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The Evidential Force of Mystical Experiences in William James's Philosophy of Mysticism

In his short chapter on William James, Bertrand Russell makes the comment, "There are two sides to William James's philosophical interests, one scientific, the other religious."[1] Whereas Russell appears to be positing a kind of dualism in James's philosophic interest, I believe that James would see these two interests as two poles of a single continuum; they are two different modes of experiencing the totality of the world. For James experience is the warp and woof out of which philosophers and scientists spin their yarn; experience is the basic "stuff" out of which reality is built at the deepest level.[2] In studying the various theories and methods of the study of religion, many metaphysical and philosophical questions arise that all seem to center around the question: *"what counts as evidence in our intellectual pursuits*?"

In the larger context of this seminar I would frame the question this way: given that the academy privileges science and scientific methods, how valid is our claim that we are scientifically studying religion? The various methods of studying religion scientifically which we have examined this semester have all been criticized to some degree or another as not properly fitting within the bounds of science. Does James offer a solution that will enable those who study religion to be taken seriously by other scientists in the academy? Or, is Russell correct in maintaining that science and religion are two different things that may be held together by individuals but are forever on opposing sides of some divide? In discussing James's

1. Bertrand Russell, *The History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945), 811.
2. Russell, 813.

philosophy of mysticism we are forced to encounter the philosophy of science, epistemology, metaphysics and the philosophy of religion. James would happily agree with the interconnectedness of it all.

Since experience is the fundamental stuff of reality, James would approve of us attending to his life experiences. His family seems to have a predilection towards intellectual giftedness. James's father, Henry James, Sr., was an unorthodox theologian. His younger brother, Henry Jr., was a gifted novelist and his sister, Alice, was a diarist. Henry Sr. insisted that the children receive a European education and took the family on long trips to England and Europe, "a procedure that made William multilingual and extraordinarily cosmopolitan."[3] James earned an M.D. from Harvard and went on to teach anatomy and physiology there. Eventually, he became a professor in the new field of psychology and also taught in philosophy department. "From 1890 forward James saw the fundamental issues as at bottom philosophical and he undertook an intense inquiry into matters epistemological and metaphysical; in particular 'the religious question' absorbed him."[4]

The religious question, specifically the question of unseen worlds and human encounters therewith, is a deeply personal question for James. Both James and his father had mystical experiences at various points in their lives. James revered his father, "Henry James, Sr., in the eyes of his son, William, was a living exemplar of mysticism and saintliness."[5] The family myth of Henry Sr.'s "acute despair" was well known to James and seems to be a major prototype for his interpretations of mystical experiences. Through a chance encounter with a

3. John J. McDermott, "William James" in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy,* ed. Robert Audi, Second Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 446.
4. McDermott, 447.
5. G. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 78.

Mrs. Chichester, while at a resort seeking relief from depression caused by his mystical encounter, Henry Sr. was introduced to the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. Henry Sr. became a student of the Swedish mystic but did not buy his philosophy whole-heartedly. Instead of becoming a disciple, Henry Sr. focused on one significant aspect of Swedenborg's theory that resonated with his own personal experience; "In Henry Sr's. opinion, Swedenborg had one key insight: selfhood is the only real evil in the universe."[6] Nonetheless, Swedenborg's influence upon Henry Sr. and, by filial proxy, William was profound. Henry Sr.'s initial mystical experience instilled a sense of despair that in turn set him down a path of overcoming self-hood and restoring a connection to the divine ground of all existence.[7] Even though James would later emphasize the need for one to realize her own self-hood and exert her own will to believe, his father's experience, coupled with his own, would not let him close the door on the possibility of such experiences being admissible as evidence to a scientific inquiry.[8]

Even though James had no formal training in the philosophy of science, it would have been impossible for him to escape the influence of the positivism of his day. While logical positivism was not codified until a decade after his death, Comte's empirical positivism was the dominant philosophy of science.[9] In Comte's version of positivism, metaphysics is strongly criticized for ungrounded speculation about unknowable things such as causes, things *per se* and grounds of being. Positive science has the goal of prediction of observable events based

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6. Barnard, 81.
7. Barnard, 81.
8. McDermott, 446. McDermot describes this exercise of the will in the following way,"James attempted to sustain, on empirical grounds, his belief in the self as Promethean, as self-making rather than as a playing out of inheritance or the influence of social context."
9. Richard A. Fumerton, "Logical Positivism" in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy,* ed. Robert Audi, Second Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 514; Paul Weirich, "Auguste Comte" in in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy,* ed. Robert Audi, Second Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 168; Anthony Flew, "Positivism" in *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, Revised Second ed. (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1984), 283.

exclusively on past observations and using only the laws of succession.[10] "All genuine human knowledge is contained within the boundaries of science, that is the systematic study of phenomena and the explication of the laws therein."[11] For something to count as knowledge, it must be scientific and therefore based on observable phenomena. Unstated in these definitions is the assumption that observable phenomena must be *publicly* observable.[12] For positivism of this sort, private experiences are unobservable therefore inadmissible into science and do not contribute to knowledge. The full-blooded verificationist theory of logical positivism was still a generation away, but James uses the language of a "process of verification," indicating that the term was already in play during his life.[13]

In James's world positive science was the default position and it strived to be absolutely empirical, "Never were as many men of a decidedly empiricist proclivity in existence as there are at the present day. Our children, one may say, are almost born scientific. [...] Our scientific temper is devout."[14] The most apt description of empiricism in James's time comes from James himself: "'empiricist' meaning your lover of facts in all their crude variety, 'rationalist' meaning your devotee to abstract eternal principles. No one can live for an hour without both facts and principles, so it is a difference rather of emphasis."[15] Since "abstract eternal

10. Weirich, 168-169.
11. Flew, 283.
12. I will avoid using the terms "objective" and "subjective" since they are strongly contested in epistemology. Instead I will use the terms "public" and "private" which I think adequately captures what is at stake without drifting into the debates of what makes an experience objective or subjective. I acknowledge the problems with this shift in terminology but do not have space to adequately address it in any other way.
13. William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking,* Barnes & Noble ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003), 90.
14. James, *Pragmatism, 6.*
15. James, *Pragmatism*, 4; William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Touchstone, 2004). In *Varieties* James spells out his definition of rationalism thusly,"Rationalism insists that all our beliefs ought ultimately to find for themselves articulate grounds. Such grounds, for rationalism, must consist of four things: (1) definitely statable abstract principles; (2) definite facts of sensation; (3) definite hypothesis based on such facts; and (4) definite inferences logically drawn." p. 55-56.

principles" are rationalistic, any metaphysical claims that are unable to be experienced are denied by positive science. Within this mode of empiricism is a form of anti-elitism. The reasons for this bent are far beyond the scope of this paper, so I will simply appeal to your own inclinations (as I bet this anti-elitism is shared by many, if not most of us). This anti-elitism is expressed by demanding that all valid experiences be public. For an experience to have evidentiary force, it must be observable by everyone through repeatability or verification. Experiences that are private, unrepeatable or not subject to verification are not admissible as evidence.

James finds the rejection by positive science of some experiences, as well as the inadmissibility of the products of metaphysics to be problematic and argued that such non-repeatable phenomena should be counted as evidential.[16] James's solution consists of what he calls "radical empiricism" and "pragmatism." Radical empiricism is the principle that any evidence which has been experienced must be admitted to the discourse; nothing should be excluded based on *a priori* principles or dogmatic statements as to what is permitted in science. Closely coupled with this is his definition of pragmatism:

> Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude, but it represents it, as it seems to me, both in a more radical and in a less objectionable form than it ever has yet assumed. A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. That means the empiricist temper regnant and the rationalist temper sincerely

16. Barnard, 45.

> given up. It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality and the pretense of finality in truth.[17]

However, this rejection of rationalism does not follow positivism and the rejection of metaphysics, in that, for the pragmatist, "science and metaphysics would come much nearer together, would in fact work absolutely hand in hand."[18] The pragmatic method is to trace a notion's practical consequences. If the theory fails to make a difference somewhere, then it is *adaiphora* or mere word-play.[19] For a theory to be true it must have "cash value," in that it somehow alters how people encounter the world. Here, according to James, "*The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons*" (italics in original).[20] To the question of "What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experimental terms?" James offers the following answer, "*True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not"* (italics in original).[21] In the end, it is against both dogmatic empiricism and dogmatic rationalism that James points the pragmatic method. No answer is final, no theory is beyond revision, all claims to truth are provisional and worth holding only so long as they are useful.

The pragmatic method is resolutely non-reductionist. The strict materialism that is implicit in positivism carries little weight for the pragmatist. Reducing mental or spiritual states down to the bouncing of atoms offers little theoretical value. As James posits, "when other people criticize our own more exalted soul-flights by calling them 'nothing but' expressions of our organic dispositions, we feel outraged and hurt, for we know that, whatever

17. James, *Pragmatism*, 23.
18. James, *Pragmatism*, 23.
19. James, *Pragmatism*, 22.
20. James, *Pragmatism*, 23.
21. James, *Pragmatism*, 88.

our organism's peculiarities, our mental states have their substantive value as revelations of the living truth."[22] Even given a diseased or disturbed state, the contents of an experience and the respective truth claims that come from the experience are not instantly disqualified due to the physiological state of the experiencer; emotionally disturbed who poets create poems that resonate with emotionally healthy individuals.

Given this pragmatic method and the framework of radical empiricism, the reasons for James's willingness to step outside the bounds of positive science seems clear. All experience is open to being admitted as evidence so long as it helps discern the truth as James defined it: as long as the experience and the theory in play has cash-value.[23] James's own experiences, as well as those of his father, are valuable enough to warrant serious consideration. Their evidential force cannot be denied simply because they are private. Thus, rejecting the dogmas of positive science, James can develop a philosophy of mysticism that includes a metaphysics and a rich mystical epistemology and still insist that he is being empirical—even more so than the positivists. And within this framework James offers a pragmatic evaluation of religion that is resoundingly positive (unless something better comes along):

> In the religious life [...] surrender and sacrifice are positively espoused; even unnecessary givings-up are added in order that the happiness may increase. *Religion thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary;* and if it be the only agency that can accomplish this result, its vital importance as a human faculty stands vindicated beyond dispute.[24]

This is not to say that James admits any and all religious or mystical claims as veridical. He draws a parallel between sensory and mystical experiences.[25] The epistemic move being

22. James, *Varieties*, 11.
23. Barnard, 46.
24. James, *Varieties,* 39. Italics in original.
25. Barnard, 107.

made is to formulate a theory of perception that allows private experiences to be evidential for the experiencer. This does not mean that the claims are self-justifying, that they are beyond criticism or that they must be accepted by others. Any noetic content of a mystical experience must be subject to *the same criteria of evaluation as any other experience*. Just as we check our eyes to make sure we are seeing correctly when a road sign appears to be stating the impossible, we have to make sure that the noetic content of a mystical experience is coherent with the rest of our beliefs.[26]

Since mystical experiences are notoriously difficult to repeat in any predictable way, the standard mode of verification is not possible. One cannot simply repeat her experiment to ensure that the same results occur. That does not, however, rule out the possibility of other forms of verification. Also, since mystical experiences are private, they are evidential for the experiencer but that does not mean that the experience is directly evidential for anyone else. They can be indirectly evidential for others through testimony. Testimony of a mystical experience can count as much as testimony of any other perceptual experience. If someone were to tell me that she saw a bear in downtown Dallas I may find the claim to be dubious but would (with my epistemic virtues intact) *prima facie* accept the testimony to a degree proportional with my evaluation of the trustworthiness of the witness. The same standards, according to James, should apply to mystical experiences.[27] The value of mystical experiences is fundamentally the same as any other experience. As Barnard puts it, "mystical experiences in this way are not understood to be privileged cases to be singled out for special treatment,

26. I do not intend to imply that James holds to a simple coherentist theory of truth. Coherence is one of the major criteria but not the final mark. I found no indications that pragmatism is foundationalist in any strong sense.
27. Barnard, 107.

but rather, their validity and value, like all other information about the world (including the data from the senses), is determined by the overall effect of their interaction with the rest of life."[28]

The epistemic principle being deployed is one of credulity. One should trust the evidence of the senses (both mystical and physical) as well as the testimony of others in a *prima facie* manner but be willing to look for and accept counter-evidence or indications of fraud or misperception. A virtuous thinker seeks ways of evaluating their beliefs and considers all evidence to the best of their ability. James does not appear to use this language in any strong way but this version of a reformed virtue epistemology seems to fit what James is doing. In the pragmatic method, no source of perception is beyond reproach, no truth claim, either empirical or from a first principle, is beyond evaluation. Since a mystical experience is 'just another' experience, it is subject to the same principles (but not necessarily modes) of verification and degree of credulity as any other experience. Indeed, even as James sought to expand the borders of what is considered to be empirical, he was always concerned with being adequately scientific. As Barnard notes, "James's *own* preference is clearly aligned with the academy. He finds the 'mystical style of philosophizing' aesthetically unappealing and prefers to let the critical and analytical perspective have priority when it comes to investigating and theorizing about any 'wild facts.'"[29]

James establishes some criteria by which mystical experiences can be evaluated. These are normative marks that any valid mystical experience, as defined by James, should have: (1) ineffability, that is, it should defy adequate expression; (2) a noetic quality, i.e. it should be

28. Barnard, 77.
29. Barnard, 48.

non-discursive (lacking in middle terms) yet still convey knowledge; (3) transiency, (half-an-hour or an hour or two at most is all that a valid mystical experience can last); and (4) passivity, (there is no way to cause a mystical experience).[30]

The rich Eastern traditions—including Zen Buddhism, some Hindu practices and even the Christian practices described in the *philokalia*—all point towards ways in which we can facilitate and improve the odds of having a mystical experience. Both quietistic meditative and physically vigorous practices, such as Sufi dancing, seem to be successful in increasing the probability of the practitioner having a mystical experience. James himself had a kind of method for increasing the possibility of having a mystical experience in that he was fond of long quiet walks alone and his experimentation with nitrous oxide and other intoxicants gave him moments he thought met his criteria.[31] His disappointment and frustration that he was unable to have frequent, powerful experiences like those to which others testified seems to be a contributing factor in his positing passivity as a criteria. Being attentive to data that James did not have, such as Zen masters who claim to be able to enter the unitive state at will, would clearly force James to reconsider this criterion.

Whereas Proudfoot is troubled by James' correlating sense experience and mystical experience, I would in fact posit that a better formulation would be that we have mystical (or spiritual) senses.[32] Our physical senses perceive physical things and our spiritual senses perceive spiritual things.[33] Just as an infant, or half-awake person, lacks conceptual categories

30. James, *Varieties,* 281-283.
31. Barnard, 19, 25; James, *Varieties, 287.*
32. Barnard, 107.
33. My own Wesleyan theology is fully evident here. I think that James's analysis could be very helpful in enriching our own understanding of the spiritual senses in the Wesleyan tradition. In the Wesleyan tradition the spiritual senses were lost (or obscured to the point of uselessness) in the fall, they are only restored by grace. Not everyone has these senses in a restored or functioning manner.

for physical stuff, our categories for spiritual stuff are likewise lacking.[34] For James, the process of experiencing is {perception→cognition→action}. This process is analyzable into these parts but is really an irreducible flow, "these are three phases of a unified process."[35] Perception requires some mode of sensation. Cognition is the application of categories to the stuff of perception. There is a dialectical relationship between our perception and our cognition; our perception is informed by previous experiences (and thereby, previous cognitions) but not entirely.[36] Without adequate categories, the world is just a stream of meaningless colors and sounds which would be ineffable. We cannot make a blind person guess at what blue is even if she has the linguistic category of blue available to her and she correctly names its place on the spectrum. If she were to experience blue through a sudden restoration of vision, the initial impact of the blueness would be entirely ineffable.[37] I have normal color vision. I pass all the color-blindness tests without problem. My wife, however, has tetrachromatic color vision.[38] She sees colors that most people cannot, especially in the blues. Usually she is completely at a loss as to how to describe the difference between two seemingly identical shades of blue to me. Her ineffable experience is in no way mystical, in fact, it is quite banal. Ineffability, rather than properly being a product of a mystical experience, is a result of a lack of a conceptual category through which we are able to understand and communicate our experiences.

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34. Barnard, 116.
35. Barnard, 95. Whitehead takes this epistemic model and turn it into a full-fledged metaphysics. The means by which past experiences, coupled with concepts, inform new experiences is the core of process metaphysics.
36. Barnard, 118.
37. Barnard, 112.
38. Kimberly A. Jameson and Susan M. Highnote, "Richer Color Experience in Observers with Multiple Photopigment Opsin Genes." *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 2001, 8 (2) 244-261; Available from http://www.klab.caltech.edu/cns186/papers/Jameson01.pdf; Internet; accessed 9 November 2009.

James reaches towards this way of understanding perception and cognition in his distinction between "knowledge-by-acquaintance" and "knowledge-about." Knowledge-by-acquaintance does not require strong conceptual categories. It is as close to bare perception as is possible given our cognitive apparatus. This seems to be consistent with Barnard's reading of James when he states, "knowledge is always intentional, that is, it is always knowledge *of* something, there is always an implicit duality between the knower and what is known.[39]

An unstated problem here is the issue of modes of knowing. Discursive reasoning is clearly different than affective states, but there seems to be no empirical reason to limit "reasoning" to discursive forms. For example, "knowledge-how-to" or muscle memory seems to be a kind of knowledge that is cognitive in some sense in that there are more and less effective ways of swinging a hammer. Similarly, we learn how to be angry—to associate physical states with affective emotions (many emotionally unhealthy people do not know how they feel or what emotions feel like). Affective knowledge is a kind of knowledge, knowledge that I feel a certain way. Finally, ritual knowledge is gaining ground as a field of epistemic study—i.e. a form of knowledge that is embodied in our routine actions, the embodied knowledge that is gained through doing rituals. These are all forms of cognitive (truth-conveying) non-discursive knowledge. Many of them do not have clear linguistic categories yet have clear cognitive aspects.

Both mystical and non-mystical experiences are ineffable because we lack categories to interpret and communicate them. It seems plausible that a culture could exist where mystical experiences were common enough that the society would develop interpretive frameworks and categories through which mystical experiences could be discussed (the categories of

39. Barnard, 119.

mystical and ineffable are themselves categories which we do apply to these kinds of experiences. By saying something is ineffable we have already said something about it—making it a tiny bit effable.) Ineffability is not exclusive to mystical experiences and could potentially not be a valid mark of such experiences in other societies.

Given the framework of radical empiricism in which all noetic content comes through experience and the intellect is always involved in the act of experiencing, James's claim that mystical experiences are noetic seems to be a tautology; even ignoring something faintly perceived (the tea cup at the edge of my vision as I type) requires a choice to not "pay attention" to it. There is a belief that the ignored object is unimportant to the activity at hand. The noetic criterion applies to all experiences, not just mystical ones. A non-noetic experience seems, at least within James's framework to be impossible. A criterion that applies to everything is a bare metaphysical assertion; no matter how true it is, it does not help very much in discerning mystical from non-mystical experiences.[40]

James's criteria for evaluating mystical experiences appears to be inadequate: (1) ineffability is not unique to mystical experiences and it is conceivable that a community could develop categories for discussing them; (2) being noetic is true of all experiences; (3) transiency is empirically an invalid criterion given examples of prolonged mystical experiences by Zen masters; and (4) passivity is a debatable criterion given ascetic systems that increase the likeliness of mystical experiences. This, however, is not problematic in the larger context of his project to demonstrate that mystical experiences can be evidential. Indeed, by moving beyond James's criteria—employing something like the spiritual senses

40. Consider Hartshorne's ontological proposition that "something is happening now." Of course this is necessarily true in the strongest sense. It is also so devoid of any content that it has no "cash value." A statement can be ontologically true and still pragmatically useless.

framework—I think the case for the evidential basis of mystical experiences is strengthened. Since no assessment is ever final in James's pragmatic method, I think he would be delighted at this critique. Instead of seeking to deploy criteria for determining how veridical mystical experiences are, simply admitting them on the same basis as any other perception (perceived by an appropriate sensation-mechanism and run through the appropriate cognitive mechanisms) gives them an appropriate status within his empirical framework. The question of how many mystical senses we have, what these senses perceive and how we process the perceptions remains open and the variety of mystical experiences can be attributed to different modes of mystical perception. Just as most people cannot describe sounds as colors or shapes as tastes, it seems odd and reductionistic to require that all mystical experiences be explained by a single sensing apparatus.

In his anti-reductionistic mode of presenting a number of examples, James deploys a rich cumulative-case argument. No one case study is absolutely veridical in proving the existence of unseen worlds or the divine or that mystical experiences are not simply irregular patterns of brain chemicals. James does not seem to notice the force of his own cumulative case.[41] His frustration that unequivocal evidence was difficult to obtain was visible at times, but he "was clearly, in the end, personally convinced that psychical and mystical phenomena offered reliable evidence for the existence of an 'unseen' world."[42]

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41. This should not to be faulted him, it would be nearly century before cumulative cases were understood as a valid form of reasoning.
C.f.: Robert Prevost, *Probability and Theistic Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 56-58. Cumulative case arguments have been used since the dawn of philosophy, but the force of them had not been explored until the 20th century. Prevost offers an excellent introduction to the nature of the cumulative case argument.
42. Barnard, 49.

Returning to the guiding questions posed at the beginning, does James offer a solution that will enable those who study religion to be taken seriously by other scientists in the academy? This practical question completely hangs on the answer to the epistemic question: what counts as evidence in our intellectual pursuits? If James's radical empiricism and willingness to admit private experiences as evidential is acceptable, then yes, James does provide a solution by which the study of mystical experiences can be scientific. James rightly questions the dogmatic principles of positive science. But, given that logical positivism followed a mere generation later, one is forced to wonder why James's proposals and criticisms were not taken seriously. Perhaps materialism and the mechanistic principles are simply too pragmatic, they get the job done without needing all that other nonsensical (in both meanings of the term) baggage. We have cars, computers, longer life-spans, better health, easier food production and a much higher quality of living all from mechanistic materialism and positive science. The cash value of these theories seems to be very high.

The cash value yielded by these theories does not come without a price-tag. The cost is a denigration of "soft" things like poetry and religion; we lose a rich understanding of what it means to fully be a person. Moral relativism and the specter of nihilism may very well be the debt collectors that pounce the moment positive science writes a check that our human nature is no longer able to cash. James, I think, would consider these costs too high for what we have gained. If my assessment of the cost of positive science is correct, then the philosophy of religion has the responsibility of helping positive science to see its own dogmatism and to confront its incoherencies based on its epistemological assumptions. Not only is there room for us in the academy, we need to help our colleagues see their own inadequacies as we humbly reflect on our own.