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Renewal and Critique in Social Theory

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THE PSYCHOLOGIST'S DILEMMA


James, W. (1979b) 'Great Men and Their Environment', in The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 163–89. (Original work published as an article in 1880 and as a book chapter in 1897.)

James, W. (1979c) 'The Importance of Individuals', in The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 190–5. (Original work published as an article in 1890 and as a book chapter in 1897.)


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mean perspectives that accord some objectivity to science and some efficacy to the creative impulses of individuals.

On the wall of William James Hall at Harvard University are some words that are relevant in this regard:

THE COMMUNITY STAGNATES
WITHOUT THE IMPULSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL.
THE IMPULSE DIES AWAY
WITHOUT THE SYMPATHY OF THE COMMUNITY.

(James, 1979b [1880/1897]: 174)

Disciplinary as well as academic communities would do well to keep these words in mind.

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CONCLUSION: TYING THE TALES TOGETHER

Following a Jamesian practice, I have let my subject—William James—speak as much as possible for himself. His is surely an authentic voice. Though certain aspects of his thought are dated (for instance, most of us today would add women to his discussion of men and extend his treatment of heroes to non-heroes as well), the substance of James's arguments seems to me to be as valid now as when he first offered them.

Naturally, my own interests motivated me to tell these tales about James, science and the self, and to reach the conclusion I have just expressed. I call these tales 'cautionary' because I am concerned about trends in our time which, if continued, will diminish both science and the self, neglecting the intentions and achievements of James, with which I am deeply sympathetic. Neither science nor the self enjoys, or should enjoy, the sort of autonomy once accorded to them. Without a doubt, the constructionist emphasis reflected in recent historiography of science and in recent psychological analyses of the self has brought about a laudatory regard for the day-to-day processes and relations that make things 'go'. This is an important achievement. But current historiographical and psychological practices are moving toward—and in some cases seem to have reached—the point of excess and exclusion, beyond which science as well as self will be robbed of their worth.

As one of the architects of the postmodern world, William James was neither excessive nor exclusionary. Although no one did more than James to uncover the pretensions of positivism and to elucidate the social and material dimensions of the self, he retained a high estimate of the potential effectiveness of science and the self, and both remained critically important to him. He criticized science for its denial of subjectivity, but he did not on that account reject it out of hand. He argued against viewing the self as a special ontological substance, but he continued to point out its irreducible core of interests which give individuals their various 'intelligible perspectives' from which they can comprehend and deal with their experience. He was, after all was said and done, a realist, though of a very particular sort.

James was not a historian, but I believe we will profit from considering his historiographical comments. To do good historical research giving science or individual scientists their due is challenge enough; to do good historical research giving science and individual scientists their due is all the greater challenge, as the story of 'the psychologist's dilemma' suggests; and to do good historical research giving science and scientists and milieu their due, as James would inspire us to do, is probably a greater challenge than we can handle alone. We must, therefore, divide and conquer, knowing that any analytical separation of science, scientist and milieu will be artificial and hence will result in historical treatments that are less than completely 'true'. So be it. We need to rely on one another, and especially on those whose perspectives supplement our own. Today that tends to
no one natural reality per se is any more emphatic than any other. Accentuation, foreground, and background are created solely by the interested attention of the looker-on. ... There are things and differences enough to be seen either way. But which are the humanly important ones, those most worthy to arouse our interest — the large distinctions or the small? In the answer to this question lies the whole divergence of the hero-worshippers from the sociologists. As I said at the outset, it is merely a quarrel of emphasis; and the only thing I can do is to state my personal reasons for the emphasis I prefer. (191, 193)

James expressed these personal reasons by quoting 'an unlearned carpenter' whom he had overheard saying: 'There is very little difference between one man and another; but what little there is, is very important.' James noted that

... this distinction seems to me to go to the root of the matter. It is not only the size of the difference which concerns the philosopher, but also its place and its kind. An inch is a small thing, but we know the proverb about an inch on a man's nose. Messrs. Allen and Spencer, in inveighing against hero-worship, are thinking exclusively of the size of the inch; I, as a hero-worshipper, attend to its seat and function. (191)

This captures James's central creed, also expressed (to his mind, most effectively) in 'A Certain Blindness in Human Beings' (1983d [1899]). The differences between individuals may be small, but they make all the difference in the world. (This argument mirrors James's similar conclusion regarding free will: its range may be limited, even exceedingly small, but whether or not we have it will make a significant difference in our lives.)

James ended his response to Allen with a blast against the levelling function of statistics:

What strange inversion of scientific procedure does Mr. Allen practice when he teaches us to neglect elements and attend only to aggregate results? ... If individual variations determine its ups and downs and hair-breadth escapes and twists and turns, as Mr. Allen and Mr. Fiske both admit, Heaven forbid us from tabooing the study of these in favor of the average! ... The preferences of sentient creatures are what create the importance of topics. ... And I for my part cannot but consider the talk of the contemporary sociological school about averages and general laws and predetermined tendencies, with its obligatory undervaluing of the importance of individual differences, as the most pernicious and immoral of fatalisms. Suppose there is a social equilibrium fated to be [as Spencerians might claim], whose is it to be — that of your preference, or mine? There lies the question of questions, and it is one which no study of averages can decide. (194–5)
Fiske's response, 'Sociology and Hero-Worship' (1881), granted much of what James had claimed but reduced their differences largely to matters of purpose:

The study of sociology is primarily concerned with institutions rather than individuals. The sociologist does not need to undervalue in any way the efficiency of individual initiative in determining the concrete course of history; but the kind of propositions which he seeks to establish are general propositions, relating to the way in which masses of men act under given conditions. . . . As it is, the task of the sociologist is confined to the ascertainment of truths relating to the actions of men in aggregates. It is for the historian to make use of such general truths in interpreting the actions of particular men. . . . This increased use of sociology, this more frequent and conscious reference to the 'conditions,' the 'environment,' and all that sort of thing, does not make the modern historian less mindful of the reverence due to great men. On the contrary, it enhances his appreciation of them through his more profound knowledge of the conditions under which they have worked. (82)

James apparently had no problem with this response, which affirmed that there can be different interests at stake in doing history as in doing anything else. Clearly, James felt that historians have a right to emphasize one perspective over another so long as they do not deny legitimacy to other defensible perspectives, including his own. To do the latter would rob other approaches of their worth.

Grant Allen's response appeared in 'The Genesis of Genius' (1881). He was not so conciliatory as Fiske. Although he granted that 'individual men are the units whose movements make up social changes', he argued that 'the individual characters themselves, in their totality, are wholly created by the external circumstances' (372). This was precisely the sort of environmentalism that James had opposed. To buttress his argument, Allen suggested that James's thesis entailed a 'doctrine of special creations' and 'miracles' (379, 381), and he tried to show that 'genius is nothing without his environment. . . . Your genius is directed by his milieu, and reacts again upon his milieu. But both genius and milieu are products of the geographical conditions' (380).

James, of course, had already granted — indeed, he had insisted — that the context within which a person lives is very important to the unfolding and effectiveness of his or her life. But he had also given a fairly extensive critique of the notion that 'geographical conditions' were pre-eminent, much less dominant, in this regard. Not surprisingly, he immediately responded to Allen's claims by writing 'The Importance of Individuals', which did not appear in print, however, until 1890. In this article, James gave clear expression to his view of the personal commitments involved in taking a stance on such issues as 'great men' vs 'the milieu':

Which is the right point of view for philosophic vision? Nature gives no reply, for both points of view, being equally real, are equally natural; and
if not, it will never find it. And the ways are to a large extent indeterminate in advance. (172)

James went on to apply this same conceptual framework to mental evolution, ranging from the evolution of our basic ‘mental furniture’ to the development of our most advanced scientific theories:

I have no hesitation whatever in holding firm to the darwinian distinction even here. . . . I can easily show that throughout the whole extent of those mental departments which are highest, which are most characteristically human . . . the new conceptions, emotions, and active tendencies which evolve are originally produced in the shape of random images, fancies, accidental out-births of spontaneous variation in the functional activity of the excessively instable human brain, which the outer environment simply confirms or refutes, adopts or rejects, preserves or destroys – selects, in short, just as it selects morphological and social variations due to molecular accidents of any analogous sort. (184)

At this point, James outlined how original minds are characterized by ‘the most abrupt cross-cuts and transitions from one idea to another, the most rarified abstractions and discriminations, the most unheard-of combinations of elements, the subtest associations of analogy’, in a word, by an astonishing range of variations. In contrast, ‘human intelligences of a simple order are very literal. They are slaves of habit, doing what they have been taught without variation; dry, prosaic, and matter-of-fact in their remarks’; etc. (184). In terms more fully articulated in his Principles of Psychology, the thinking of these uncreative individuals operates primarily through association by contiguity whereas the thinking of creative individuals, including scientists, operates primarily through association by analogy, which is to say, by comparative or metaphorical thinking (James, 1983b [1890]: 968–93; see Leary, 1990c; Leary, 1992).

The ultimate point with regard to the role of the individual in history is that the environment produces nothing; it can only preserve what has been produced in and through individuals. 'Take out the geniuses, or alter their idiosyncracies, and what increasing uniformity will the environment show?' (188) That is why

. . . the evolutionary view of history, when it denies the vital importance of individual initiative, is . . . an utterly vague and unscientific conception, a lapse from modern scientific determinism into the most ancient oriental fatalism. The lesson of the analysis we have made (even on the completely deterministic hypothesis with which we started) forms an appeal of the most stimulating sort to the energy of the individual. (183)

James's article elicited spirited responses from John Fiske and Grant Allen, both of whom characterized themselves as disciplines of Herbert Spencer.
who gave priority to factors external to the individual. These philosophers argued instead that

... the changes are irrespective of persons, and independent of individual control. They are due to the environment, to the circumstances, the physical geography, the ancestral conditions, the increasing experience of outer relations; to everything, in fact, except the Grants and the Bismarcks, the Joneses and the Smiths. (164)

Aligning these theorists with 'pre-Darwinian philosophers' like Lamarck, James espoused his 'Darwinian' approach, noting that 'although I believe in free-will myself, I will waive that belief in this discussion, and assume with the Spencerians the predestination of all human actions' (165). Crucial though the notion of free will was for James, the important point in this context was that the individual is the foundation and site of the variations in thought, feeling and action that are subsequently selected and preserved in the course of evolution.

The crux of James's argument revolved around a two-factor theory based on the Darwinian account of natural evolution: (1) there are physiological 'causes of production' that bring about variation among individuals and (2) there are environmental 'causes of preservation' that favor (i.e. select) some individuals over others (167).

And this brings us at last to the heart of our subject. The causes of production of great men lie in a sphere wholly inaccessible to the social philosopher. He must simply accept geniuses as data, just as Darwin accepts his spontaneous variations. For him, as for Darwin, the only problem is, these data being given, How does the environment affect them, and how do they affect the environment? Now I affirm that the relation of the visible environment to the great man is in the main exactly what it is to the 'variation' in the Darwinian philosophy. It chiefly adopts or rejects, preserves or destroys, in short selects him. And whenever it adopts and preserves the great man, it becomes modified by his influence in an entirely original and peculiar way. He acts as a ferment, and changes its constitution, just as the advent of a new zoological species changes the faunal and floral equilibrium of the region in which it appears. (170)

Extending this line of reasoning with specific examples and with critical assessments of contrary points of view, James advanced his basic argument that 'the mutations of societies... are in the main due directly and indirectly to the acts or the example of individuals' (170). For instance:

Rembrandt must teach us to enjoy the struggle of light with darkness, Wagner to enjoy certain musical effects; Dickens gives a twist to our sentimentality, Artemus Ward to our humor; Emerson kindles a new moral light within us. ... If shown a certain way, a community may take it;
fundamental spontaneity of human functioning. Even crowd behavior, a phenomenon presumed by many in his time to demonstrate the ephemeral nature of individual differences, was seen by James to depend ‘for the most part on the initiative of individuals, fixed by imitation and habit, and continued by tradition’ (1045). Habits and such instincts as humans have (see James, 1983b [1890]: 1004–57) may lead to common species-specific traits, but James was confident that ‘individuality outruns all classification’ (1977 [1909]: 7). Again, the issue revolved for James around the indeterminately variable interests of individuals:

Many as are the interests which social systems satisfy, always unsatisfied interests remain over, and among them are interests to which system, as such, does violence. (James, 1987b [1905]: 97)

Considerations of these kinds led James to one major conclusion:

Surely the individual, the person in the singular number, is the more fundamental phenomenon, and the social institution, of whatever grade, is but secondary and ministerial. (97)

This individualistic approach to social life underlies James's view of history, which was most specifically articulated in several articles on the role of the individual in history, published in an exchange of opinions with the American historian John Fiske and the British social evolutionist Grant Allen. This exchange was noteworthy because it represented one of the first applications of Darwin's natural selectionist theory. Although it is well known that Darwin persuaded many of his contemporaries of the reality of evolution, it is less well known that he convinced very few of the efficacy of natural selection as the means of evolution, much less the vehicle of social history. James was among the first thoroughgoing proponents of natural selection, arguing that apparent changes at the abstract level of the species are dependent upon the selection and preservation of specific changes at the concrete level of individuals, in social and mental evolution as well as in natural evolution.

It was in October 1880 that James published what Fiske and Allen granted to be an ‘interesting’ and even ‘brilliant’ article on ‘Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment’, later republished in The Will to Believe as ‘Great Men and Their Environment’ [1979b [1880/1897]]. James began this article by noting that there is ‘a remarkable parallel, which to my knowledge has never been noticed . . . between the facts of social evolution and the mental growth of the race, on the one hand, and of zoological evolution, as expounded by Mr. Darwin, on the other’ (163). A consideration of this similarity led him to argue that changes in human communities from generation to generation are ‘due to the accumulated influences of individuals, of their examples, their initiatives, and their decisions’ (164). He explicitly opposed this approach to that of Herbert Spencer and others
and on the side of the ‘molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual’ (letter to Mrs Henry Whitman, 7 June 1899, in H. James, 1920, II: 90).

This commitment to what he called ‘the sacredness of the individual’ (James, 1983c [1899]: 4) was reflected in his frequently expressed sympathy for the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Carlyle, and was a crucial factor in his embracing of Darwinian modes of thought. In particular, he incorporated the basic premises of natural selectionist thinking into the foundation of his entire system of thought. From early on, the variation and selection of random thoughts, feelings and impulses were crucial concepts in his psychology and philosophy: ‘What are our very senses themselves but organs of selection?’ ‘Reasoning is but another form of the selective activity of the mind.’ ‘If we now pass to [the mind’s] aesthetic department, our law is still more obvious.’ ‘Ascending higher still, we reach the plane of Ethics, where choice reigns notoriously supreme.’ In sum,

... 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. (James, 1983b [1890]: 273, 276, 277)

As we have already seen, James believed that it is the deeply personal and idiosyncratic interests of individuals that account for their distinctive ‘perspectives’ or ‘points of view’, from which they compare, select and suppress their distinctive thoughts, feelings and behavioral tendencies:

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 indiscriminateness, impossible for us even to conceive. Such an empirical writer as Mr. Spencer, for example, regards the creature as absolutely passive clay, upon which ‘experience’ rains down... If such an account were true, a race of dogs bred for generations, say in the Vatican,... ought to become... accomplished connoisseurs of sculpture. (James, 1983b [1890]: 381)

Clearly, the residuum in the self — what remains even if its ‘substance’ is denied and its functional relations are removed — is the inner core of interests that are both fundamental and unique to each and every self, that give it ‘intelligible perspective’.

Of course, even though an individual’s interests are idiosyncratic, James was well aware that habits come to limit their randomness, giving typical shape to individual lives, though never to the exclusion of distinctive characteristics. To the extent that particular habits are consonant with an individual’s values and goals, he felt strongly that they should and could be inculcated (James, 1983b [1890]: 109–31). But James always saw such training as overlaying the more
interests and necessarily producing novel ‘data’ – absolute, final truth will be ‘an ideal vanishing-point’ (106), for what ‘is’ and therefore what is ‘true’ will still be coming into existence. However, what we take to be ‘true’ at any given moment is far from arbitrary or merely constructed, according to James, due to the natural ‘coerciveness’ and ‘communality’ of experience within the scientific community. Our beliefs are not only ‘funded’ by experience (107), they are ‘wedged and controlled’ by many other factors (104), including, but not limited to, social factors. For James, it was clearly not the case that one subjective opinion is as good as another. Rather, one person’s opinion can be ‘a great deal better’ than that of another, and the determination of which opinion is better is most safely (though fallibly) made, at any given point in time, by ‘the consensus of opinion of those who are qualified to say’ which is to say, by the majority of those individuals who have had the relevant experience [James 1988b [1908]: 431–2; emphasis added].

In many instances, of course, the relevant experiences will be ‘personal’ in nature. Those are the instances, James felt, in which science is most prone to stumble, its vision all too ‘perspectivless and short’ [James, 1979a [1897]: 241]. ‘The cosmic and the general’, about which science speaks more readily, are but ‘the symbols of reality’. It is only ‘as we deal with private and personal phenomena’ that ‘we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term’, i.e. as actually and immediately experienced [James, 1985 [1902]: 393]. So the self demands a special place within science on behalf of empiricism.

The traditional disciplinary field in which the ‘private and personal’ is given due consideration is history. Therefore, perhaps the best way to uncover the residuum in the self – what remained for James when its substantive nature is dissolved and its functional relations are accounted for – is to review James’s analysis of the role of the individual in history. Although we will find that we already know what this residuum is, a review of this topic will provide another relevant cautionary tale.

THE ROLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN HISTORY

Against the idealists and other contemporary proponents of ‘group mind’ or ‘absolute self’, William James emphatically championed the fundamental importance of the individual self, which he considered to be ‘the only thing properly called self’ [James, 1976b [1905/1912]: 86]. In fact, over time, he became more and more committed to the primacy of the individual, even deciding in the 1890s to devote the rest of his life to defending his evolving ‘pluralistic and individualistic’ view of things (letter to Wincenty Lutosławski, 2 September 1896, in Scott, 1986: 147). Clearly, this was consistent with his long-term interests and sensibilities: he was against ‘bigness and greatness in all their forms’
proceed (James, 1988a [1897–8]: 234). As a result, science necessarily assumed what might be called a ‘selfish’ quality: however constrained by methodological rigor, the scientist’s view of the world is not uniquely privileged – it is not ‘absolute’ or ‘literally objective’.

Consistent with his conviction that science pivots upon the interests of the self, James (1983b [1890]) felt that ‘the personal self rather than the thought [or consciousness]’ could be treated as ‘the immediate datum in psychology’ (221). Indeed, James was strongly convinced that ‘no psychology . . . can question the existence of personal selves. The worst a psychology can do is so to interpret the nature of these selves as to rob them of their worth’ (221).

Despite this claim, and despite the efforts of his pupil Mary Whiton Calkins to establish self-psychology at the center of the discipline, a psychology did come about that questioned the existence of personal selves and robbed them of their worth. During the heyday of behaviorism, which was coextensive with the reign of logical positivism in the philosophy of science, the self was clearly subjected to science – that is, to the traditional (19th-century) presumptions and strictures of materialism and determinism. Of course, some psychologists still felt caught in what I have called ‘the psychologist’s dilemma’. But those who felt and respected the dilemma – Gordon Allport, Henry Murray, Carl Rogers, George Kelly and others – were clearly in the minority and on the periphery of the discipline, no matter how great their individual reputations.

Interestingly, all of this began to change in the late 1950s and the 1960s as positivism came in for systematic critique and as the self began to reappear in psychology. Now, in the 1990s, post-positivist philosophy of science and post-behaviorist self-psychology are thriving industries; and in both industries, various forms of constructionism and pragmatism – which is to say, Jamesian modes of thought – are central to ongoing developments. But the dilemma has not been resolved, and those who proceed as if it has been may be advancing interpretations of self or science or both that ‘rob them of their worth’. At least James would probably think so, for even though he helped to initiate the revolt against positivism and the turn in the human sciences from a ‘substantial’ to a more ‘functional’ view of the self (see James, 1976a [1904/1912] and Leary, 1990b), he would have rejected any purely constructionist view of either science or self. For intellectual, aesthetic, moral and practical reasons (James, 1977 [1909]: 55), he always placed his ‘wager’ on ‘the residuum’ – in this case on what is distinctive about science besides its subjective element and what is distinctive about the self besides its functional relations.

As regards the residuum in science, James (1988b [1908]) was unambiguous in declaring that ‘there is an ultimate reality’ beyond ‘all the particular truths that individuals believe in’ (432). He could even conceive of the ‘absolutely’ true, by which he meant ‘what no farther experience will ever alter’ (James, 1975a [1907]: 106). The rub for him was simply that as long as new experiences are being had in this universe of ours – experiences necessarily rooted in ‘selfish’
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, and the sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. Just so the world of each of us, howsoever different our several views of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensations. . . . 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. . . . How different must be the worlds in the consciousness of ant, cuttle-fish, or crab! (James, 1983b [1890]: 277)

Or to apply the comparison to humans, how different can be the experience of different persons, as illustrated by James's example of four Americans traveling in Europe:

Let four men make a tour of 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 of the same mass of presented objects, those which suited his private interest and has made his experience thereby. (James, 1983b [1890]: 275–6)

As this quotation suggests, at the root of James's new approach to science was his conviction, bred of experience, that the interests of the scientist himself or herself are the sine qua non of his or her distinctive insights into reality. Indeed, these interests, being part of reality, help to shape its contours and prospects. As James (1983b [1890]) wrote: 'The fons et origo of all reality, whether from the absolute or the practical point of view, is thus subjective, is ourselves.' Reality starts 'from our Ego', shedding itself 'from point to point', extending to whatever holds the 'immediate sting of interest' for us (925–6). By thus shaping reality through our selective attention and emphasis,

. . . we are creative. We add, both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality. The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands. Like the kingdom of heaven, it suffers human violence willingly. Man engenders truths upon it. (James, 1975a [1907]: 123)

To James, the self was the 'center of knowledge & interest', and its function was 'positional': to define the vantagepoint or perspective from which all perception, all conceptualization, all appreciation, all judgement and all behavior
hauteur of scientists who presumed a level of authority far outstripping any proof they could offer regarding the validity of their assumptions and arguments. A little later, in one of his first substantive articles, James began to clarify what he regarded as misguided in the positivist epistemology of his day, primarily the presumption that there is such a thing as disinterested knowledge.

We are all fated to be, a priori, teleologists whether we will or no. Interests which we bring with us, and simply posit or take our stand upon, are the very flour out of which our mental dough is kneaded. . . . Not a cognition occurs but feeling is there to comment on it, to stamp it as of greater or less worth. . . . The knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds simply existing. The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth which he helps to create. Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, so far as they are bases for human action – action which to a great extent transforms the world – help to make the truth which they declare. In other words, there belongs to mind, from its birth upward, a spontaneity, a vote. It is in the game, and not a mere looker-on. (James, 1978 [1878]: 18, 21)

In other words, the mind can make a difference.

This thesis about the role of the knowing self in the generation of knowledge – in science just as much as in the humanities and in everyday life – was to become a central theme in James’s thought, informing his psychology at the most fundamental level and radically transforming the philosophy underlying his scientific work. Indeed, having rejected his earlier presumption that science dictates a reduction of the self to materialistic and deterministic bases, James saw that his new insight into the nature of human cognition mandated an entirely new view of the scientific enterprise. In particular, it mandated a view that recognized the centrality of the human self and the end of what he called ‘literal objectivity’. As he wrote later in his life:

Up to about 1850 almost everyone believed that sciences expressed truths that were exact copies of . . . realities. . . . The suspicion is in the air nowadays that the superiority of one of our formulas to another may not consist so much in its literal ‘objectivity’, as in subjective qualities like its usefulness, its ‘elegance’ or its congruity with our residual beliefs. Yielding to these suspicions, and generalizing, we fall into something like the humanistic state of mind. Truth we conceive to mean everywhere, not duplication, but addition; not the constructing of inner copies of already complete realities, but rather the collaborating with realities so as to bring about a clearer result. (James, 1975b [1909]:40–1)

This is precisely the sort of philosophy of science that he elaborated – a philosophy in which the universe, like a block of stone, can be carved up in different ways, according to the particular perspective and skills of each scientist.
scientific methods of analysis, or to subjectify science by submitting its procedures to psychological analysis – innervated James’s consciousness and work from the very beginning, and represents an important dimension of the conceptual context within which he and others tried to define the subject, methods and prospects of scientific psychology at the turn of our century. Its repercussions continue to echo in the psychology, philosophy and historiography of our own day.

WILLIAM JAMES AND THE PSYCHOLOGIST’S DILEMMA

When William James, with his basic training in the medical sciences, turned to the new physiological psychology in the 1860s and early 1870s, he was already keenly aware of the increasing friction between modern science and the more traditional humanistic modes of understanding. In the 1860s, in fact, he became virtually convinced that modern science, and in particular the assumptions surrounding the influx of Darwinian notions into the biological sciences of the time, led inevitably to the conclusion that ‘we are Nature through and through, that we are wholly conditioned, that not a wiggle of our will happens save as the result of physical laws’ (letter to Thomas W. Ward, March 1869, in H. James, 1920, I: 152–3). His presumption then, with respect to psychology, was that a truly objective, scientific treatment of the human self would reveal it to be an epiphenomenal byproduct of the working-out of inexorable physical laws.

This presumption – to James quite dreadful – conflicted with his fundamental desire (and what he took to be a common human desire) to ‘make my nick, however small a one, in the raw stuff the race has got to shape, and so assert my reality’ (letter to Ward, January 1868, in H. James, 1920, I: 132). In the end, after suffering the ravages of personal depression and contemplating suicide, James grasped in desperation to ‘the thought of my having a will’ and ‘belonging to a brotherhood of men’ (130). Although he could not justify the notion of freedom from any scientific point of view, he resolved to act ‘as if’ he were free. In doing so, he found that his prospects took on a better hue, and he gained hope that he could in fact enter into what he called ‘real relations’ (not just causal relations) with others, which he took to be a necessary prelude to making a difference in his life.

It was in this biographical context – a context shared by many other first-generation psychologists who experienced a similar conflict between their view of the human self as real and efficacious, on the one hand, and their commitment to causal modes of scientific explanation, on the other – that James came to reconsider the fundamental assumptions underlying the scientific enterprise. In a letter to the editor of The Nation in 1874 (James, 1987a [1874]), he started to reveal and to work out his new views on science, complaining about the
William James, the psychologist’s dilemma and the historiography of psychology: cautionary tales

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William James, one of the major founders of modern scientific psychology, spoke often about ‘the psychologist’s fallacy’ (e.g. James, 1983a [1884]: 161–7; James, 1983b [1890]: 195–6). This fallacy resulted (and still results) from the tendency of psychologists to confuse their analyses of subjective experience with the nature of reality. A related, though less attended, problem revolved for James (and still revolves) around what I shall call ‘the psychologist’s dilemma’. Although other psychologists have been sensitive to this dilemma, both in James’s time and more recently, perhaps no other thinker has felt and pondered it so deeply. In all, James’s psychological and philosophical works reflect its import and centrality in the history of the human sciences. As I hope will be clear, James’s thoughts about this dilemma bear consideration by contemporary psychologists and are relevant to the work of contemporary historians of psychology.

The psychologist’s dilemma, experienced so intensely by James, can be stated rather simply: whether to create a science of the self, objectively considered, or to create a science compatible with the self, as subjectively experienced. The dilemma pivots around the fact that science, as an activity of human selves, falls within the domain of psychology, thus making a ‘science of the subject’ (i.e. a science of the subjective or psychological) doubly problematic. For, as James realized, if science is to be honestly and accurately ‘self-reflective’, it must present itself as an activity that depends upon (however much it also constrains) human subjectivity. This dilemma – essentially, whether to objectify the self by submitting it to