georgia, James marched through Victorianism with an increasing determination, because he saw a desert there, spreading under the illusions of a decaying manhood. And so he lifted the martial virtues to a universal plane, blending the militia of the State and the militia of Christ into one.

The future of America is in an impasse because of the cleavage between a pacifist theory and a belligerent actuality.

² Camp William James in Tunbridge, Vt. was a voluntary work service camp, first organized in 1940 as an experimental camp within the Civilian Conservation Corps. Professor Rosenstock-Huessy was its principal adviser. The camp was a forerunner of the Peace Corps.

America may remain paralyzed if the Moral Equivalent of War is not used to unify the soul of America. Here is a civilian mind, a lover of peace who discovers war and has the courage to "think" it, for the sake of peace, by showing that war and love of the enemy are not incompatible, but enter a new stage today.

I wish I could be more eloquent now. Let me say this simply, that the worker, thinker, soldier, hit hard at the objects or objectives of their will. They are "natural" types of man. The gentleman and the non-conformist are "social" types. They treat man as a member of a congregation or of a society, and mitigate his ruthlessness by making him regard his neighbor. The soldier's steel also must be tempered by the fire of the soul, if he is to remain the brother of all men. The soldier who today is not a member of the whole of humanity endangers it. No enmity between humans can be allowed to be more than relative, lest a world totally at war perish.

Now, James revealed this secret in his own life. A few days before his death, a friend said to him: "I know of no one more universally beloved. I at least never heard an ill word of you from any one." And as early as 1871, James exclaimed: "In America, a regular advance is possible because each man confides in his brothers." A soldier does not idly speculate on the abstract brotherhood of man: he himself remains a brother, still loved even when he contradicts, fights and resists. A William James who can be loved is not simply James who loves; he sets the example of a new world order.

Today, soldiers must restore the capital of our faith which competitive workers and smug intellectuals have consumed. And William James, who confided in his fellowmen, has ennobled the soldiers' task, to convey, arouse, evoke faith. You, the youth of America, on this January 11, 1942, may have a good conscience, because the most illustrious American thinker, worker, and soldier has pre-lived your total mobilization, and lifted it beyond mere imperial war. He has made your way of life one form of creating, through the martial virtues, the unity of the earth; one way of curing our blind souls so that some great design and purpose for the whole of mankind can be

worked out here below, for which we have the honor to be the faithful servant; one way not of talking about the brotherhood of man, but of bringing it about.

"Bring it about," William James would say; it will not come about by education, or by accident, or by progress, or by fate or by any causation and mechanism. The universe in which we move is cleft and plural. You have to fill the gaps between its banks and edges, as thinkers, workers, soldiers. The great traditions of the race—freedom, faith, hope—never exist unless thou insisteth upon them. Make nationalism shrink so that the universe can grow.

And so the soul of William James will converse with us when we, in work, in thought, in battle, bring about a growing universe of free people.

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