"One Moment in the World's Salvation": Anarchism and the Radicalization of William James

Deborah J. Coon

In the opening pages of the essays in Pragmatism (1907), William James condemned the shallow abstraction of contemporary religious philosophies. In introducing his point, he conjured the name of “that valiant anarchistic writer Morrison I. Swift” and quoted Swift at length regarding the urgent problems of the nation’s unemployed. James urged his auditors and readers that both the transcendental idealism of the neo-Hegelian school and the theism of contemporary Protestantism were abstract, “refined,” out of touch with the “tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed” world of real human experience. What was needed, James explained, was pragmatism, a philosophy that would be better attuned to the crying needs pointed out by Swift.1

To James’s contemporaries the allusion to Swift was richly packed with meaning, for his name had been common newspaper fare for more than a decade. Swift was an American writer and radical organizer of the nation’s unemployed, achieving notoriety during the depression of the 1890s by organizing marches of the unemployed in Boston and, in 1894, to Washington. Indeed, as Alexander Keyssar has written, “Every major demonstration of the unemployed that took place in Boston between 1894 and 1914 was led by Morrison Isaac Swift.”2

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James used Swift's name as a rhetorical device to set up pragmatism as the new philosophy that would confront rather than avoid the problems of the modern world. James's choice of Swift rather than more moderate reformers was not an arbitrary one; it represented the culmination of a decade during which he had become increasingly radical in his thinking. As James witnessed important events of the 1890s, especially the Spanish-American War, the invasion of the Philippines, and Americans' reaction to the Dreyfus affair in France, he became increasingly distressed by the direction American society seemed to be taking. It seemed to him that what he often referred to as "big" forces—the military, the government, the growing corporations and trusts—were becoming increasingly predominant within American society. As he viewed the growing scale and power of institutions, he became more anti-institutional and anarchistic in his own thinking; he confided to William Dean Howells in 1900, "I am becoming more and more an individualist and anarchist and believer in small systems of things exclusively."3

One of the great dangers, as James came to see it, was that in the face of these big institutionalizing forces, the individual and the small group seemed to be powerless. The result was that people lost hope in their ability to make a difference, to change things for the better, and they gave up trying. It became one of James's goals to convince people that their actions could make a difference even in the face of overwhelming odds. For James, the issue struck at the very core of American identity and its democratic ideals of personal freedom and active participation. If people ceased to speak out and take action against social and political evils, then liberty became a sham. He wrote to his friend and colleague Carl Stumpf in 1901,

I should like to . . . write . . . in a way which . . . might slightly help to influence American ideals. . . . There are splendid things about America, but the old human leaven of national adventure and aggrandizement is threatening to substitute its brute instinctive power for our historic and hereditary principles.

Through his confrontation with empire and big forces, James became acutely sensitive to the notion that philosophies lent themselves to one side or another in the affairs of the world, and it became crucial to James to create a philosophy that would take a stand against imperializing tendencies wherever it found them.4

New England Quarterly, 49 (Dec. 1976), 542–58. The New England Industrial Delegation that Swift led to Washington was different from Jacob Coxey's army of the unemployed.


4 William James to [Carl] Stumpf, Aug. 6, 1901, in Perry, Thought and Character of William James, II, 199–200. David A. Hollinger argued that James was deeply concerned to reassert the importance of religious commitment (though not of any orthodox sort) in a scientific age: David A. Hollinger, In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas (Bloomington, 1985), 3–22. See also Bennett Ramsey,
Prior to the last decade or so, scholars tended to portray James as an essentially apolitical academician interested only in his professional world of philosophy and psychology. Those who acknowledged his interest in political affairs tended to treat his stated positions (on anti-imperialism, for example) as instances of cranky Jamesean idiosyncrasies, to be treated with a nudge and a wink. Even in his own day, many held that view of James's political interests. For example, he wrote to his colleague Wincenty Lutoslawski, declining participation in one of Lutoslawski's schemes regarding Polish patriotism:

My name is already identified with so many unorthodox things, such as psychical research, anti-imperialism, mind-cure medicine, etc., that if I were now to begin to figure as a Polish patriot the only place left for me in public esteem here would be the lunatic asylum!

Some excellent recent scholarship has attempted to take James's political interests more seriously and to rehabilitate our image of James as the socially and politically engaged individual that he was in his later career. So, for example, James Kloppenberg has cast James among the ranks of activist social democrats, while Frank Lentricchia and, more recently, James Livingston have portrayed him as a sort of undeclared Marxian socialist. Their work on James has provided a much-needed corrective to the older view of an apolitical James. I suggest, however, that we view James's politics and activism in a different light.\(^5\)

We have, first, James's emphatic and repeated insistence that the individual and the small group should be the moving forces in society, that the smaller unit was in all cases "truer," more valuable, than the larger unit in society—"the man more than the home, the home more than the state or the church."\(^6\) This steers us away from Marxist and social democratic positions because of the relative emphasis given the individual vis-à-vis the group. We have, moreover, James's own self-professed anarchism to consider. I hope to convince the reader that

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\(^6\) William James, "Notes for Metaphysical Seminary, 1903-4," in Petry, Thought and Character of William James, II, 383.
James's self-label was not a frivolous one, and that viewing James as a type of late-nineteenth-century communitarian anarchist brings us as close as possible to capturing the essence of his world view and perhaps closer to seeing James as he saw himself.

Through his father, Henry James Sr., William James shared the millennialist background that John L. Thomas has described as typical of Henry George, Edward Bellamy, and Henry Demarest Lloyd. The remedies offered by those neo-republican populists to some of the same dangers of corporate capitalism that concerned William James were in general more collectivist than his were; he remained strongly anarchistic in his thinking. James also stands in contrast to many of the major Progressive thinkers in the extent of his anarchistic leaning. James represented an adversarial and reformist tradition, but he argued for more individualistic, anarchistic solutions to contemporary problems than did the Progressives.7

Finally, it seems to be one of the ironies of our era that the term "pragmatism" has come to be equated with crass opportunism, the very antonym of "idealism." While James opposed absolute Idealism (with a capital I), he deeply believed in the importance and power of ideals of a more historically and culturally contingent sort. The project of James's last decade, as I will show in this essay, was precisely to combat the big forces sweeping society by reviving and rekindling belief in American ideals of pluralism, tolerance, and individual freedom and by restoring people's faith in the ability of the individual and the small group—in "small systems of things"—to create a better world.

Shortly before his death in 1910, James would write in A Pluralistic Universe (1909) that "philosophy is more a matter of passionate vision than of logic." We must look to James's response to world-shaping events of the 1890s to see the circumstances under which his own "passionate vision" developed focus. In the crucial period of the mid- to late 1890s, James worked out his individualistic world view—integrating earlier psychological theories and philosophical considerations with events he saw taking place in the world around him, so that his later published works, while rarely addressed specifically to social and political issues, were replete with allusions to them. Out of the crucible of these experiences would emerge The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), his essays on pragmatism and radical empiricism, and miscellaneous other essays—all promulgating a deeply pluralistic and anti-institutional vision.8

Prior to the 1890s, William James was not much engaged by political events. He made passing references to various elections, to the Irish political situation,

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and to the woman suffrage question in his letters to his brother Henry and his sister, Alice, but those letters hardly suggested intense interest; in any case his opinions remained private.

What seemed to shake James out of his relative complacency was the expansionist mood of the United States in the 1890s, culminating in the Spanish-American War and the continued American presence in the Philippines. Prior to the 1890s, the United States had appeared to many of its citizens to live according to the ideals of democracy—government of the people, by the people, for the people. But in the 1890s newer ideals seemed to be developing. The attempt to annex Hawaii and the meddling in Venezuelan affairs (even at their behest) because of United States economic interests in those places seemed to James and many Americans to fly in the face of the older ideals. It appeared as nothing but thinly veiled colonialism, anathema to everything the nation had stood for since its own revolution against England.

In the mid-1890s, James's correspondence exploded with angry political commentary. It is clear in this correspondence that he believed that the nascent ideals of neocolonialism and the expansion of economic and political territory were due to a new predominance of the coarser elements in the body politic, its primitive "fighting instincts" and its sheer muscular force. He wrote to William M. Salter that it was critically important to him that "disinterested critics" (he would later adopt and popularize the term intellectuals from the French)—as the cerebrum of the body politic, so to speak—do everything in their power to resist the "hardening" of these nascent, undesirable ideals into rigid dogmas. Just as individuals could consciously choose to redirect the development of their personal habits into new channels of action, so, James argued in another letter to Salter, the disinterested critics within a society could and should redirect its energies away from its warring instincts and into constructive, ethically sounder paths.

James wrote a number of letters about the dangers of resurrecting the Monroe Doctrine to interfere in Venezuelan affairs in 1896. For example, he wrote to Salter,

9 Critics pointed out that true democracy had not yet been accomplished even within United States borders: see Richard Drinnon, Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building (Minneapolis, 1980), 307–32.

10 William James to Frederic William Henry Myers, Jan. 1, 1896, in Perry, Thought and Character of William James, II, 305. William James to William M. Salter, [Feb. 13], 1896, ibid., 306. Salter was an independent scholar-philosopher, a leader in the Chicago branch of the Society for Ethical Culture, and a friend and in-law of William James (their wives were sisters). The term "les intellectuels" was popularized during the Dreyfus affair after the Dreyfusards published their "Manifeste des Intellectuels" of 1898. On the emergence of intellectuals as a class within American society during this period, see Christopher Lasch, The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type (New York, 1965). William James to Salter, Feb. 10, [1896], James Papers (Houghton Library). One is tempted to speculate that if he had lived long enough, James would have opposed World War I and John Dewey's support of it. Because James died in 1910, however, it was left to Randolph Bourne to criticize Dewey in the Jamesean mode. Bourne felt that, by supporting the war, "Dewey and his followers . . . [were] forsaking the creative tension between ideals and existing conditions that he [Bourne] saw as the critical dynamic in pragmatism." It may well have been the pacifist, anti-institutional flavor of James's writings that Bourne had found most appealing about pragmatism, while Dewey's more social-democratic variant was too sympathetic to large-scale institutions and state intervention for Bourne's taste. See Casey Nelson Blake, Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticisms of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford (Chapel Hill, 1990), esp. 158.
Filipinos killed in the battle of Calumpit, April 1899. William James was appalled by newspaper reports of slaughter in the Philippines in 1899.

*Courtesy National Archives; U.S. Signal Corps Photo no. 111-RB-1288.*

If there ever was a nation whose history put it in a position to escape such dogmas it is ours, and when now the dogma *is in weorden* only, and a few weeks of acts and precedents are to decide whether it shall be part and parcel of our permanent national soul, I should think that the duty of an ethical society ought to be to work on the loosening rather than on the hardening side.

But his most consistent and heated correspondence about American imperialism began in January 1898, evincing political vituperation that would not abate for several more years. When Salter became involved in education efforts in the Philippines, James exclaimed passionately: “I wish to Heaven you might be made to disbelieve in our mission of impregnating the Philippine's [sic] with American ideals and educating them for freedom. You may depend on it that it is sheer illusion, and can only mean rottenness and ruin to them.”11 For James, American ideals were appropriate only for the American people, that is, for the people who

11 William James to Salter, Feb. 10, [1896], Jan. 5, 1898, James Papers. James's spelling of “Philippines” was erratic; I have tried to maintain the peculiarities of his spelling.
developed them or were born into them. If others adopted them voluntarily, that was one thing, but to impose those ideals on another people was both arrogant and pernicious. He would give this message public shape in letters to editors and in his essay "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," to be discussed below.

In June 1898, James went to the public protest at Faneuil Hall in Boston that marked the beginnings of the Anti-Imperialist League. During the late 1890s and early 1900s, James wrote letters to editors of the Boston Evening Transcript, the Springfield Republican, and the New York Tribune with lengthy evaluations of contemporary social and political events. During this period, he also began to keep a scrapbook in which he pasted newspaper articles and printed materials relating to United States imperialism and the activities of the Anti-Imperialist League. He collected books on the psychology of war. Indeed, so intense was James's interest in political affairs by the late 1890s that his doctor cautioned him to avoid political and philosophical controversy for the sake of his physical and mental health. Instead, he embraced such controversy with a vengeance.12

As American action in the Philippines shifted from a war against Spain to a war against the Filipino nationals, reports began to filter in concerning the huge number of Filipino casualties relative to those of the United States and concerning the general brutality of the United States soldiers. The "war" began to appear to many Americans as little better than a slaughter of unfortunates. James was appalled, and he began to draw links between events in the Philippines and those throughout American society. He wrote to his brother Henry in late February 1899,

Our national infamy is I fear irremediable, after our massacring of these poor filipino "rebels" with whom we have refused to hold any communication. The day of "big"ness—big national destinies, political parties, trade-combines, newspapers, is sweeping every good principle and quality out of the world.13

Echoing these sentiments two days later, he complained to Henry W. Rankin of these same big forces and added:

It is time to organize an opposition. The resounding idol of mere empty "bigness" and "success" is killing every genuine quality and ideal. Was there ever such a national infamy as the Filipine business which we are enacting? And the loathsome greasy cant of McKinley & Co., which we swallow with it as its sauce!14

Nationalism, political parties, yellow newspapers, monopolies—to James, all were instances of a growing tendency toward corporate enterprise, toward the

12 James wrote to friends about attending the protest at Faneuil Hall: see, for example, William James to François Pillon, June 15, 1898, James Papers. On anti-imperialism in the 1890s, see, for example, Robert L. Beisner, Twelve against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists, 1898–1900 (New York, 1968); E. Berkeley Tompkins, Anti-Imperialism in the United States: The Great Debate, 1890–1920 (Philadelphia, 1970); and Richard E. Welch Jr., Response to Imperialism: The United States and the Philippine-American War, 1899–1902 (Chapel Hill, 1979). William James, scrapbook, "A collection of newspaper clippings relating to the Philippine question, 1899–1903" (microfilm), film W 11316 (Houghton Library, Harvard University). In the list of James's books donated to the Harvard College Library in 1923, there is a subcategory of books on the psychology of war. For the doctor's cautioning James, see William James to James Mark Baldwin, Oct. 16, 1899, James Papers.


establishment of massive institutions that would take on lives of their own. In such an era, individual virtues seemed powerless; “principles, sincerity, honesty, delicacy [are] all overwhelmed.”\textsuperscript{15} The scale of things was simply growing beyond individuals’ ability to cope. In a striking analogy written a few days later, James compared the American military’s crushing of the Filipino rebel leader Emilio Aguinaldo to “the infernal adroitness of the great department store, which has reached perfect expertness in the art of killing silently and with no public squealing or commotion the neighboring small concern.”\textsuperscript{16}

The Spanish-American War provided James and his fellow Americans a rude political education. One begins to see James, the unquenchable optimist, fraying around the edges, bristling with indignation over the plight of innocents, over the fate of indigenous peoples in the face of forces hell-bent on world domination. He wrote an angry and frustrated four-page letter in February 1899 to the editor of the \textit{Boston Evening Transcript}. Alluding to his own earlier naïveté in letting matters take their course, he wrote:

\begin{quote}
We gave the fighting instinct and the passion of mastery their outing; . . . because we thought that . . . we could resume our permanent ideals and character when the fighting fit was done. We now see how we reckoned without our host. We see by the vividest of examples what an absolute savage and pirate the passion of military conquest always is, and how the only safeguard against the crimes to which it will infallibly drag the nation that gives way to it is to keep it chained for ever; is never to let it get its start.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

James believed that Americans should have nothing but sympathy with oppressed peoples struggling against foreign domination. Americans should—according to their constitutional ideals—believe in self-government by indigenous peoples, and what better contemporary instance was there than Aguinaldo’s nationalist movement—a “healthy piece of national self-development”? “Here,” he wrote, “were the precious beginnings of an indigenous national life, with which, if we had any responsibilities to these islands at all, it was our first duty to have squared ourselves.”\textsuperscript{18}

There was every reason to think Aguinaldo’s movement could have succeeded. But, James continued, the United States did not give the movement a chance. It duped Aguinaldo into cooperation and then turned against him “as a dangerous rival, with whom all compromising entanglement was sedulously to be avoided by the great Yankee business concern.” James agonized:

\begin{quote}
We are now openly engaged in crushing out the sacredest thing in this great human world—the attempt of a people long enslaved to attain the possession of itself, to organize its laws and government, to be free to follow its internal destinies according to its own ideals. . . . No life shall you have, we say, except
\end{quote}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{15} Ibid.
\bibitem{17} Ibid., 154.
\bibitem{18} Ibid., 155.
\end{thebibliography}
as a gift from our philanthropy after your unconditional submission, to our will. . . . It is horrible, simply horrible. . . . Could there be a more damning indictment of that whole bloated idol termed "modern civilization" than this amounts to? Civilization is, then, the big, hollow, resounding, corrupting, sophisticated, confusing torrent of mere brutal momentum and irrationality that brings forth fruits like this!19

This is a James we have not heard before—a man angry to the depths of his being because his own people, the American people whose older ideals he loved so well, were allowing an irremediable moral wrong to happen in their name. An indigenous people, with its own customs, mores, and struggling attempts at autonomous government, was being crushed under the sheer muscle and overwhelming scale of American military and corporate interests.

James had begun to take action, and he would continue to take action through other letters to editors and to friends, incorporating these lessons into his intellectual work and filling that work with sociopolitical examples and allusions richly meaningful to his contemporaries. He would encourage others to take action also, as he did in this letter to the Transcript:

The impotence of the private individual, with imperialism under full headway as it is, is deplorable indeed. But every American has a voice or a pen, and may use it. So, impelled by my own sense of duty, I write these present words.

One by one we shall creep from cover, and the opposition will organize itself.20

What James advocated for the Filipinos was simply that the Filipinos be allowed to work out a viable system of government on their own. It would not be without struggle, he wrote, but the end result would be a government appropriate to the Filipinos' particular internal ideals, not one imposed on them by some foreign power. For Americans instead to attempt to "sow our ideals, plant our order, impose our God" would be to abstract these ideals, this order, this God from the American context in which they had grown and evolved. It would be to ignore the historical contingencies that made those ideals appropriate for one people and not for another.21

Such letters to editors resonate with ideas James put forth in the essay "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," published in May 1899, in his volume Talks to Teachers on Psychology. This essay, which he told several friends was his favorite in the volume, is the first of his published works to bear the mark of his distress over world events. While the date of the essay cannot be determined precisely, evidence from correspondence suggests that it was most likely written in the fall of 1898 and was first read to theology students in late October.22 Thus, it was

19 Ibid., 155, 156–57.
20 Ibid., 158.
21 Ibid., 157.
written well after James's concern about American imperialistic activities had begun but before his spate of letters to editors in the spring of 1899.

The central message of the essay "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" was that all humans were relatively ignorant of others' feelings, ideals, goals, and aspirations. The lesson James drew was this: with respect to the ideals and feelings of other human beings,

Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good, is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands. . . . It is enough to ask of each of us that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field.23

Much of the essay was a plea for respect for the "ideal life"—that is, respect for the lives of the mystics, poets, and visionaries who seemed out of place in the everyday world because of their absorption in the spiritual life. Superficially, the essay seemed to have little to do with political questions. But it is clear from the book's preface, which James wrote in March 1899, that he perceived the essay to have important social and political implications. He wrote that American ideals were in crisis: The "democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality" had become a hollow phrase without meaning, for "these phrases are so familiar that they sound now rather dead in our ears," although they formerly "had a passionate inner meaning." Alluding to American interference in the Philippines, James wrote that the "passionate inner meaning" of American ideals could be revived "if the pretension of our nation to inflict its own inner ideals and institutions vi et armis upon Orientals should meet with a resistance as obdurate as so far it has been gallant and spirited." James called upon Americans to resist the nation's new career of imperialism and to rekindle the dying flames of the ancient American ideals of democratic tolerance and individualism.24

In short, in his preface, James connected "the pluralistic or individualistic philosophy" with political consequences—an essential characteristic of pluralistic philosophy was its democratic respect for individuality, and this implied a policy of noninterference in the Philippines.25 It may be significant that the political implications were drawn in the preface, written in March 1899, and not in the essay itself, probably written the preceding fall. It suggests that James was only beginning at this time to integrate his existing philosophical theories with contemporary political events, as he became increasingly incensed by these events during February and March.

In February 1899, he wrote, "The day of 'big'ness . . . is sweeping every good principle and quality out of the world"; in April, "I begin to believe that every 'big' thing is necessarily corrupt."26 What follows is a well-known passage from

23 James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," 149.
25 Ibid., 4.
a letter of June 1899 to Sarah Wyman Whitman, a close friend of James's. The passage has usually been taken to exemplify James's love of the individual, a love stemming from the long tradition of American individualism. The passage represents much more than this. The war had served to focus attention for James—and many of his contemporaries—on the nexus of industry, the military, and foreign expansionism, that is, on the big forces that were working to change the shape of the world forever. James, increasingly sensitive to the implications of these changes, wrote:

I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms; and [I am] with the invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets or like the capillary oozing of water, and yet rending the hardest monuments of man's pride, if you give them time. The bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed. So I am against all big organizations as such, national ones first and foremost, against all big successes and big results, and in favor of the eternal forces of truth which always work in the individual and immediately unsuccessful way, under-dogs always, till history comes after they are long dead, and puts them on the top.27

Reexamining this passage in the light of his increasing alarm at political events in the 1890s, it is clear that it marked a transitional phase in James's thinking—from an implicit acceptance of moderate individualism to a more radical stance of anti-institutionalism that James himself would soon label anarchism.

In November 1900, James wrote to William Dean Howells from Rome. He penned hopes that Howells opposed the "philippine war of conquest," because the whole war "means simply the death of the old American soul." With his next penstroke, James continued,

I am becoming more and more an individualist and anarchist and believer in small systems of things exclusively. . . . I think that "les intellectuels" of every country ought to band themselves into a league for the purpose of fighting the wave of savagery that is pouring over the world.28

This excerpt is packed with meaning. First, it refers to the two issues whose unfolding led James to condemn big organizations—explicitly to the Spanish-American War, and implicitly to the Dreyfus affair (les intellectuels having been coined by the Dreyfusards). Second, it reveals that James was beginning to define himself as an anarchist in opposition to these events. If bigness was overtaking the world and crushing the smaller, then James chose to champion "small systems of things exclusively." If the rest of the world was incorporating into ever-larger

28 William James to Howells, Nov. 16, 1900, Howells Papers.
systems of organization, then James saw himself increasingly as an individualist and anarchist.

What James meant by calling himself an anarchist merits exploration. The term anarchism today typically conjures the image of the revolutionist with one arm raised, poised in the act of throwing a bomb. The reading public in the United States in the late 1880s and 1890s did not have solely the image of the anarchist-as-revolutionist. It had competing, pacifist images of evolutionary anarchism in the Boston Circle of anarchists and in the increasingly popular anarchist writings of Peter Kropotkin and Leo Tolstoy. Daily newspapers discussed the various types of anarchism, especially after the 1886 riots at the Haymarket in Chicago, and they often singled out Kropotkin and Tolstoy for approval in contrast to the Haymarket anarchists. For all the differences among the various types of anarchism, the common thread running through all was that any permanent institutional structure was oppressive and undesirable. Many anarchists believed that community, order, and temporary rules would arise spontaneously in the process of human interaction to cover specific situations, but to codify law and order was to render it inflexible to changing circumstances and to give the deathblow to human liberty. Types of anarchists ranged from extreme individualists to "socialistic" or "communitarian" anarchists, who held that community was extremely important but that it must be freely formed, freely maintained, and noncoercive.20

James was distinctly unsympathetic to the social revolutionism of the Haymarket anarchists, and he refused to sign a petition for clemency circulated by William Salter.30 After the Haymarket riots, however, James's interest in at least some kinds of anarchism took a more positive turn. There is good reason to believe that the seed of James's eventual interest in anarchism lay in his upbringing and education in the home of the unorthodox intellectual Henry James Sr., who counted both anarchists and utopian socialists among his friends and whose own philosophy was a peculiar blending of New England transcendentalism, Fourierist socialism, and the thinking of Emmanuel Swedenborg.31 While it is not possible to pinpoint William James's turn precisely, the evidence for his interest in anarchism masses around the late 1890s, at the height of his disaffection with American imperialism. Indeed, his positive view of anarchism probably grew at least partly out of his involvement with the Anti-Imperialist League.

20 For a fuller discussion of varieties of anarchism in the late-nineteenth-century United States and of James's interest in some of them, see Coon, "Courtship with Anarchy." See also Paul Avrich, Anarchist Portraits (Princeton, 1988); Ronald Creagh, L'Anarchisme aux Etats-Unis (Anarchism in the United States) (2 vols., Paris, 1986); Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th ed., s.v. "Anarchism" (written by Peter Kropotkin); and William O. Reichert, Partisans of Freedom: A Study in American Anarchism (Bowling Green, 1976). For a contemporary account that distinguished the "true anarchism" of Leo Tolstoy and Peter Kropotkin from the revolutionism of the Haymarket anarchists, see Gen. Francis A. Walker, "The Difference between the True Anarchist and the Chicago Bomb-Throwers," Boston Evening Transcript, Oct. 25, 1887, p. 5. Walker was president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; the Transcript article is a condensation of a talk he had given.

30 Details of Salter's public activities in behalf of the Haymarket anarchists and of his correspondence with James can be found in Coon, "Courtship with Anarchy," 56–70.

Partial page from a scrapbook William James and his family kept on the Philippines and anti-imperialism. At the bottom, Ernest H. Crosby's parody of Rudyard Kipling's poem “The White Man's Burden.” Upper left, the last stanza of Kipling's poem; upper right, the final part of another parody by Henry Labouchere.

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The Anti-Imperialist League comprised individuals of all political stripes and moral stances—nativists, racists, reactionaries, democrats, republicans, mugwumps, pacifists, anarchists, and socialists—united only by their common belief that the United States should not be interfering on foreign soil. To point to someone's involvement in the Anti-Imperialist League does not per se imply any
particular political radicalism. But James seems to have met, corresponded with, and read the works of some of the more radical among the anti-imperialists. He would have heard of Morrison Swift in the daily newspapers, but it was probably Swift's anti-imperialist book *Imperialism and Liberty* (1899) that first attracted James to Swift's work. James owned a copy and subsequently acquired two of Swift's later books, one of them *Human Submission* (1905), the book that James singled out for attention in *Pragmatism.*

Another important anti-imperialist contact for James was Ernest Howard Crosby, an American Tolstoyan pacifist-anarchist and the head of the New York branch of the Anti-Imperialist League. Crosby wrote an anti-imperialist parody of Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden"; it was quite well known, and James pasted a copy of it in his anti-imperialist scrapbook. In 1901 Crosby sent James a volume of his anarchistic poems, *Plain Talk in Psalm and Parable* (1899), and James replied that he felt "the strongest sympathy" with "their spirit . . . for I believe in Tolstoi-anism (so to call it for short) as the best life, yet lie myself in the bonds of mammon, and think some denunciation called for." James questioned, however, whether "in so inveighing against the competitive and capitalistic social system at large, you don't take a target both too big and too invulnerable."

Instead of attacking so vast and invulnerable a target as the capitalist system, James advocated setting up small anarchistic communities that would model the value of cooperation. In that way, human rapaciousness, a real and present evil, might be eliminated from the race by example and active choice. He wrote:

> And so long as freedom remains, isn't the way for the lovers of the ideal to found smaller communities which should show a pattern? . . . [T]hrough small systems, kept pure, lies one most promising line of betterment and salvation.
> Why won't some anarchists get together and try it. I am too ill (and too old!) or I might chip in myself.

In short, James hoped that, through building small, viable communities, anarchists could set a contagious example that might, in the evolutionary long run, eliminate ruthless competition and martial tendencies from the race. Through evolution and constructive example rather than through revolution and destruction, the anarchist cause had the most hope of long-term success.

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Also probably in the late 1890s, James became enchanted with an obscure little book, *The Theories of Anarchy and of Law: A Midnight Debate*, by Henry B. Brewster, a European-born American. It takes the form of a wide-ranging discussion among four friends. Three of them promulgated variants of anarchism: one was a purely intellectual anarchist, believing that no idea should be exalted above another; one was an anarchist in the moral and religious arena, a polytheist who considered anarchists to be "a van-guard to the army of the exiled gods"; and one was a social revolutionist. The revolutionist sympathized with the philosophical and theological anarchism of the other two but criticized them for their lack of activism. The fourth figure served as a foil for the others, holding out for law and maintenance of the status quo. James read the book and read it thoroughly. The intensity of his interest can be gauged by his underlining and highlighting passages on most pages, annotating certain crucial passages with his characteristic NB, cross-referencing various passages to other passages, and jotting down the ones he considered most significant in the flyleaf of the book.35

The book is poetically written, and it is easy to understand why James was taken with its style and content. Through their discussion, the three anarchistic figures together conveyed a range of anarchist thinking about thought, language, ideas, emotions, God, and society. Most revealing of all is a section James marked heavily, a passage in which the polytheist asked the social revolutionist how anarchists answer their everyday questions. Not only did James underline this passage and mark it in the margin with a vertical line, but he also wrote in the margin "NB" and "pragm." One is forcibly struck by the image of James excitedly reading this passage, marking it in the margin, underlining the query about how anarchists answer their everyday questions, and penning his answer—*pragmatism*.36

During the late 1890s, William James's remarks about his philosophical individualism and his desire to write a new individualistic metaphysics increased. In emphasizing the individual, James was not denying the importance of community. Kloppenberg has astutely analyzed James's writings to show him to be a proto-social democrat, emphasizing a community of individuals working toward a more moral world. Without contradicting Kloppenberg, we can perhaps more accurately view James as a type of late-nineteenth-century communitarian anarchist. The relative emphasis was on the individuals banding together in communities, rather than on the communities of individuals. The difference may seem slight, but as James


36 Brewster, *Theories of Anarchy and of Law*, 109–10. In James's characteristic NB, the stem of the B completes the N.
William James and Paul Ross at Chocorua, New Hampshire, c. 1889–1891. Paul Ross is the carpenter friend whom James quoted as saying “There is very little difference between one man and another; but what little there is, is very important.”

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himself liked to quote a carpenter friend of his as saying, “There is very little difference between one man and another; but what little there is, is very important.”

In 1900, shortly before James wrote to Ernest Howard Crosby regarding the idea of forming small anarchistic communities, he confided to William Dean Howells that he was becoming “an individualist and anarchist.” Later, in 1903, he wrote to a close friend, Pauline Goldmark,

I am getting to be more and more of an anarchist myself, in my ideas, though when it comes to applying them to life I am helpless. So I find myself more and more respecting those who can take hold practically, and live in unconventional spheres of activity.

Writing to Goldmark five years later and bewailing the fact that a mutual friend planned to enter the Episcopalian priesthood, thereby asserting his “little tory,

37 Kloppenberg, Uncertain Victory; William James, The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (New York, 1897), 256.
authoritarian, policeman side," James exclaimed: "Thank Heaven, I'm still an anarchist and likely to remain so! What art thou?"38

What can be pieced together from various sources is that the form of anarchism James had roughly in mind was a type of pacifist, communitarian anarchism—strongly individualist, but holding community to be important. James placed the individual within an overlapping network of "systems" or communities, some based on practical functions and others based on sympathy, love, and friendship.39 Any given individual was typically a member of a large number of different communities or groups. For James, individualism did not mean either rugged individualism or cutthroat competition, which he viewed as atavisms to earlier stages of human evolution. Individualism instead meant the possibility for each human being freely and spontaneously to work out his or her own ideals in concert with others working out similar ideals.

A description that James used to characterize the individualism of his friend Thomas Davidson seems equally to describe James's own variant:

No one felt more deeply than he the evils of rapacious individual competition. Spontaneously and flexibly organized social settlements or communities, with individual leaders as their centers, seem to have been his ideal, each with its own religious or ethical elements of discipline.

Individualism combined with spontaneous and flexible organization, whatever it may be called, is anarchism. Such was James's intention in comparing Davidson with other "contemporary anarchists." James wrote that while Davidson was an individualist and a communitarian, unlike other anarchists (such as Tolstoy) he never believed in the importance of "manual occupation, in order to share the common burden of humanity."40

While James praised both anarchistic and socialist experiments by his friends, it seems that he leaned toward anarchism rather than socialism because he feared that socialism held the danger of all universalizing systems—by emphasizing the group over the individual, the bigger over the smaller, it might constrain individual freedom by demanding conformity to a group standard. Sympathetically describing Davidson's view, James wrote: "You ask for a free man, and these [socialist] utopias give you an 'interchangeable part,' with a fixed number, in a rule-bound organism." Especially in an age of industrialization and standardization at all levels of society, the antidote to society's evils was not socialism, because that merely reinforced the standardization process, rendering human beings into "interchangeable parts" in a "rule-bound organism." What was needed was an anarchistic individualism that would emphasize human uniqueness and the value of the personal in an

38 William James to Howells, Nov. 16, 1900, Howells Papers; William James to Pauline Goldmark, Jan. 30, 1903, James Papers. James, in an earlier letter (now lost), had admired Goldmark's "socialistic work" with the National Consumers League. William James to Goldmark, Jan. 22, 1908, ibid.

39 James, Pragmatism, 67.

40 William James, Memories and Studies (New York, 1911), 95–96.
era when humanity was increasingly in danger of becoming a mere series of interchangeable cogs in a vast military-industrial machine.41

Again, the important thing for James was scale: “The bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed.”42 As organizations and institutions grew larger, they grew increasingly impersonal, increasingly indifferent to the needs and desires of individual human beings. For James the basis of morality and social justice had to lie with the individual. If there were crying social problems, then individuals and communities of individuals linked by their sympathies would have to address them. In the writings and public lectures of his last decade, James was trying desperately to restore people’s sense of power in the face of larger forces shaping society—the industrializing, bureaucratizing, institutionalizing forces that Alan Trachtenberg has so aptly labeled “the incorporation of America.”43 James was attempting to convince people that it was imperative to struggle against those forces and the social and political evils that sprang from them. He located the solution in an anarchistic personalism and pluralism.

As James was working on the Gifford lectures that were later published as The Varieties of Religious Experience, he frequently linked his anti-imperialist thinking with his developing philosophical ideas about the dangers of rationalism and absolute idealism, which he characterized in short as “the Absolute.” In a 1901 letter to Elizabeth G. Evans, he burst out, “Damn great empires! — including that of the Absolute.”44 Nominally a psychological study of religious experience, the Gifford lectures delivered in 1901–1902 contained the germ of James’s emerging metaphysics and epistemology and strong evidence of his now fervent anti-institutional stance.

The Varieties of Religious Experience was not simply a descriptive study; it was a vindication of the deeply religious life in an era when science encouraged skepticism and scorn toward religious believers. James argued that passionately religious people had something useful to add to the world. Through their selflessness and devotion to righting injustices, the best of these religious types actively improved the world and set an example for others to follow:

The world is not yet with them, so they often seem in the midst of the world’s affairs to be preposterous. Yet they are impregnators of the world, vivifiers and animaters of potentialities of goodness which but for them would lie forever dormant.45

41 James’s praise of H. G. Wells’s Fabian socialism is well acknowledged in the James literature. His description of Thomas Davidson’s version of individualism is found in James, Memories and Studies, 89.
42 William James to Whitman, June 7, 1899, in Henry James, ed., Letters of William James, II, 90.
43 Alan Trachtenberg, The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age (New York, 1982).
44 William James to Elizabeth G. Evans, Feb. 15, 1901, box M84 (microfilm, reel 6). Elizabeth Glendower Evans Papers (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass.). James used the phrase “the Absolute” as a shorthand for Absolute Truth, Beauty, Good, God—all abstract, eternal standards.
45 James, Varieties of Religious Experience, 285.
The influence of James's interest in socialist and anarchistic thought is evident in several important passages. For instance, in his discussion of the value of "saintly" people in creating a better world, James wrote that "the saint's magic gift to mankind" is that he or she "is an effective ferment of goodness, a slow transmuter of the earthly into a more heavenly order." He then continued that socialists and anarchists had much the same effect:

In this respect the Utopian dreams of social justice in which many contemporary socialists and anarchists indulge are, in spite of their impracticability and non-adaptation to present environmental conditions, analogous to the saint's belief in an existent kingdom of heaven. They help to break the edge of the general reign of hardness, and are slow leavens of a better order.46

Despite his seeming dismissal in this passage of their "impracticability and nonadaptation to present environmental conditions," James actually defended the possibility of their eventual adaptation to better circumstances. According to contemporary social Darwinist theories, it might seem that the saint, the martyr, and the utopian were evolutionarily maladapted for survival, since in a society with a mix of aggressive and "non-resistant" types, the aggressive would win out. But, James urged, it was both undesirable and implausible that the aggressive would win out in the long run, for a society in which everyone was aggressive would eventually destroy itself. The converse, however—a society in which everyone was "non-resistant" or pacifist—was desirable and plausible:

It is meanwhile quite possible to conceive an imaginary society in which there should be no aggressiveness, but only sympathy and fairness—any small community of true friends now realizes such a society. Abstractly considered, such a society on a large scale would be the millennium.47

In an era when Theodore Roosevelt and other Americans were touting the virtues of the aggressive and competitive "strenuous life," James tried to offer an alternative within the terms of that evolutionary argument. Granted that people wanted to counteract the increasing "effeminacy" of humankind, he urged that the asceticism of monks was surely an alternative, equally strenuous mode of life: "May not voluntarily accepted poverty be 'the strenuous life,' without the need of crushing weaker peoples?" Surely ascetics lived lives of hardship and deprivation that toughened them toward the exigencies of life without compromising their moral virtues. James's foremost contemporary model for this voluntary adoption of poverty and nonresistance was Tolstoy. James suggested that "voluntarily accepted poverty," if more widely adopted, would be a new "moral equivalent of war," a concept he developed subsequently in the famous essay of that name. His purpose was not to bolster Roosevelt's call to martial virtues, but rather to address contempo-

46 Ibid., 286–87.
rary worries about the evolutionary weakening of the human race by providing a pacifist alternative modeled on Tolstoy's Christian anarchism.48

Other historians have discussed the emphasis James gave to the “strenuous life,” but they have tended to emphasize possible psychodynamic motives—for example, his need to find a substitute mode of strenuous life because of his guilt over his own nonparticipation in the Civil War.49 While psychodynamic motives may certainly have played a part, I see his emphasis on the “strenuous life” here and in “The Moral Equivalent of War” as growing more immediately out of his anti-imperialist concerns. As mentioned earlier, in the late 1890s James came to see the intellectual’s place as fighting the “coarser” warring tendencies of the body politic. Hence, he needed to confront directly Roosevelt’s and others’ call for militarism as a remedy for the effeminacy of modern American culture. James was distressed by the havoc that those “martial virtues” were wreaking in the Philippines, so he sought to install a pacifist but no less “strenuous” set of virtues in individual minds, and thereby in society.

Throughout The Varieties of Religious Experience, James insisted on distinguishing between “religion as an individual personal function, and religion as an institutional, corporate, or tribal product,” arguing for the value of individual religious experience and against that afforded by the institutionalized church. While individual revelation was spontaneous and genuine, the church tended to codify prophecy and revelation, making it secondhand and sterile for other people. Furthermore, it prescribed how people should act, think, and believe. Thus was born “religion’s wicked intellectual partner, the spirit of dogmatic dominion, the passion for laying down the law in the form of an absolutely closed-in theoretic system.”50

“I am well aware of how anarchic much of what I say may sound,” James remarked in his lecture “The Value of Saintliness,” as he defended the legitimacy of a plurality of types of faith; but, he added, “I am no lover of disorder and doubt as such.” Rather, he opposed the institutionalized church because subjective religious feelings and impulses were too frequently lost or corrupted when they became institutionalized: “When these groups get strong enough to ‘organize’ themselves, they become ecclesiastical institutions with corporate ambitions of their own. The spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule are then apt to enter and to contaminate the originally innocent thing.” Even at the age of sixteen, James had written, “All the evil in the world comes from the law and the priests and the sooner these two things are abolished the better.”51 But in The Varieties

48 James, Varieties of Religious Experience, 292. For James’s discussion of Tolstoyan nonresistance, see ibid., 126–31, 153–56. James’s description of “voluntarily adopted poverty” as the “moral equivalent of war” is found ibid., 292.
49 For example, see Cockin, William James, Public Philosopher; and George M. Fredrickson, The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union (New York, 1965).
50 James, Varieties of Religious Experience, 268, 271.
of Religious Experience the thought was now being given a central emphasis in his work and being cast in a new, politicized language: "Corporate ambitions," "the lust of dogmatic rule," and the "spirit of politics" everywhere corrupted what they touched. As he would repeatedly do from the late 1890s on, James emphasized the particular over the general, the personal over the institutional.

One final aspect of The Varieties of Religious Experience was a crucial part of James's developing thought as he became increasingly anti-institutional and sought a way to counter the big forces that were taking over the world: his argument regarding the presence of evil in the world. James grappled with the problem of evil throughout his later years, both publicly and privately. His treatment of it in Varieties was fairly abstract; in his correspondence and in the essays on pragmatism he would give flesh to these abstractions by citing particular social evils.

James's argument on evil in the abstract was this: If one believed in an Absolute, in the eternal existence of God, then, if one admitted the existence of evil at all, one admitted it for all time. If God was eternal, then so was Evil. But if one abolished the Absolute and allowed for a pluralistic, changing world, there was no longer any philosophical necessity for what had always existed historically. Evil might always have existed—and surely there was ample evidence that it had. But it need not always exist in the future: "it might be, and may always have been, an independent portion [of reality] that had no rational or absolute right to live with the rest, and which we might conceivably hope to see got rid of at last." 52

The crucial thing, according to James here and subsequently, was to learn from the experience of religious people and saintly types throughout history; with faith in better possibilities and through the slow accumulation of individual acts over time, a better world could, and surely would, result. If one believed in a changing reality and worked to bring it about, then the ultimate goal of a world without evil, a world without human suffering—in short, the millennium—was at least philosophically possible.

While launching his individualistic philosophy in the early years of the century, James continued his anti-imperialist work. In December 1903, he stood up publicly to call for independence for the Philippine Islands, giving an address to the Anti-Imperialist League in Boston that was subsequently published in the New York Evening Post. 53

For James, the anti-imperialist cause was no longer simply a national cause, no longer an attempt merely to revive older American ideals. It had become a subset of an international human cause, the fight of all those who stood for "light against darkness, right against might, love against hate." Because "the country has once for all regurgitated the Declaration of Independence and the Farewell Address," and imperialism was now well entrenched, the United States had "deliberately

52 James, Varieties of Religious Experience, 113.
pushed itself into the circle of international hatreds, and joined the common pack of wolves.” The duty of a new breed of “liberals” now was to “carry . . . on the war against the powers of darkness here, playing our part in the long, long campaign for truth and fair dealing which must go on in all the countries of the world until the end of time.” In short, “the older liberalism was in office, the new is in the opposition.”

Writing to his friend Josephine Lowell three days after his speech, James elaborated on what he had hoped to accomplish in his anti-imperialist address, urging the importance of protest against the “organization of great machines for ‘slick’ success.” He admitted reservations about the efficacy of the anti-imperialist movement but wrote that he had gone to the meeting “because I had heard the people ridiculed so much.” Explaining what he believed to be the important issues now, he continued:

It seems to me that the great disease of our country now is the unwillingness of people to do anything that has no chance of succeeding. The organization of great machines for “slick” success is the discovery of our age; and, with us, the individual, as soon as he realizes that the machine will be irresistible, acquiesces silently, instead of making an impotent row. One acquiescence leads to another, until acquiescence itself becomes organized. The impotent row-maker becomes, in the eye of public opinion, an ass and a nuisance. We get to live under the organization of corruption, and since all needful functions go on, we next treat reform as a purely literary ideal: We defend our rotten system. Acquiescence becomes active partnership. . . . We want people who are willing to espouse failure as their vocation. I wish that that could be organized—it would soon “pass into its opposite.”

James’s social and philosophical concerns were inextricably mixed; indeed, they can hardly be thought of as separate categories. In the above letter and in letters to newspapers, he encouraged the “row-maker.” He called upon people to stand up and protest the government’s immorality when they saw it occurring, because “acquiescence becomes active partnership.” Protesting evil might fail initially, but it “would soon ‘pass into its opposite’”—success.

As a professional philosopher, however, James privately worried about the philosophical status of rebellion, for it posed an ontological problem: In what sense could protest really change reality? In a notebook he titled “Possibility,” James attempted to work out the problem. Protest presupposed that the world could be different, better. He puzzled: “In the universe of experience, object is one thing and protest another, entitatively, so it remains problematic whether the protest can be regarding [sic] as having any paramountcy or privileged position.”

James resolved the problem by invoking the Aristotelian distinction between actualities and potentialities. Perhaps protest of existing reality brought potential,

54 Ibid., 85–86.
55 William James to Josephine Lowell, Dec. 6, 1903, James Papers.
alternative forms of reality into being. Reality could change as these alternative forms of reality became actual. He wrote:

The protest makes at least reference to a better possibility. The question resolves itself then into the relation of possibilities to actualities. Something is surely achieved when a better possibility is brought to birth. It is the beginning of the bad reality’s death. It gnaws and works + undermines.57

As James wrote in numerous letters and in the essays on pragmatism, the importance of holding ideals and having faith in those ideals was that holding ideals was the first step in bringing better possibilities into existence. First, one had to believe that “What is so good, may be; ought to be; must be, shall be,” and then one had to work to bring it about. The germ of this idea had been contained in an early essay of James’s, published in French, “Quelques Considérations sur la méthode subjective” (1878). In that essay James argued for the importance of subjective belief, a theme that would thread through most of his published work for the rest of his life. But in the early essay, James did not elaborate—perhaps did not even care to see—the social and political implications of his view. His example in the 1878 essay had concerned a mountain climber in the Alps who had to make a difficult leap and could only succeed if he believed that he could succeed. After his experiences of the 1890s, James’s examples and metaphors would generally be less frivolous, would bear the mark of his radicalization and his social concerns.58

Ideals were not eternal absolutes for James. For him, ideals were particular and personal rather than universal or absolute, and they were historically contingent. They could be temporary, even evanescent. Ideals could be utterly novel, arising out of a particular historical context with its own peculiar needs. To James, “ideals” were not the empty, abstract husks of classic philosophical idealism, but living germs of future possibilities, given birth by a person who cared enough to fight for their existence: an “ideal is a possibility which has made connexion already with some portion of reality. It is somebody’s possibility: ‘Hurray!’ for it!”59

In his notes for the “Metaphysical Seminary” he gave in 1903–1904, James outlined a new anarchistic philosophy of radical empiricism that stressed the value of the individual and the personal:

It means anarchy in the good sense. It means individualism, personalism: that the prototype of reality is the here and now; that there is a genuine novelty; that order is being won,—incidentally reaped; that the more universal is the more abstract; that the smaller and more intimate is the truer,—the man more than the home, the home more than the state or the church.60

57 Ibid.
59 William James, notebook, “Possibility,” James Papers.
60 James, “Notes for Metaphysical Seminary,” 383.
James's essays on pragmatism were the culmination of decades of philosophizing. A number of their elements had been present in at least nascent form in James's philosophical essays of the 1870s. For example, he had raised the issue of "the Absolute" in an 1879 essay, "The Sentiment of Rationality," and had written about the relativity of truths and ideals in his essay "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence" (1878). He had also discussed the transforming role of beliefs and subjective interests in "Quelques Considérations sur la méthode subjective" and "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind."61

But the essays on pragmatism were given added force and purpose by James's disillusionment and radicalization of the late 1890s. He had found his "passionate vision." The essays on pragmatism, unlike the essays of the 1870s, were shot through with metaphors and allusions connecting pragmatism to the social and political realm. The world as James saw it was desperately in need of reform of all sorts, both domestic and international; pragmatism was his public contribution to the effort. In 1899, James wrote to a former Radcliffe student of his, Mary E. Raymond, about his intention to write a major work in philosophy and implicitly linked his goal with his anti-imperialist concerns:

I even begin to feel as if I might end by doing something which might some day be called my message to the world in the way of philosophy, and it makes me look forward to the rest of life with a certain amount of interest. Surely the world needs messages of some sort in this deluge of militarism that is sweeping over it.62

Throughout the 1890s James had become increasingly outspoken against imperializing tendencies, whether in academic and professional matters or world political affairs. For example, in 1894 and 1898, he opposed medical licensing in Massachusetts because he felt it represented a hegemonic move by allopathic doctors to gain exclusive control of medicine and to eliminate alternative sects such as faith healers and homeopaths. He challenged the standardization of methods that was taking place in the discipline of psychology in the 1890s. He also viewed the trend toward hiring only Ph.D.'s in higher education as another form of standardizing, asking in his 1903 essay "The Ph. D. Octopus," "Is individuality with us also going to count for nothing unless stamped and licensed and authenticated by some title-giving machine?"63

James became increasingly frustrated with the growing institutionalization taking place throughout American society. The United States, which once had seemed

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62 William James to Mary E. Raymond, March 2, 1899, Mary E. Raymond Papers (Special Collections, Miller Library, Colby College, Waterville, Me.).
63 See Coon, "Courtship with Anarchy," 191–96; Coon, "Standardizing the Subject"; and James, Memories and Studies, 346–47.
to be the haven of individual freedom and anti-institutionalism, had begun to "puke up its ancient soul" as it steadily turned toward policies of imperialism within world affairs, professionalization within academic affairs, and standardization within virtually all facets of society.\(^{64}\) All these tendencies represented, to James, the imperializing propensities of institutions, the domination of the weak by the strong, of the underdog by the bully. They represented the oppression of the concrete individual instance—be it a concept, a belief, a developing body of thought, a human being, or a small nation—by an abstract dogma.

If society was moving toward increasingly big forces, then pragmatism would act as a counterforce to this process, encouraging individuals to evaluate the truth for themselves and to take action when action was necessary. James intended pragmatism to be a philosophy that would fight dogmatism, absolutism, and oppression in the philosophical world. Through its work in the minds of its readers and listeners, it would serve as a basis for reform and activism in the social and political world as well. He wrote to Pauline Goldmark in 1904 that he was "ashamed to say how much interested I have become in my own system of philosophy(!!)" since John Dewey, F. C. S. Schiller, Henri Bergson, and others had independently developed similar ideas. He continued, "I am persuaded that a great new philosophical movement is in the air, and I pray to be spared to play an active part in it. Those moments [sic] seem ridiculously abstract in their original form, but they filter down into practical life through the remotest channels."\(^{65}\)

As James himself wrote, pragmatism was both a theory of truth and a method for weighing truths and values. As a theory of truth, pragmatism's "account of truth is an account of truths in the plural," and not of "Truth with a big T." Indeed, wrote James, "the whole notion of the truth is an abstraction from the fact of truths in the plural, a mere useful summarizing phrase like the Latin Language or the Law." Even without an absolute notion of truth, people would create their truths and ethical guidelines as current conditions required. This lack of an absolute standard of truth did not imply utter lawlessness, nor did it mean that an individual had free rein to declare anything true or ethical simply because it satisfied him or her. James argued that the natural world and the social community were strong conservative forces that would quickly squelch any "truths" that were too far out of line.\(^{66}\)

It should be clear that James's theory of truth and ethics was deeply anti-institutional in character. James opposed abstract, universal standards because they held the same dangers as big institutions—they were impersonal, hollow abstractions that tended either to colonize or to crush the individual instance. James advocated instead smaller-scale, contingent standards that would be more responsive to change, to historical circumstance, to particular human interests and needs.

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\(^{64}\) William James to Henry Lee Higginson, Sept. 18, 1900, James Papers.

\(^{65}\) William James to Goldmark, Feb. 24, 1904, James Papers.

\(^{66}\) See James, \textit{Pragmatism}, esp. 104–19.
As a philosophical method, pragmatism would help individuals assess what concrete difference it would make in their lives if a particular term was used, a particular ideal was adopted, a particular world view was embraced. This, James wrote, ought to be the essential task of any worthwhile philosophy: “to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.”

Of all the possible world views that might be embraced—materialism versus spiritualism, empiricism versus rationalism, monotheism versus polytheism—the “most central of all philosophic problems,” according to James, was that of monism versus pluralism. The ramifications of choosing sides extended into every corner of life—epistemological, metaphysical, social, political. Pragmatism came out on the side of pluralism, because James believed that pluralism’s consequences for life were at once more hopeful and more in keeping with the nature of reality than those of monism.

A fundamental premise of James’s pragmatism and radical empiricism is that reality is constantly changing, constantly in the process of being made:

The essential contrast is that for rationalism reality is ready-made and complete from all eternity, while for pragmatism it is still in the making, and awaits part of its complexion from the future. On the one side, the universe is absolutely secure, on the other it is still pursuing its adventures.

If reality were static, as rationalists held, then rationalist standards of an Absolute Good, an Absolute Truth, an Absolute Law, an Absolute Order would be appropriate. But if reality were constantly in flux, as evolutionary theory indeed seemed to confirm, then absolute standards were inappropriate because they would become obsolete as reality changed.

For James, therefore, pluralism better fit the character of a reality-in-flux, since it encouraged novelty and diversity. It was also more tolerant, more respectful of individual liberty, less imperialistic than monistic theories such as absolute idealism. James explained:

The theory of the Absolute, in particular, has had to be an article of faith, affirmed dogmatically and exclusively. . . . The slightest suspicion of pluralism, the minutest wiggle of independence of any one of its parts from the control of the totality, would ruin it. . . . Pluralism on the other hand has no need of this dogmatic rigoristic temper. Provided you grant some separation among things, some tremor of independence, some . . . real novelty or chance, however minute, she is amply satisfied, and will allow you any amount, however great, of real union.

Jamesian pluralism held that “there is no point of view, no focus of information extant, from which the entire content of the universe is visible at once.” According

67 Ibid., 30.
68 Ibid., 64.
69 Ibid., 123.
70 Ibid., 78.
71 Ibid., 72.
to James, there were many and diverse points of view and types of action, each individual's point of view sharing similarities (and differences) with some other individual's point of view. Kindred views would form "systems" or networks, each view overlapping its neighbor's to an extent based on its similarity:

The result is innumerable little hangings-together of the world's parts within the larger hangings-together, little worlds, not only of discourse but of operation, within the wider universe. . . . [A]ll these definite networks actually and practically exist . . . and between them all they let no individual elementary part of the universe escape.\(^{72}\)

In direct opposition to absolute idealists who posited that there must be an eternal Something or Someone that made it all cohere, James explained the unity of the "universe" without recourse to an "Absolute"; he saw instead interlinked networks of small systems binding it all together. "Our 'multiverse' still makes a 'universe'; for every part, tho it may not be in actual or immediate connexion, is nevertheless in some possible or mediated connexion, with every other part however remote, through the fact that each part hangs together with its very next neighbors in inextricable interfusion."\(^{73}\) For James, the apparent unity of the world paradoxically arose from its diversity, its pluralistic quality—through an overlapping network of "small systems."

James's philosophy had crucial social and political ramifications, which were apparent not only in pragmatism's pluralism but also in what he called its quality of "meliorism." For James, philosophy should not be just a sterile exercise engaged in by academics for each other's exclusive benefit. It should grow out of existing social and political conditions and be productive of better ones. As he underlined in a favorite book, Friedrich Paulsen's *Introduction to Philosophy*, philosophy arises out of "the revolt against a miserable present"; an act of will "determines the direction it will take and arouses its passions."\(^{74}\)

In a monistic world view, reality was whole, entire—and static. Good and evil had always existed and would always exist. Hence, this world view led either to pessimism, if one dwelled on the presence of evil, or to a blind optimism, if one tried to explain away the evil by saying either that it was necessary as part of the perfect whole or that, on the whole, evils were not as bad as they appeared. A pluralistic world view, on the other hand, as James had demonstrated in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, allowed that evils might exist and might always have existed previously; they were not, however, a necessary part of reality. As he had worked out in his notebook on "Possibility," faith in better possibilities and protest of current bad conditions were the first steps toward bringing about an imagined better world. He wrote in *Pragmatism*: "Meliorism treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes


\(^{73}\) James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 146; a similar view is expressed on 115.

\(^{74}\) Friedrich Paulsen, *Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Frank Thilly (Boston, 1895), 317. Passage marked in James's copy, Houghton Library.
more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become."75 For James, pluralism was crucial for allowing the proliferation of a variety of protests, reforms, solutions. The more types of "possibilities" that were allowed to exist—the more seeds of future realities that were planted—the better the chance that some would flourish.

The advantage of meliorist, James urged, was that it allowed hope and trust in better possibilities while avoiding the danger of sinking into passive acceptance of evil as a necessary part of the world: "absolutism admits quietism or indifferentism, which pluralism does not." Melioristic pragmatism plunged one into "the pluralistic uncompleted flux, saying there will be an atonement for this [bad] moment." It did not guarantee the atoning facts but allowed them as possibilities, thereby encouraging activity rather than indifference.76

Thus, Jamesean pragmatism encouraged activism—not full-scale revolution, which would be the ultimate dogmatic act, but reform and small revolts against particular injustices. It encouraged people to think for themselves, to have faith in their own beliefs and truths, and to fight actively rather than accept passively the evils that they saw around them. James wrote in Pragmatism and elsewhere that the problem with many contemporary ethical theories was that they encouraged quietism. They asked individuals simply to accept their fate, to acquiesce. In the essays on pragmatism, James quoted a long passage from Morrison Swift's Human Submission. The passage condemned modern ethical and religious theories as being almost criminally negligent by declaring evil necessary to the perfection of the eternal order, when all about them the working classes confronted real evils and were doomed to despair, starvation, and suicide.

James quoted Swift's bitter pronouncement that "ethics is an archaic exercise of modern school-masters hundreds of years in arrears, that its message to the present and to the future is dead." James particularly stressed this last message: ethics was dead if it did not respond to the crying needs of modern society. In sections of Human Submission that James did not quote, Swift proposed the radical ethical solution that the oppressed were outside the law and need feel no compunction about disobeying ethical systems constructed by their oppressors. If society prevented them from earning their bread, then they should simply take it. Swift, the social revolutionist, held that "the abolition of the rich is the next law of the universe to be executed." Given the intensity of Swift's bitter condemnations of capitalism, the radicalism of his proposed solutions, and the fact that his views were well known to both working-class and elite contemporaries, it seems all the more noteworthy that James cited him favorably, concurring with Swift's "revolt against the airy and shallow optimism of current religious philosophy," and qualifying only that "Mr. Swift's anarchism goes a little farther than mine does"77

75 James, Pragmatism, 137.
76 William James to Elizabeth G. Evans, Dec. 11, 1906, James Papers. The letter as published in Petry, Thought and Character of William James, II, 473–74, differs from the original and does not contain these quotations.
James could not go as far as Swift. He certainly never preached social revolution, and he was not even much of an active reformer. When he had confessed his growing anarchism to his reformer friend Pauline Goldmark, he had admitted his inability to apply it to the world. To Lutoslawski, James wrote that he envied those who could "live in unconventional spheres of activity" but felt himself to be somehow constrained, strapped into "conventional harness" in academics. He complained to friends that he was thought a crank by many of his friends and colleagues for his support of too many unorthodox causes, including anti-imperialism. Even in its relatively subdued form, pragmatism was attacked by several contemporary scholars for its anarchistic tendencies or, as one theologian put it, for its "revolt against all tradition, authority and unity," its opposition to "all regulative norms and law."  

Within James's chosen role, however, within those constraints of convention and professorial respectability, he offered a pluralistic and anti-institutional philosophy that self-consciously left behind the gentility of the old world and asked people to grapple with the tremendous ethical and social problems of the new. James saw absolute idealism and rationalism as too "noble," too genteel to address current problems: "In this real world of sweat and dirt, it seems to me that when a view of things is 'noble,' that ought to count as a presumption against its truth, and as a philosophic disqualification." Pragmatism instead called for people to roll up their sleeves and work to bring about a better reality:

Suppose that the world's author put the case to you before creation, saying: "I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own 'level best.'" I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?  

Pragmatic pluralism viewed the universe not as a single vast system, but as a great network of smaller systems, with every living individual contributing to some system(s). Reality and truth were not given once for all, but were constantly "in..."
the making,” and individuals were creators of new realities. Our roles as creators of new realities “add both to our dignity and to our responsibility as thinkers,” James wrote. It meant that all individuals had the chance to make an impact on the world by working as the “live champions and pledges” of better possibilities.82

For James, nothing less than the world’s salvation was at stake; pragmatism insisted that salvation was possible, though not guaranteed, and that individuals had to work to bring it about: “Take, for example, any one of us in this room with the ideals which he cherishes, and is willing to live and work for. Every such ideal realized will be one moment in the world’s salvation.”83 What form that salvation would take was not given in advance. Anyone’s solution just might prove the most viable one in the long run. The crucial thing was to try.

It was James’s hope that pragmatism would help to rekindle the historically contingent American ideals of pluralism and tolerance. These ideals had lost their “passionate inner meaning” for the American people as imperializing forces held sway in the 1890s, and they had to be given new meaning if they were to become living, personal ideals again. It was James’s further hope that pragmatism would restore people’s faith in individual self-determination, in the efficacy of spontaneous, individual acts of will. People might then more readily undertake social and political action, trusting that immediate failure might eventually “pass into its opposite.” In a secular age, the millennium was no longer guaranteed by a Creator, but it might be attained if enough people believed that it could be attained and voluntarily and spontaneously worked hard to bring it about.

James wrote in Pragmatism that surely “the scale of the evil actually in sight defies all human tolerance.” The crying needs of real individuals in the face of imperializing, militarizing, industrializing forces had to be met. The hope of present and future generations, for James, lay in pluralism, personalism, and “anarchy in the good sense.” It lay in the abolition of particular evils and in the championing of better possibilities that, as “slow leavens of a better order,” might help to bring about a “socialistic equilibrium,” the earthly millennium. Forged in the fire of his radicalization of the 1890s, much of the corpus of James’s work in his last decade was designed to convince people that the need was imperative and the goal was possible.84

82 Ibid., 123, 137.
83 Ibid., 137.
84 James, Pragmatism, 70. James, “Notes for Metaphysical Seminary,” 383. James, Varieties of Religious Experience, 287. James, Memories and Studies, 286.