William James and the Art of Human Understanding

David E. Leary
University of Richmond

This article proposes (a) that William James (1842–1910), one of the founders of philosophical pragmatism as well as psychological science, developed a distinctive theory of human understanding, according to which all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is ultimately based on "the finding of analogy"; (b) that this theory of human understanding underlay both his psychological and philosophical thought; and (c) that this theory depended on his artistic sensibility and experience. James's native artistic ability and interests are discussed, and his period as an artist's apprentice in the early 1860s is depicted as particularly salient to the development of his system of thought.

It has long been noted that William James, one of the founders of philosophical pragmatism as well as psychological science, had the sensibility of an artist. It has also been suggested that his artistic sensibility made a tangible difference in the crafting of his thought, both in philosophy and in psychology. G. Stanley Hall (1891), for instance, said that James was "an impressionist in psychology" whose "portfolio" (The Principles of Psychology, W. James, 1890/1983c) contained many stimulating and even brilliant "sketches" (Hall, 1891, p. 585). Later, James Jackson Putnam (1910) averred that James was "through and through an artist" (p. 842), and John Dewey (1910) stated that he was "an artist who gave philosophical expression to the artist's sense of the unique" (p. 507). Still later, George Santayana (1930) referred to James's "pictorial cosmology" (p. 252), and Ralph Barton Perry (1935) wrote about his "pictorial manner of philosophizing" (Vol. 2, p. 684).

It may surprise some to learn that James not only had the sensibility of an artist, but that his first vocation (as he himself called it) was to be an artist. This was no whimsical aspiration. From a young age, James drew very capably and persistently, he studied art in American and European museums with great avidity and insight, and at the age of 18, he committed himself to an apprenticeship with William Morris Hunt, one of the major painters in America. As testimony to his ability, the well-known artist John La Farge, who had been an apprentice to Hunt at the same time as James, asserted that James "had the promise of being a remarkable, perhaps a great, painter" (La Farge, 1910, p. 8).

Recently, Jacques Barzun (1983, 1985), Daniel Bjork (1983, 1988), and Howard Feinstein (1984) have suggested some of the possible consequences of James's artistic ability, aesthetic interests, and abbreviated artistic career for his subsequent work in psychology and philosophy. Their scholarship is extremely valuable, but it has left many unresolved questions and issues to be explored. For instance, Barzun (1985) argued that "the Jamesian mind is artist first and last" (p. 909), but he did not articulate in concrete detail what this meant, nor did he relate his thesis to James's own particular artistic experiences. Feinstein (1984), whose detailed and fascinating research has provided grist for many mills (including my own), was primarily concerned with the emotional antecedents and consequences of James's turn away from his early artistic vocation and with the effects of these emotional factors (rather than artistic factors per se) on the development of James's thought. Even Bjork, who has examined the extent to which James, the psychologist, was a "compromised artist" (Bjork, 1983, pp. 15–36) and has portrayed the center of James's subsequent vision (Bjork, 1988), has not analyzed many of the tangible ways in which James's artistic background and sensibilities affected the development of his specific premises and doctrines. Nor has he pursued his insight that James often articulated his thought in terms of metaphors drawn from the arts.

Through the aid of such metaphors, drawn by James from the realm of the arts, I will introduce and illustrate my thesis in the next section. This thesis is simply that James's artistic sensibility and experience were critically important in the development of his psychological and philosophical thought and, more particularly, in the articulation of a view of human understanding that was fundamental to his psychology and philosophy. This view of human understanding, I will argue, underlay how James characterized all thought, ranging from the philosophical and psychological through the common-sensical and scientific. It also influenced the way in which he thought about and formulated his own specific psychological and philosophical doctrines. To underscore its centrality as a fundamental motif throughout all his work, I shall begin by reviewing the ways in which—and the artistic metaphors through which—James characterized philosophy.

Preliminary versions of this article were presented at Brock University, Carleton College, and the University of New Hampshire. A penultimate version was presented in August 1990 as an invited address at the 98th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in Boston.

The thesis of this article supplements my earlier argument that poetry influenced the development of James's thought (Leary, 1988), and its explication expands the outline of James's theory of human understanding presented in the introductory chapter of Metaphors in the History of Psychology (Leary, 1990a). Material from James (ca. 1894) is quoted by permission of Alexander R. James and the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to David E. Leary, Dean of Arts and Sciences, University of Richmond, Richmond, VA 23173.
and philosophizing over the course of his career. Subsequently, I shall turn my attention to James's view of human understanding, its development, and its further articulation and application in his psychology.

James's Portrait of Philosophy

The heuristic goal of philosophy, according to James, is to achieve the most all-encompassing view, or perspective, possible. In practice, however, "no philosophy can ever be anything but a summary sketch, a picture of the world in abridgment, a foreshortened bird's-eye view of the perspective of events" (James, 1909/1977, p. 9). Because no single person or group can achieve a view that is all-inclusive, James (1876/1978b) defined philosophical study as "the habit of always seeing an alternative," of gaining and changing "mental perspective," like a connoisseur walking around a three-dimensional statue (p. 4).

Just as Plato once described science as the search for likely stories, James (1905/1978a) said that the philosopher searches for "more or less plausible pictures" (p. 143). Concepts are "views taken on reality," he suggested (James, 1910/1979, p. 200), and "philosophies are only pictures of the world which have grown up in the minds of different individuals" (quoted in Myers, 1986, p. 570). If you want to understand anyone's philosophical system, James argued, you should "place yourself . . . at the centre of [that person's] philosophic vision." When you do, "you understand at once all the different things it makes [that person] write or say. But keep outside [that vision] . . . and of course you fail" (James, 1909/1977, p. 117). For "philosophy is more a matter of passionate vision than of logic . . . Logic only finds reasons for the vision afterwards" (p. 81). Given this conviction, it is not surprising that James felt that "a man's vision is the great fact about him" (p. 14).

Although James had a special affinity for the notion that philosophers "paint" their views (see, e.g., James, 1907/1975b, p. 275; 1903–1904/1988), he was not invidiously wedded to the painting metaphor. On occasion he characterized his system of thought, instead, as a "mosaic philosophy" in which the picture of reality was composed of myriad little pieces or aspects of reality (James, 1912/1976, pp. 22, 42). The mosaic, James said, would never be completed, for "every hour of human life" can add a new aspect, achieved from a novel perspective, guided by a distinctive interest, thus enlarging the "picture gallery" of human life (p. 83). Because "of no concrete bit of experience was an exact duplicate ever framed" (James, 1910/1979, p. 76), he insisted that truth should be conceptualized "to mean everywhere, not duplication, but addition" (James, 1909/1975a, p. 41). The full truth about the universe, which includes the experiences and conceptual constructions of humans within it, cannot possibly be known—it will not even exist—until all its aspects have been created.

James's Portrait of Human Understanding

The preceding review of James's metaphorical descriptions of philosophy and philosophizing should serve as an apt introduction to his view of human understanding in general. This view was solidly grounded in the analyses presented in his masterpiece, The Principles of Psychology (1890/1983c), and these psychological analyses were based, in turn, on insights gained or corroborated through his experiences as a fledgling artist and artist's apprentice and through his reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Wordsworth, and others.

Before discussing these experiences, I want to provide a "charcoal sketch" (to use a Jamesian term) of two major features in James's portrait of human understanding. Stated most simply, these features (or claims) are (a) that all knowledge, including science, is ultimately based on the finding of analogy, which is to say, on the finding of an appropriate, enlightening comparison or metaphor; and (b) that the analogies or metaphors in any field of knowledge, including science, are (or should be) always changing rather than fixed. In the words of his much-beloved Emerson, they should be "fluxional" rather than "frozen" (Emerson, 1837/1983a, p. 55; 1844/1983c, p. 463; on these important points, see James, 1890/1983c, pp. 500, 735–754, 984; Leary, 1987, pp. 326–327; 1988, 1990a, pp. 19–20, 45–47). In other words, James felt that the analogies, comparisons, or metaphors that provide the means of human understanding are partial and temporary in their utility, and that they should be changed as newer aspects of reality come to the fore in the stream of experience. For James, a staunch empiricist, there was always a new way to experience any reality and a new way to categorize any experience. Although a given analogy may provide useful insight into experience and reality, it can never provide a truly definitive and final view of it. His convictions in this regard pertained perforce to his philosophy of science. "Any bit of scientific research," he wrote, "becomes an angle and place of vantage from which arguments are brought to bear" (James, 1885/1987b, pp. 383–384). Whenever a scientific theory is taken as "definitive," it cuts off other vantage points and hence becomes "perspectiveless and short" (James, 1896/1986a, p. 136).

For example, if one wishes to understand the nature of the mind, it might be helpful to note that the mind is like a machine in a number of regards, and it may prove fruitful to explicate the ways in which, and the degrees to which, this is the case. But James would insist that the mind is not identical, structurally or functionally, with any known machine, including the most sophisticated computer of our own day. The use of other analogies will be necessary to elucidate the mind's other, perhaps neglected aspects.

Another way to express James's belief—a belief that he began to articulate in the 1870s—is to say that we humans can understand things, events, and experiences only from and through the viewpoint of other things, events, and experiences. This belief or thesis by no means rules out valid and reliable human understanding. On the contrary, if in addition to noting parallels among a variety of phenomena, we abstract and name the specific similarities that account for these parallels, we can develop
reasonable and coherent arguments regarding the aptness of particular analogies and of the theories based on them. Such arguments will sometimes result in quite reliable inferences. Crafting such arguments, James pointed out, is something that occupies both scientists and philosophers: Disconfirming or verifying them is something at which scientists excel, and leaving analogical or metaphorical insights in their more complex, ‘unresolved,’ but highly suggestive form accounts for the genius and fertile works of poets, artists, and others (see James, 1890/1983c, pp. 984–988). Whatever the various uses to which analogies and metaphors can be put, James emphasized that the offering of what he called ‘similar instances,’ far from being ‘a perverse act of thought,’ is ‘the necessary first step’ in any type of human understanding, whether scientific or nonscientific (p. 987).

It should also be noted, because it will underscore the art involved (according to James) in creative cognition, that the conjuring of ‘similar instances’ was, for him, a very subtle affair. Some individuals, and not others, are unusually adept at this task. As he stated in The Principles of Psychology, ‘some people are far more sensitive to resemblances, and far more ready to point out wherein they consist, than others are’ (James, 1890/1983c, p. 500).

Indeed, he was convinced that ‘a native talent for perceiving analogies is . . . the leading fact in genius of every order’ (p. 500). For whereas most people ‘have no eyes but for those aspects of things which [they] have already been taught to discern,’ creative individuals are precisely those who further human understanding by noting analogies that others ‘could never cogitate alone,’ although they may recognize and appreciate them once they are pointed out, whether by Shakespeare, Newton, Darwin, Tolstoy, or some other genius (p. 420). (The persons I have just named were some of James’s favorite examples of genius. See James, 1890/1983c, pp. 984–988.)

**Development of James’s Portrait of Human Understanding**

James’s theory of what I shall call the art of human understanding—the art of grasping similarities among phenomena and of thus forging perceptual patterns and conceptual categories out of the flux or chaos of experience—evolved in the 1870s from a very rich mixture of his own reading and experience. The reading, as I have argued elsewhere (Leary, 1988), included especially the work and thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Wordworth—for instance, Emerson’s essays on “The American Scholar” (1837/1983a), “Art” (1841/1983b), and “The Poet” (1844/1983c), and Wordworth’s long poem, “The Excursion” (1814/1977). It also included works by Robert Browning, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The experience, as opposed to the reading, that formed the basis for James’s insight and belief had more to do with his efforts and encounters with art, and it started long before his time as a painter and artist’s apprentice. Here is the way that his brother, the novelist Henry James (1913/1983b), subsequently described the youthful William: “As I catch W. J.’s image, from far back, at its most characteristic, he sits drawing and drawing, always drawing... and not as with a plodding patience... but easily, freely and... infallibly” (p. 118). This image is repeated in Henry’s various reminiscences, and it is a picture that emerges from other sources as well, not least from William’s own drawing notebooks (many fine examples of James’s drawings are reproduced in Feinstein, 1984). From early in life, James showed a remarkable aptitude with a pencil and a strong inclination to give free rein to it. In addition, first in New York City, then in Europe, and finally in Newport, Rhode Island, James took lessons and developed the obvious abilities that he had. Supplementing the exercise and development of his own talent, he also showed a distinctive interest and an unusual sensitivity as an observer of art. Throughout his life he was a curious and omnivorous museum visitor, often attracted to what was new and experimental.1

In this context, James was persuaded at the age of 18 to become an artist, and he committed himself wholeheartedly to an apprenticeship in Newport, Rhode Island, with the highly regarded painter, William Morris Hunt (on this period of James’s life, see Bjork, 1988, pp. 22–36; Feinstein, 1984, pp. 103–145; Perry, 1935, Vol. 1, pp. 190–201). Significantly, this was James’s first commitment to any field of study or potential career. In explaining his decision to his father, he said that he continually received from his “interviews with art... spiritual impressions that I would know... Not only was he inclined toward art, he said, but he lived life “would be embittered if I were kept from it.” With foresight he added, “That is the way I feel at present. Of course I may change” (quoted in Perry, 1935, Vol. 1, pp. 199–200).

The following year was full of the explorations, discoveries, and trials of apprenticeship, enhanced in significant ways by the friendship and ideas of his fellow apprentice, John La Farge. La Farge was seven years older than William and much more experienced than either William or William’s younger brother Henry, who often accompanied him to Hunt’s studio. As Henry (1914/1983b, p. 197) wrote: “William Morris Hunt (1875–1883/1976) said with considerable foresight, at least as regards James, “mathematics... don’t develop a person like painting” (p. 86).
La Farge's paintings created a new relation between the artist and his subject. His paintings unite the external world with subjective inner experience to the point where subject and object, the viewer and the thing seen, merge into one. Perception ceases to lead to solid, substantive qualities but culminates instead in feelings of transition and relation—in ever-changing gradations of light, focus, interest, and emotion, in continually fluctuating perceptual nuances, which never become fixed or solid. (Adams, p. 30)

William was so struck by the technical and conceptual issues with which La Farge was struggling at that time that he remembered and discussed them with La Farge—to La Farge's amazement—almost 50 years later (La Farge, 1910). Although James's subsequent "psychology of consciousness" was no doubt multiply determined, Gay Wilson Allen (1967) had good reason to suggest that La Farge was among those who influenced its development (p. 69).

Despite the creative energy and growth produced during this apprenticeship, by the fall of 1861 James had left Hunt's studio, given up his aspiration to an artistic career, and moved with his family to Cambridge, Massachusetts. He entered Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard University, thus starting down the path that led to his accomplishments and renown in psychology and philosophy.

Much has been written about James's one-year apprenticeship. In particular, there has been a great deal of speculation about James's motives for giving up his calling to become an artist, despite plentiful evidence of his interest and ability; but in fact, little is known for certain. That his father was not happy about his choice of vocation is abundantly clear, and this almost certainly played a role in James's decision (see especially Feinstein, 1984, pp. 140–145). However, it is also plausible, as Perry (1935, Vol. 1, p. 200) and Bjork (1988, pp. 30–31) have suggested, that James simply concluded that he could not become a painter of the very first rank, and hence turned to science, another of his (and his father's) many interests. In any case, as his brother Henry (1914/1983a) put it, "nothing... could have been less logical, yet at the same time more natural, than that William's interest in the practice of painting should have suddenly and abruptly ceased" (p. 300). There was in the event "no repining at proved waste" on William's part (pp. 300–301), perhaps because on a deeper level there was no waste. As Henry (1913/1983b) had noted earlier, William "flowered in every [seeming] waste" (p. 117). And indeed, with hindsight, I would argue that his year-long stay in Newport was a tutorial for his later philosophical and scientific work, not a detour on the way to it.

Whatever factors were involved, the motives and rationale for James's turn from art to science are less important than the fact that he had such a formative exposure to art and painting. This experience, building on his native artistic aptitude, prepared him to be sympathetic and responsive, in the 1860s and 1870s, to Emerson's and Wordsworth's ideas regarding the nature of human thought. In James's own rendition, as in Emerson's and Wordsworth's, the notion that human understanding is basically analogical or metaphorical was often expressed with visual imagery. It wasn't simply that humans can apply different analogies or metaphors; rather, humans can assume different viewpoints and achieve new perspectives. As a former artist, James felt the rightness of Emerson's and Wordsworth's claims. He was deeply and intimately aware that one can come to see things anew, to notice fresh aspects, and to create novel possibilities in reality. As Wordsworth put it in "The Excursion," which James read and reread in the early 1870s much as Charles Darwin had done to similar effect in the early 1840s (see Perry, 1935, Vol. 1, pp. 338–339, 355), the mind has an "excursive power" to "wander about" the world, viewing it from this and now that vantage point, thus shaping its "prospects" (Wordsworth, 1814/1977, p. 73).

2 Allen (1967) also claimed that "it would be futile to attempt to trace any lasting influence of William Hunt on his life," although Hunt's school of painting was consonant with James's later insights (p. 69). Without asserting any singularity of influence, I think that Allen's claim is exaggerated. Hunt's (1875–1883/1976) repeated admonishments to his students contained many hints of James's later doctrines (e.g., regarding the centrality of experience and the primacy of action), and James himself suggested how sensitive and retentive he was with regard to these hints by periodically referring to "the endless advice of every [art] teacher to his pupil" (James, 1890/1983c, p. 875). Indeed, James's portrait of philosophy echoed his teacher's dictum that painting is "the only universal language! All nature is creation's picture-book!" (Hunt, 1875–1883/1976, p. 73).

3 After leaving Newport, James kept his drawing alive for another decade before he claimed to have let it "die out" (quoted in Perry, 1935, Vol. 1, p. 330). He regretted this loss of serious drawing, but he maintained his interest in art, with some fluctuations, throughout his life. As he told his brother in 1872, he envied Henry's belonging to "the world of art" because "away from it, as we live, we sink into a flatter, blanker kind of consciousness, and indulge in an ostrich-like forgetfulness of all our richest potentialities." These potentialities, he said, "startle us now and then when by accident some rich human product, pictorial, literary, or architectural...slaps us with its tail" (quoted in Perry, 1935, Vol. 1, p. 327). At critical points in 1868, 1873–1874, 1882, and 1892, art "slapped" him into important meditations. This remains a largely untold story.
pp. 155, 173). Even what is taken to be normal reality needs to be learned, as James came to realize. As he put it quite tellingly in The Principles of Psychology (1890/1983c), just as “in poetry and the arts, someone has to come and tell us what aspects we may single out” (p. 420), so too all humans “must go through a long education of the eye and ear before they can perceive the realities which adults perceive” (p. 724). Ideally, the labels for reality that are thus stamped in our mind through this long education will be fluxional rather than frozen. Unfortunately, this proves often not to be the case, so that we become all too conventional or literal in our mentality. As a result, James said, “if we lost our stock of labels we should be intellectually lost in the midst of the world” (p. 420). Human understanding, he realized, depends on such labels, whose meanings are derived (or were derived long ago) from their analogical relations. It can be advanced, however, only with the exchange of these labels for new concepts and terms, grounded in new views of reality.

Further Articulation and Application of James’s View of Human Understanding in Psychology

James’s belief in the analogical or metaphorical foundations of knowledge is richly illustrated in his psychological writings. His treatment of thought or consciousness as a stream instead of a chain or train is well-known (see James, 1890/1983c, chap. 9), and his discussion of other psychological topics is similarly informed by underlying analogies and metaphors. The ultimate metaphors that founded and framed his psychological thinking, and that came to undergird his philosophical pragmatism, pluralism, and radical empiricism, were the Darwinian metaphors of variation, selection, and function. All psychological states and actions, according to James, are products of spontaneous variation or selection in terms of their consequential utility. This functionalist orientation has influenced many other American psychologists and has structured much of the theoretical argumentation in modern psychology. Unfortunately, it has in some respects become frozen, despite James’s advocacy of a fluxual approach to human and scientific understanding, and it is often taken (in one or another of its contemporary versions) as a definitively authoritative portrait of human nature.

I have discussed this elsewhere (Leary, 1990a, pp. 20–21, 47–49). The point here is that James’s own psychology (not to mention his philosophy) reflected and reinforced his view of human understanding. James used analogies and metaphors throughout his works, not simply as ways of expressing his ideas, but as ways of constructing them. He often drew on his artistic experiences in his attempt to understand and explain psychological phenomena as well as in his attempt to pursue philosophical reflection. In fact, the frequency with which he drew on his artistic experience in important, often critical, passages is noteworthy. Insofar as these passages often have to do with the nature of human cognition and understanding, which he conceived from the start on the model of artistic experience, this is not surprising. But his use of artistic experience as a source of metaphorical referents suggests a basic principle of human cognition—that humans tend, naturally enough, to draw their most telling analogies from their own experience. In other words, they use what is familiar to understand the less familiar.

In this section I quote at length from various passages in The Principles of Psychology (1890/1983c) to demonstrate sufficiently how James often used a transparently artistic analogy to reach, explicate, and defend a point. In these passages, note how often the notion of perspective, of seeing from a different angle or within a different context, was crucial for James, and attend to his frequent references to what he had learned as an artist. For instance, looking forward to his chapter on perception, James wrote,

We shall see how inveterate is our habit of not attending to sensations as subjective facts, but of simply using them as stepping-stones to pass over to the recognition of the realities whose presence they reveal. The grass out of the window now looks to me of the same green in the sun as in the shade, and yet a painter would have to paint one part of it dark brown, another part bright yellow, to give its real sensational effect. We take no heed, as a rule, of the different way in which the same things look and sound and smell at different distances and under different circumstances. The sameness of the things is what we are concerned to ascertain; and any sensations that assure us of that will probably be considered in a rough way to be the same with each other. . . . What appeals to our attention far more than the absolute quality or quantity of a given sensation is its ratio to whatever other sensations we may have at the same time. When everything is dark a somewhat less dark sensation makes us see an object white. (pp. 225–226)

Further on:

If the assumption of “simple ideas of sensation” recurring in immutable shape is so easily shown to be baseless, how much more baseless is the assumption of immutability in the larger masses of our thought? For there it is obvious and palpable that our state of mind is never precisely the same. Every thought we have of a given fact is, strictly speaking, unique, and only bears a resemblance of kind with our other thoughts of the same fact. When the identical fact recurs, we must think of it in a fresh manner, see it under a somewhat different angle, apprehend it in different relations from those in which it last appeared. . . . From one year to another we see things in new lights. What was unreal has grown real, and what was exciting is insipid. (p. 227)

In summing up at the end of his critical “Stream of Thought” chapter, in a famous passage that articulated his view of human understanding as well as anything he ever wrote, James wrote,

Looking back, then, over this review, we see that the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities. Consciousness consists in the comparison of these with each other, the selection of some, and the suppression of the rest by the reinforcing and inhibiting agency of attention. . . . The mind, in short, works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it [within the
same block of stone], and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. Just so the world of each of us, however different our several views of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations, which gave the mere matter to the thought of all of us indifferently. . . . Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone! Other minds, other worlds from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos! My world is but one in a million alike embedded, alike real to those who may abstract them. How different must be the worlds in the consciousness of ant, cuttle-fish, or crab! (p. 277)

The selection of one possible statue, of one possible view of the world, rather than another was intricately and deeply related, for James, to the interests of each person. The concept of interest is thus fundamental to James’s psychology and philosophy, and in particular to his view of human understanding. The next passage provides James’s definition of interest. It should be clear that the artistic analogies that he used in this passage are not secondary; rather, they reflect the most fundamental way in which he conceived this important concept.

Millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no interest for me. My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground—intelligible perspective, in a word. It varies in every creature, but without it the consciousness of every creature would be a gray chaotic indiscrimination, impossible for us even to conceive. . . . The interest itself, though its genesis is doubtless perfectly natural, makes experience more than it is made by it. (pp. 380–381)

To underscore how fundamental this concept of interest is, recall that in James’s psychology, interest directs attention, attention directs selection, and selection confers coherence on each level of psychological functioning—the perceptual, the conceptual, the practical, the aesthetic, and the moral (see James, 1890/1983c, pp. 273–278). Interest, then, defined as “intelligible perspective,” underlies the art of human understanding.

James supplied a nice example of the application of this art:

Let four men make a tour in Europe. One will bring home only picturesque impressions—costumes and colors, parks and views and works of architecture, pictures and statues. To another all this will be non-existent; and distances and prices, populations and drainage-arrangements, door- and window-fastenings, and other useful statistics will take their place. A third will give a rich account of the theatres, restaurants, and public balls, and naught beside; whilst the fourth will perhaps have been so wrapped in his own subjective broodings as to tell little more than a few names of places through which he passed. Each has selected, out the same mass of presented objects, those which suited his private interest and has made his experience thereby. (pp. 275–276)

Many other passages could be cited, making the same point. For instance, in a passage already quoted in part, James wrote,

Men have no eyes but for those aspects of things which they have already been taught to discern. Any one of us can notice a phenomenon after it has once been pointed out, which not one in ten thousand could ever have discovered for himself.

The only things which we commonly see are those which we preperceive [those for which we are on the lookout], and the only things which we preperceive are those which have been labelled for us, and the labels stamped into our mind. (p. 420)

After discussing the perception of likeness, which is to say, the perception of analogies or metaphors, James said,

If the reader feels that this faculty [of perceiving similarities] is having small justice done it . . . I think I emphasize it enough when I call it one of the ultimate foundation-pillars of the intellectual life. (p. 500)

Not surprisingly, James drew on his sensibilities and experience as an artist and artist’s apprentice throughout his chapter on perception, pointing out (for instance) that the “eye-picture” created by stimuli impinging on the optic nerve is quite different from the mind-picture that is produced, the mind somehow correcting for the angle of vision and substituting a concept of the object as it would appear from a hypothetically ideal vantage point (James, 1890/1983c, p. 724). Similarly, in the chapter on space perception, James discussed what is now called brightness and size constancy. In one passage he explicitly referred to the training that underlay his psychological insights:

Usually we see a sheet of paper as uniformly white, although a part of it may be in shadow. But we can in an instant, if we please, notice the shadow as local color. A man walking towards us does not usually seem to alter his size; but we can, by setting our attention in a peculiar way, make him appear to do so. The whole education of the artist consists in his learning to see the presented signs as well as the represented things. No matter what the field of view means, he sees it also as it feels—that is, as a collection of patches of color bounded by lines—the whole forming an optical diagram of whose intrinsic proportions one who is not an artist has hardly a conscious inking. The ordinary man’s attention passes over them to their import; the artist’s turns back and dwells upon them for their own sake. “Don’t draw the thing as it is, but as it looks!” is the endless advice of every art teacher to his pupil: forgetting that what “is” is what it would also “look,” provided it were placed in what we have

4 James’s critical concept of selection was not drawn solely from Darwinian thought. Rather, his artistic experience prepared the way for his acceptance of this Darwinian principle and its application on all levels of psychological phenomena. As he wrote in an unpublished manuscript on the psychology of aesthetics, there is an “analogy between art and life in that by both, results are reached only by selection & elimination.” Quoting Robert Louis Stevenson, he went on to say that “there is but one art—to omit!” (James, ca. 1894). The importance of selection in James’s psychology was unambiguously expressed when he asserted that “selection is the very keel on which our mental ship is built!” (James, 1890/1983c, p. 640).

5 James articulated a version of this principle in his first psychological essay, in which he pointed out that “a layman present at a shipwreck, a battle, or a fire is helpless. . . . But the sailor, the fireman, and the general know directly at what point to take up the business. They ‘see into the situation’ . . . with their first glance” (James, 1878/1983a, p. 15).
called the “normal” [that is, the ideal] situation for vision. (pp. 874–875)⁶

In his chapter on the perception of reality, in which the psychology of belief was his central concern, James went beyond the usual focus on things and distinguished very effectively among a number of different worlds—the world of sensory things, the world of scientific qualities and forces, the world of ideal relations and abstract truths, the world of “ idols of the tribe,” the various supernatural worlds of religious belief, the innumerable worlds of individual opinion, and the worlds of “sheer madness and vagary” (pp. 920–922). “Every object we think of gets at last referred to one world or another of this or of some similar list,” he wrote (p. 922).

Propositions concerning the different worlds are made from “different points of view”; and in this more or less chaotic state the consciousness of most thinkers remains to the end. Each world whilst it is attended to is real after its own fashion; but the reality lapses with the attention. (p. 923)

I need not remind you that attention is directed by interest, which for James is a natural, individuating factor. Thus, he said,

The fons et origo [the starting point and foundation] of all reality, whether from the absolute or the practical point of view, is . . . subjective, is ourselves. . . . Reality, starting from our Ego, thus sheds itself from point to point. . . . It only fails when the connecting thread is lost. A whole system may be real, if it only hang to our Ego by one immediately stinging term. (pp. 925–926)

What is felt and understood to be real, then, is what is of “stinging” interest, which according to James’s definition of interest is whatever is linked to a compelling intelligible perspective.⁷

As the fundamental role of perspective in James’s thought becomes clearer, his later reduction of the self or ego to a point of view or field of vision, in the years after the publication of The Principles of Psychology, begins to make increasing sense (see Leary, 1990b, pp. 116–117).⁸

In this little-known development of his thought, James came to depict the individual ego, not human understanding alone, in terms of the fundamental artistic concept of perspective. From the present historical vantage point, one can see how this largely unexplored extension of his thought was consistent with his career-long reliance on the concept of perspective. Starting from his earliest definition of philosophy as “the possession of mental perspective” (James, 1876/1978b, p. 4), James had infused his principles of psychology with his perspectivalist vision, and he went on subsequently to develop versions of philosophical pragmatism, pluralism, and radical empiricism that were equally premised on the assumption that there is always another view to be had. Together with many other artistic insights and metaphors, this belief in the fundamental reality of alternative and supplemental perspectives permeated James’s entire system of thought.

Conclusion

I have argued that William James’s portrait of human understanding was influenced, as he put it, by “the whole drift of my education” (James, 1902/1985, p. 408). In particular, it was influenced in a deep and lasting way by his artistic sensitivity, experience, and training. On the basis of this view of human understanding, James felt that it was perfectly legitimate—even necessary—to use analogies and metaphors, often from the realm of the arts, in the development of his psychological and philosophical doctrines. It also led him to organize his major psychological work in a very distinctive manner.⁹

Given this background and orientation, it is not surprising that James came to understand the place and type of his psychology and philosophy, in relation to previous and alternative modes of thought, in explicitly artistic terminology. His system of thought, he said, was “ro-

⁶ This “endless advice” about drawing a thing as it looks was obviously given to James by his art teacher. In the very first of his published talks on painting and drawing, Hunt (1875–1883/1976) proclaimed, “You are to draw not reality but the appearance of reality” (p. 3).

⁷ Not only reality, but also its meaning and worth are a matter of perspective. As James (1899/1983b) wrote in an essay that expressed the heart of his thought: “Some years ago, whilst journeying in the mountains of North Carolina, I passed by a large number of ‘coves’. . . . The impression on my mind was one of unmitigated squalor. . . . I said to the mountaineer who was driving me: ‘What sort of people are they who have to make these new clearings?’ ‘All of us,’ he replied; ‘why, we ain’t happy here unless we are getting one of these cows under cultivation.’ I instantly felt that I had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation. . . . When they looked on the hideous stumps, what they thought of was personal victory. . . . I had been as blind to the peculiar ideality of their conditions as they certainly would also have been to the ideality of mine, had they had a peep at my strange indoor academic ways of life at Cambridge” (pp. 133–134). “Neither the whole of truth, nor the whole of good, is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands” (p. 149).

⁸ Having extended perspectivism to his treatment of the self or ego, James came to understand personal identity and religious conversion as involving, respectively, a centering or changing of one’s perspective (James, 1902/1985, pp. 161–162). Beyond that, he came to understand “the Absolute” as the sum of all actual perspectives, nonhuman as well as human, and thus to suggest that even the Absolute is open to continual development, as more pictures of reality are created by its constituent points of view (1909/1977, pp. 130–131, 139–144; 1899/1983d, p. 4; 1902/1985, pp. 409–414). This led Santayana (1913/1940) to comment, with perhaps more justification than he knew, that James’s God was “a sort of . . . struggling artist” (p. 210).

⁹ The organization of The Principles of Psychology (James, 1890/1983c) has baffled many psychologists and critics. In fact, this organization makes reasonably good sense if one assumes James’s artistic point of view. After getting preliminary discussions out of the way in the first eight chapters, James provided an overview of his psychology of consciousness (or “our study of the mind from within,” as he called it on p. 219) in the “Stream of Thought” chapter. This chapter, James said, is “like a painter’s first charcoal sketch upon his canvas, in which no niceties appear” (p. 220). Then, after reviewing the various levels of psychological functioning in this chapter, James went on in subsequent chapters to fill in his charcoal sketch with more detailed treatments of the various aspects of his system, proceeding from the most general (consciousness of self) to the most circumscribed (the will) of the mind’s experiences. Although this scheme does not account completely for the placement of each chapter, it makes sense of the book’s overall organization.
of William James's life and work that I have pointed out in this article is important and needs to be fused into our picture of this remarkable and influential person.

REFERENCES


10 Besides the various roles that he played in establishing the physiological, behavioral, cognitive, and therapeutic traditions in contemporary psychology, James profoundly influenced individuals all across the cultural landscape—individuals as disparate as Bernard Berenson, Niels Bohr, Jorge Luis Borges, John Dewey, W. E. B. DuBois, Nelson Goodman, Helen Keller, Walter Lippmann, Stephen Pepper, Oliver Sacks, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens. Another such person, Alfred North Whitehead, the great mathematician, philosopher, and historian of science, considered James to be one of the four major thinkers in the entire Western tradition, along with Plato, Aristotle, and Leibniz (see Whitehead, 1938, pp. 3-4). Whitehead (1956) noted that when the foundations of the modern worldview were blown apart by various discoveries at the turn of this century, William James was one of the few intellectuals prepared and able to withstand the blow (p. 272), and James withstood it without having to change his way of thinking.

11 Art and artists in modern society—especially painting and painters—provided frequent topics, themes, motifs, and devices in Henry's work (e.g., H. James, 1868-1897/1956; 1874-1909/1984; see also Bowden, 1956; Holland, 1964; Hopkins, 1961; Ward, 1965; Winner, 1967, 1970). The importance of art, particularly painting, in Henry's conceptual scheme is strongly suggested by his assertion that "the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete" (H. James, 1884/1987, p. 188).


