

# WILLIAM JAMES

William James was born at the Astor House, New York City's most fashionable and luxurious hotel, on January 11, 1842, into a wealthy family of Scottish and Irish ancestry. He was the eldest son of Henry James, Sr., an eccentric dilettante who had studied at Princeton Theological Seminary and went on to produce a sizable body of writings on religious topics. Influenced by the teachings of the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, Henry senior (who was also a great friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson) fused old-style Calvinism and newer humanistic beliefs into a private blend of theology that suited his own soul. At the center of this vision was a democratization of religious impulses ("Well, I take it, God is in one person quite as much as another") that he passed on to his son.

Young William and his four siblings—who included Henry James, the future expatriate novelist—grew up in this learned atmosphere of tolerance and freethinking. Moreover, the father treated his offspring to a transatlantic, broadly educational childhood: William attended a number of experimental schools and was tutored in England, France, Switzerland, and Germany. At the age of eighteen, he decided to pursue a career in painting and studied for a year with the artist William Morris Hunt at Newport, Rhode Island—long enough to realize that he possessed little real talent.

In 1861, the year the Civil War broke out, William James entered Harvard with the intention of becoming a scientist. After three years as an undergraduate, he enrolled in Harvard

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Medical School; in March 1865, however, he interrupted his studies to embark on a field trip to Brazil with biologist Louis Agassiz in order to observe the flora and fauna of South America. Returning to Cambridge in March 1866, James at once resumed his medical studies, until a back ailment and depression forced him to take another sabbatical. This time he traveled to Europe, where he "took the cure" at the baths of Teplitz and studied experimental physiology in Dresden, Berlin, and Heidelberg. Finally, in the spring of 1869 he received his M.D. degree from Harvard. Yet he continued to suffer an emotional and mental crisis that prefigures the existentialist dread described by present-day philosophers: A sense of moral impotence constantly tormented him, as did thoughts of suicide.

Two stabilizing events of the 1870s contributed greatly to his recovery. In 1872 James accepted a teaching position at Harvard; this proved a godsend, and he remained there for the next thirty-five years. His first appointment was to an instructorship in physiology, but from the outset he refused to treat physiology, psychology, and philosophy as distinct and separate disciplines. Instead, his lectures reflected a synthesis of insights from each of the fields and exerted considerable influence over such students as Gertrude Stein and George Santayana. Then, in 1878, James married Alice Howe Gibbens and set up a home that in many ways replicated the one he had grown up in: The couple had four sons and one daughter whom they raised in an environment of total intellectual freedom.

During the weeks following his marriage, James began work on *The Principles of Psychology*. Published in 1890, the two-volume treatise anticipated most of the major psycho-

logical movements of the succeeding seventy years and quickly became a basic text.

In addition, he carried on an extensive exchange of letters with European colleagues; his correspondence, which was later edited by his brother Henry and issued posthumously, stands as a guide to the era. In 1897 James published *The Will to Believe*; two years later his *Talks to Teachers on Psychology*, a book that contributed to the rapid development of educational psychology, appeared.

In 1901 and 1902 James accepted an invitation to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion at the University of Edinburgh. (James was also fulfilling a pledge: He had once promised his father that someday he would deal in a sustained way with the issue of religion.) His twenty talks, which became the basis for *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, were predicated on his observations of religion at home and in the world around him, his vast if eclectic reading, insights gained from his work as a psychologist, and some philosophical assumptions that were compatible with pragmatism, the new school of thought he espoused. Explaining his intentions in a letter to a friend, James wrote: "The problem I have set myself is a hard one: first, to defend . . . 'experience' against 'philosophy' as being the real backbone of the world's religious life . . . and second, to make the hearer or reader believe, what I myself invincibly do believe, that, although all the special manifestations of religion may have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories), yet the life of it as a whole is mankind's most important function."

Published in June 1902, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was an immediate best-seller and brought about some-thing of a Copernican revolution by looking at religion not as

it appeared in the object (God or the universe or revelation) but as it appeared in the subject (the believing, doubting, praying, and experiencing person). American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr explained the book's perennial appeal: "James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* proved exciting reading to his generation, and should prove equally exciting to ours not only because of the virtue of his affirmative, though critical, view of religion, but because of the catholic breadth of his sympathies and the width of his erudition in religious and non-religious literature. The examples of religious thought and life which he subjects to analysis are chosen from the widest variety of theological religious viewpoints."

During the remainder of his lifetime, James published several more works, including *Pragmatism* (1907), *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), and the now famous essay "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1910). His collection entitled *Essays in Radical Empiricism* appeared posthumously in 1912. William James died at his summer home, a ninety-acre farm in Chocorua, New Hampshire, on August 26, 1910, and funeral services were held four days later in Appleton Chapel on the wooded grounds of Harvard Yard. Afterward, James's body was cremated; his ashes were returned to Chocorua and scattered in a mountain stream. William D. Phelan, Jr., of Harvard provided this epitaph: "It is James's perpetual concern with improving the lot of the individual human being that makes him so apt a symbol of American social thought of his era. . . . This paramount aim, this humanistic orientation, determined his thinking in metaphysics as well as in religion, in epistemology as on social problems. James was above all a humanitarian and only secondarily a psychologist, philosopher, and gifted man of letters."

