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Introduction

This collection of papers celebrates the centennial of William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature (being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion delivered at Edinburgh in 1901–1902)*. *Varieties* is James's most well-known book. It was an instant hit that some predicted would be a classic for the next century (see Marty, 1982). Those early critics were right: *Varieties* has remained continuously in print since it first appeared in 1902, and Clebsch (1973) has even called it 'the most famous of all American treatises on religion' (p. 173). No surprise, then, that we are not alone in celebrating this remarkable book. A huge celebration was held in Edinburgh to coincide with a new edition prepared for the centennial, and many symposia and special issues of journals have appeared. This collection of papers is perhaps unique in that authors were asked to reflect on the enduring significance of James's text and its implications for people today. Authors were asked to consider what has been learned about the topics James discusses in *Varieties* over the last 100 years, and what has perhaps been forgotten or less well-understood by those who followed James. This introduction is only meant to whet people's appetite to reread *Varieties* and to read the commentaries we have prepared on it.

Despite this sustained interest in *Varieties*, Lamberth (1999) suggests that it is actually one of James's most misunderstood texts, one that is admired by religious scholars but not by philosophers or psychologists. Although marginalized by psychologists interested in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) or by philosophers interested in James's *Pragmatism* (1907), *Varieties* was integral to James's larger project of developing an empirical philosophy of experience (see Taylor, this issue).

Overview of *Varieties*

Varieties deserves to be read and reread and no short summary of it can do it justice. Nevertheless, it may be useful to remind readers of the basic structure of James's argument.

In Lecture 1 (Religion and neurology) James specifies that he will adopt a psychological orientation (not one concerned with institutions) and draws an important distinction between the historical roots and the spiritual fruits of religious

experiences, saying that he will focus on their fruits — especially for the ‘religious genius’ based on widely available documented accounts. James also undermines the objections of ‘medical materialism’ that religious experiences are merely the result of pathological states of the brain. In Lecture 2 he ‘circumscribes the topic’ by defining religion as a collective name like government, and describes some conceptions of religion (such as transcendental idealism) and what he thinks religion is not (e.g., mere happiness). Religious experience, he says, is just ordinary experience applied to religious objects. He reiterates that he will ignore institutional religion and focus on exceptional personal religious experiences of religious leaders or inspirational writers. Lecture 3 defends the reality of the unseen, ranging from Platonic ideals to hallucinations, which need not rely on rational defence.

In Lectures 4 and 5 James launches into the heart of his topic — the ‘healthy minded’ variety of religious experience is found wanting because it (voluntarily or involuntarily) focuses on happiness and is blind to the reality of evil. Worry over evil is itself considered a disease. Even though sometimes miraculously effective for some fortunate people, today we would say the mind-cure movement that espoused this view is too ‘New Age’. Lectures 6 and 7 deal with what James calls ‘the sick soul’ that does acknowledge evil, and feels itself to be essentially flawed or tainted by evil, which is hard to justify if everything is founded in God. The very transience of life and its joys can be a source of anguish, panic, melancholy and despair; so James claims that the most complete religions are those (like Christianity and Buddhism) where the pessimistic element is best developed.

This leads James in Lecture 8 (The Divided Self, and the Process of its Unification) to distinguish the once born (healthy minded) souls and the twice-born (sick) souls, a difference that may reflect a difference in individual temperament and introduces the importance of personal conversion experiences. Lectures 9 and 10 deal with the particularities and concomitants of conversion through which divided souls are born again as unified and sustained by God. Again, James considers the importance of melancholy, and argues that volition-conversion is less interesting than self-surrender. Lecture 10 marked the end of the first course of Lectures given in 1901. Here James introduces the idea of ‘fields of consciousness’ with their centre or interest. Fields can vary in width and around what they are centred. These fields can experience incursions from beyond them, leading to sudden conversions marked by ecstatic feelings of happiness that need not be permanent to be critical to our lives.

In his 1902 lectures, James considers the fruits of conversion. Lectures 11–13 were on Saintliness, including the shifting of our emotional centre along with melting our hard-heartedness or destructive habits, and the sensible feeling of the existence of a higher power. The consequences of this inner change are expressed through asceticism, strength of soul, purity of life, and charity toward others. Lectures 14 and 15 consider the added value saintliness brings to human life, a judgement that is never divorced from the cultural context in which it is made. This does not endorse scepticism, but rather the belief that religious ideas

are in principle always improvable, and that even saintly virtues like devoutness and asceticism can be practiced to excess.

Lectures 16 and 17 discussed mystical experience — the root and centre of religious experience, according to James. He describes various characteristics of mystical states such as their ineffability, noetic quality, transience, and involuntariness. He then gives some typical examples of mystical states and points out that while mystical experiences can occur naturally, certain religious traditions like Hindu yoga, Buddhist meditation, Islamic Sufi dance, and Christian prayer systematically cultivate them. The pragmatic effect is often one of great practical benefit to the individual and the community they serve, but while these experiences are personally authoritative they are not objectively so. But they do show that our everyday rational mind is not the whole story of human experience.

In Lecture 18, James turns to philosophy, asking what role it can play in understanding religious experiences. James claims that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophical systems are a secondary translation of these. But philosophy will always have the important task of articulating and systematizing 'private and dumb feelings'. They can moderate when there is a clash of opinions. He discusses, for example, different arguments for and against God's existence and philosophy's inability to settle the debate. And he distances himself from the older dogmatic theology concerned with God's attributes, arguing instead for a focus on the pragmatic moral significance of religious belief in people's personal lives.

In Lecture 19 James ties up a few loose ends in his discussion of 'Other characteristics' of religion, such as the place of aesthetics and personal temperament in the choice of religion, important elements of religion such as sacrifice, confession, and especially prayer, and the sense of being an instrument of a higher power that works through the subconscious mind.

Lecture 20 concludes the lectures given in 1902 and circles back to the themes of his opening lecture of 1901. Here James discusses the characteristics of religious life, and the psychological characteristics of religion generally, and how different types of religion suit different sorts of people. He goes on to discuss the role of the science of religion and why it is no substitute for a living religious faith, and addresses the sceptical question of why religion survives at all now that we have science. But it is just this feeling of personal significance that distinguishes religion from impersonal objective science that must connect religion to the rest of scientific knowledge. James concludes by discussing how feeling and intellectual belief are coordinated in specific religious systems and personal faiths, and talks of his own 'overbeliefs' about religion, which allow for the reality of an external God that we can help through our own small actions. For the published book, James added a short postscript where he clears up a few ambiguities he felt might have remained about his personal stance on religion. In particular, he emphasizes the pragmatic importance of belief in God's existence on people's lives, especially through 'prayerful communion', and explains why he did not mention personal immortality, which many consider an essential pragmatically important aspect of religious belief. He concludes that God need not be

omniscient, and in fact can be first among several greater powers that are to us as we are to the pets in our home. He concludes that for ordinary, practical purposes, the chance of salvation is enough to live a life whose keynote is hope.

Writing of *Varieties*

The story of a particular book is not merely that of its ideas, but also how it fits into the entire context of the author's life and the concerns of his generation. There is a great story to tell about both the writing of *Varieties* and its reception by psychologists and the lay public at the turn of the last century. While some authors touch on this theme, perhaps one of the best detailed sources to consult for those interested in this background are Perry's (1935) account in his biography of James and, more recently, the detailed description of the history of the text of *Varieties* in an edition prepared for *The Works of William James* (1985). I also recommend the more recent account of Lamberth (1999) who gives both the basic argument of *Varieties* (pp. 110–38) and places *Varieties* in the context of James's other writings on metaphysical themes. James's recently published correspondence from those years also provides valuable insight into how he conceived of his lectures and how he responded to critics (James, 2000; 2001). In these texts we discover, for example, that James's Gifford lectures and resulting book were written at a difficult time in James's life. Originally proposed for 1899–1900, the lectures had to be postponed because James was too ill to prepare them. He spent over a year, off and on, at Bad Nauheim being treated for a damaged heart. His heart condition left him so weak that he was often unable to write a single line. He had originally planned to give the first set of lectures on the topics covered by *Varieties* and to do a second set of lectures on the philosophy of religion. This plan had to be abandoned due to his health, and instead he agreed to expand the original series of lectures into the set we have today, published as *Varieties*. By January 25, 1901, James had enough for the first set of ten-hour lectures, but still had three chapters to complete for the book. The lectures themselves, delivered from the 16 May to the 17 June, 1901, were a tremendous success, with initial audiences of about 250 that grew as the lectures progressed — unlike other Gifford lectures that had begun with 60 and dwindled to 15 by the end. The second set of lectures (May 13 to June 9, 1902) were also a great success. *Varieties*, as a book, was first published in England on June 9, 1902, the day of his last lecture. It was an instant hit, selling over 10,000 copies in the first year — by academic standards then a huge financial success, and more popular than any other book James had written.

The Essays in this Special Issue

The place of *Varieties* within James's larger lifework is detailed by Eugene Taylor in the first paper of this special issue. Taylor situates James's growing interest in the subconscious and other deep aspects to human psychology within the broad currents of his evolving views on consciousness throughout his career,

and with regard to his times. James was the key American interpreter of the French school of psychology that studied subconscious states,¹ and one of the first to discuss Freud's work on hysteria in ways that crossed current disciplinary boundaries of medicine, cognitive psychology, psychopathology, philosophy, and religion. He contributed to refining and spreading his depth psychology around the world through his contact with friends like F.W.H. Myers in England, Janet in France, and Flournoy in Switzerland. James himself did empirical work in this area, most notably by contributing to the census on hallucinations, through reports of medium séances, and through pioneering work on automatic writing — a technique he later taught to his student Gertrude Stein, who did early experimental studies of it (Lough *et al.*, 1896; Stein, 1898) — and by treating clinical cases like Ansel Bourne, then called a 'mad traveller', a condition that no longer exists now that hysteria has vanished as a clinical category (Hacking, 1997). *Varieties* came at the end of a decade in which James developed these ideas as an extension of his psychology in *Principles of Psychology* that crystallized in his 1896 Lowell lectures on exceptional mental states. These Lectures on exceptional mental states effectively began the most celebrated era of the Boston School of Abnormal Psychology (see Taylor, 1982). Although these lectures were never published, chapters in *Varieties* made use of many ideas first developed in them. Taylor shows that these lectures serve as a bridge between the psychology of knowledge elaborated in *Principles of Psychology* and the claim of emotional primacy and intimacy for the transformative mystical experiences elaborated in *Varieties*; even the pragmatism of James's later writings are prefigured in the lectures. James develops these ideas in his last work on radical empiricism, an approach to understanding human experience that has important implications for the contemporary science of consciousness.

Eleanor Rosch's paper develops the implications of seriously considering the relevance of religious experience for the contemporary science of consciousness. She argues against James's — and many others' — division of experience into ordinary 'daylight' and altered or mystical types of experience, since this division marginalizes religious experience (and the whole of religious life) in psychology. She notes that *Varieties* promotes the radical idea that religious experience has something important to contribute to psychology and wonders why we are we no closer to implementing this idea 100 years after the publication of *Varieties*. Part of the answer may be the disjunctive way we consider science and religion. Eastern meditative traditions show how to bridge this gap and contribute to both psychological theory and clinical applications. Moreover, these traditions suggest that such experiences are available to everyone, not just 'religious geniuses' as James suggests. James would certainly have drawn on these traditions more had he known them better. Buddhism was not unknown to James and he mentions Buddhism and the Buddha several times in *Varieties*, but his portrayal of the Buddhist practice of 'dhyana' in *Varieties* and of concepts like Nirvana in *Varieties* and *Pragmatism* show that he did not have as deep a

[1] Those interested in this fascinating work can read Ian Hacking's (1995; 1997) compelling look at the dawn and development of this school.

knowledge of them of someone like Rosch (see, for example, Varela *et al.*, 1991).² This is not surprising, since these Eastern ideas were only just becoming known in America, especially following the famous World Parliament on Religion (part of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893). This paper looks at James through a meditative and contemplative lens — a perspective on his work not lost on contemporaries like D.T. Suzuki (Taylor, 1999). James ties the importance of religious experience to the subconscious life, and especially to the idea that there is more to experience than waking life suggests. Rosch disagrees with James's reliance on the subconscious, preferring to formulate the issue in terms of the depth and breadth available within ordinary waking life itself. She casts this view in terms of the contemporary metaphor of our waking experience as a computer program that can be mistaken for the entire operating system that supports it. In fact, she proposes exercises to transform our experience (to allow an escape from the program) through a more fundamental awareness that itself is deeply therapeutic. In particular, she focuses on a variety of ways to find awareness within the everyday experience of consciousness itself. These exercises both critique James and show the power of these ideas for a contemporary science of consciousness.

William Barnard notes that the intuitive and immediate certainty of mystical experiences so important to James, and one of the central fruits of religious experience, has been questioned by contemporary writers (a point also made by Brockmeier, this issue). Barnard suggests that James endorsed an 'incomplete constructivism' in explaining mysticism through a dialectic between two kinds of knowledge — knowledge of acquaintance and knowledge about — that were also central to James's *Principles of Psychology*. This dialectic allows James to maintain both that mystics worldwide share certain aspects of their experience, but also to remain a pluralist about the specific experiences and interpretations of mystical experience of mystics from different traditions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. It is on this basis that James can grant the absolute first-person authority of such experiences for mystics themselves, while still refusing to grant their necessary objective authority for those who have not

[2] Eugene Taylor, in a December 18, 2001, email to the Willaim James Society ListServe, notes that:

James was less well read in Buddhism than Hinduism. He left Vedatnta for Royce to follow up (Royce, a Christian monist, had even studied Sanskrit briefly), while in Hindu philosophy James actually mastered some of the metaphysics of the Samkhya-yoga school and published a few snippets in defining the early field of personality theory in psychology (Johnson's *Universal Cyclopedia*, 1895–98). He knew about the translations of the Pali Text Society from Charles Rockwell Lanman, James's colleague, neighbour, and friend on the faculty at Harvard. Lanman was then editing the Harvard Oriental Series and brought James as a guest to the meetings of the History of Religions Club (personal communication with Lanman's daughter before she died), where James would have been exposed to the latest in Buddhist scholarship. James also knew Anagarika Dharmapala, a Theravada Buddhist meditator, and announced in public that one day Dharmapala's would be the psychology of the future. He also met practicing Buddhists at the salon of Mrs. Ole Bull, who ran the Cambridge Conferences on Comparative Religions. More recently, David Kalupahana has written *Principles of Buddhist Psychology* (SUNY Press, 1985), in which he bases the book on a comparison of James's views on consciousness in *The Principles of Psychology* with Theravada and Mahayana epistemology.

shared their experiences. But such experiences do suggest hypotheses about the deep structure of human experience that require us to go beyond our everyday waking life — a point central to James throughout his career as Taylor (this issue) has shown. In this way, the philosophy of religion has an important (if secondary) role in sorting out the claims of different religious traditions in light of their ability to account for experience and to promote positive therapeutic transformation in people's lives. Thus, different religions can suit different temperaments and should be valued for that. But James's important point is that any such science of religion is inevitably fallible, and subject to refinement in light of experience; as Charles Tart (2002) suggests, perhaps its greatest role might be to help people know the benefits and risks of certain kinds of practices, and how people with their own psychological make-up respond to them. This pluralism also extends cross-culturally to radically different kinds of experiences for which people can experience an 'immediate luminosity'. In all cultures, the reality of religious belief is tied to verifiability — that priests, shamans, and others can experience these states and verify that they are true. In this sense such belief is ultimately pragmatic. For James, truths are always assessed within a particular cultural, historical, and linguistic context understood not as self-contained, but rather, as a dynamic field that interpenetrates other contexts of meaning. For example, the Kalahari Kung healing dances are a central focus of their religious and social life. While dancing, men experience the *num* 'heating up' within them until it begins to 'boil' and rise up their spines to the back of their heads. Healers then begin to *kia*, (i.e., enter a state of heightened or altered awareness feared as a sort of death that gives them clairvoyant healing powers). Only through participating in such contexts, or by collecting first-hand accounts of them, can people gain insight into the nature of experiences that are deeply transformative for people in other cultures.

Jens Brockmeier further presses the theme of the interdependence of cultural interpretative frameworks and personal experience. He shows that religious experience is necessarily culturally situated and in particular is tied to how we use language and cultural artefacts to create 'spiritual homes' for our experience within the universe of cultural meanings available to us. James virtually ignores this problematic relationship between experience and language; like Barnard, Brockmeier believes even our deepest experiences cannot be understood as unmediated pre-linguistic experiences. So for Brockmeier, as for Barnard, mystical experiences take place not only on the inner stage, but within a particular cultural and historical context. Meaning is bound to discourse; there is no meaning outside the symbolic space of culture. On this view, religious practices are not supernatural communications, they are cultural practices — a point made in recent studies of mysticism, such as Mark's (2000) study of St. John of the Cross, but one also implicit in the work of James's friend and colleague Flournoy (1915), in his study of 'a modern mystic' written just a few years after James's death. James's method involved a thick description that uses *documents humains*, a very original approach praised by Bergson and others at the time. As Brockmeier makes clear, the written descriptions of mystical experience James

draws on in *Varieties* reflect a culturally shaped literary genre that is meant to describe the 'ineffable' — what is beyond the power of words to communicate, as does poetry in a different way. However, in poetry, what is beyond words is not necessarily mystical or religious revelation; at stake here are experiences, ideas, and emotions central to the human condition, even if often beyond our control.

Keith Oatley and Maja Djikic draw implications of these themes for contemporary culture by emphasizing another key theme of James's *Varieties*, the metaphor of conversion as central to religious experience. But religious experience is taken in an idiosyncratic sense of the emotional experience of identity and one's place in the universe. Building on James's own changing views of emotions, Oatley and Djikic show that James considered emotions critical to personal transformations, just as they are to the feeling of the truth or reality of mystical experience. In *Varieties*, James claims that personally significant emotions have attentional and motivational properties — in striking contrast to his famous theory, in which emotions are a bodily reaction that are then interpreted (James, 1884). Emotions make cognition 'hot' and 'intimate'. It is our intimate acquaintance with evil that leads some to a despair that can only be overcome through religious conversion: we overcome evil by being melted down and 'reborn' in a new emotional centre. Although the emphasis in *Varieties* is necessarily on religious conversion, James grants that the same sorts of transformations occur in secular contexts and are critical to what is now called life-span development. But always, emotions are at the core of transformation that shift our personal centre, and the effect is that of a dynamic system. Emotions overcome the modern tendency to turn a blind heart, when electronic media no longer lets us turn a blind eye to others' suffering. However, as Oatley and Djikic note, secular conversions are not always individual, often they are social and involve transformative relationships (such as falling in love) and historic social upheavals (such as war and famine). These transformations are not always positive — through loss people are sometimes born again in ways that cripple them, such as the personal suffering caused by rape and torture or the death and disappearance of loved ones. They end with the thought that we may need to be reborn a third time to lay the foundations for societies that progress beyond those characterized by what James (1899a) called an inner blindness to others.

Michel Ferrari looks at what is perhaps the ultimate conversion experience — the transition from life to death. Death marks the limits of our certain experience and forces *us* to hold beliefs about how to approach death and the possibility of an afterlife as what James (1897) called 'live options' about which our belief is necessarily in advance of conclusive evidence. James had definite views about the afterlife that went beyond what he says in *Varieties*: views articulated and defended in *Human Immortality* (1899b) and in later texts like *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909). Today, scientists may have more trouble accepting James's position because they contradict other deeply held contemporary beliefs; for example, the widespread acceptance that the brain generates experience and does not merely transmit it from some deeper realm. Although there are those who

believe in reincarnation and place great stock in reports of people returning from the dead, few cognitive scientists or philosophers now endorse James's pansychism and his transmission theory of how experience relates to the brain. *Instead, contemporary attempts by cognitive scientists to deny death often rely on the use or promise of technology.* Clearly, as Barnard and Brockmeier suggest, the denial of death is intimately woven into the cultural contexts in which it occurs. Ideas about possible immortality are themselves reinvented in ways that are consistent with our technological efforts to prolong life or cheat death. Through organ transplants, for example, the dead literally bring some people back to life. At the very least, literature and photography let us conjure up the spirits of those now dead. We honour and question the words and images of James himself about contemporary issues long after he has left our world.

The issue concludes with a commentary by Martin Marty in which he considers the richness of James's work and its perennial interest — perhaps far above what our humble commentaries can provide — even though science may despair at proving the reality of the transcendent or of breaking what he calls 'the circle of immanence'. I echo this view. Still, to my mind, if these papers can encourage people to return to *Varieties* and to James's other writings to discover the humour and the humanity in them, they will have accomplished their purpose. This is an unabashedly 'pen pal' view of how to relate to those who have gone before us (Hacking, 2002), but it is a personal one that I suspect James would have considered one important way to keep the memory and power of important thinkers alive and speaking to us still.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the editors of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* for the opportunity to edit this special issue, and to anonymous reviewers who helped hone an already exceptional set of manuscripts. Thanks, too, to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and other agencies for funding that made work on this project possible. We are all very grateful for your efforts and support.

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