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Recommended Citation

McAndrew, James () "Optimism, Adventure, Pragmatism and Psychology: William James and the Gilded Age," *The Histories*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol8/iss1/5

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III

Optimism, Adventure, Pragmatism, and Psychology:

William James and the Gilded Age

By James McAndrew '10



The Gilded Age is the term used to refer to the period of totally unprecedented economic and population growth in the post-Civil War and pre World War I United States. Many influential figures lived during this time, one of the most important being William James, an American psychologist, philosopher, and medical doctor. Throughout his life, James did much to promote the then very young science of psychology, founding the first demonstration laboratory in America and teaching the first psychology course at Harvard University. He also wrote about and greatly helped develop the philosophy of pragmatism. Through his outlooks on both of these subjects, James exposes much about his own personality and the values that he held personally, many of which seem to be in line with the dominant beliefs of the Gilded Age. William James was able to help shape America and American ideas during a time in the country's history that was unlike any other.

William James was born on January 11, 1842, at the Astor House in New York City. He was the oldest child of Henry James Sr. and Mary Robertson Walsh. His father was a very wealthy man and an exceptionally eccentric Swedenborgian theologian who seemed to be at great odds with the pro-science views of the time. William James, along with his brothers and sister, was educated throughout Europe during his childhood, becoming fluent in both French and German. He then took a short-lived apprenticeship with William Morris Hunt in his studio in Rhode Island. In 1861 as the American Civil War began, James's brothers, Garth Wilkinson and Robertson, enlisted in the Union Army while William and his other brother Henry did not, pleading health issues. William himself suffered from what was then known as neurasthenia which included fatigue, anxiety, and periods of severe depression leading to suicidal thoughts. Also, in 1861 James entered Harvard University as a Chemistry major, but quickly switched to physiology. Subsequently, he began to attend Harvard Medical School in 1864, but took a leave of absence in the spring of 1865 to go on a scientific expedition up the Amazon River with Harvard's Louis Agassiz. While on this excursion, James became ill many times, suffering bouts of seasickness and contracting smallpox. Due to these illnesses, James contemplated abandoning the excursion months early, only to eventually decide to stay until the end. Later, however, he would say that when winter came or a rain storm began, he recalled the beautiful Amazon. Shortly after returning to Harvard he became ill again in 1867 and went to Germany with hopes of improving his condition. It was here

that James was introduced to the new science of psychology, attending lectures by such notable figures as Emil du Bois-Reymond, Hermann von Helmholtz, and Wilhelm Wundt. He again returned to medical school and finally received his M.D. in 1869. (Richardson, 2006)

America's Gilded Age began after the Civil War in the early 1870's, the term being coined by Mark Twain with the publication of his book, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, in 1873. It was a period of extreme economic and population growth with millions of immigrants coming to America from a very diverse range of countries, many seeking a better life and economic prosperity. Instead, most immigrants ended up working long hours in factories for very low wages with no rights or benefits. Thanks to this major influx of cheap labor America became the world's leading supplier of such things as livestock, fuel, and textiles as the economy boomed. The economic policy was one of laissez-faire, meaning that the government stood back and allowed businesses to be run however the owners saw fit. Furthermore, Labor unions began springing up all over America, trying to aid the many workers who were being mistreated by the companies for which they worked. The Gilded Age also became dominated by the scientific thought of the day. Religion began to become less important as people were enthralled in the new scientific theories and discoveries that came to light during this time. (Cashman, 1984)

What is now called the Gilded Age began as William James was turning 30 years of age and graduating from medical school (Cashman, 1984). As a result, his own personal ideals were affected by the times, and his works and actions affected the age itself and have continued to be influential today. Throughout much of James's life, he was very ill and suffered from many different symptoms. His brother Henry James wrote on his brother's poor health, "My brother's health has small fluctuations of better and worse, but maintains steadily a rather lowly level." (Richardson, 2006) William, whose symptoms were not only physical, but also mental, constantly turned to medical treatments. Yet, he also read pieces of philosophy as well as works on the new science of psychology. And, although James would usually complain about his physical ailments, it was his mental peace that he would usually comment on while in a rare state of good health, "Feeling my mind so cleared up and restored to sanity. It is the difference between death and life."

James most definitely was in harmony with the attitude of the Gilded Age by being very scientific and analytical, but his interest in philosophy and psychology shows his concern with things that were outside of the realm of scientific understanding. This is further supported by James's lifelong investigations with mysticism, possibly an attempt to make religion slightly more important to the times in which he lived. However, being true to his scientific mind, he even approached these as experiments and came to the conclusion that mystical revelations only held true for the person who experienced them (Gale, 1999). His desire to make religion a larger part of the Gilded Age is shown when he says, "I think his [Hegel's] philosophy will probably have an important influence on the development of our liberal form of Christianity. It gives a quasi metaphysic backbone which this theology has always been in need of." (Richardson, 2006) This illustrates James's affinity for religion, despite his being a very scientifically oriented person. This is most likely due to the fact that his father, being a theologian, raised William and his siblings with a strong religious background. His love of science can also be seen by his embodiment of another Gilded Age characteristic.

William James, at many times in his life, showed a sense of adventure common in the Gilded Age. In 1865, during his first year of medical school, James, despite always being in poor health and never really favoring working in the field, decided to go on an eight month expedition on the Amazon River with Louis Agassiz, the world's foremost skeptic of Darwin's theory of evolution at the time. Though James became ill very early on in the trip, after his health improved he became a great asset to the trip, helping to collect many specimens and even going off on a canoe through the tributaries of the Amazon. He reported home saying, "My health at present is probably better than it ever was in my life . . . I never felt in better spirits, nor more satisfied than I do now with the way in which I am spending my time. I feel that I am gaining a great deal in every way." (Richardson, 2006) This shows another great divide in William James, this time between the life of an academic and that of an adventurer (Gale, 1999). Throughout James's entire life, he read and studied, rarely doing much physical activity. However, being a product of the Gilded Age, James respected the robust adventure attitude of the times and it is possible that he tried to experience this despite being more of an academic himself. His trip with Agassiz seems to be uncharacteristic of James, but in reality it worked perfectly for him, being an adventures journey and a scientific expedition at the same time. James even commented on the fact that he seemed to be growing intellectually, despite the lack of books he could read. He also came to admire Agassiz as a great educator, writing home saying, "He has done me much good already and will evidently do me more before I have got through with him." (Richardson, 2006) Connecting these two sides of himself may be why James felt that his health was the best it had ever been in his life (Gale, 1999). This could also explain why, in his later life, James would go to Europe if he felt ill in order to improve his health. These trips, as well, showed an adventurous side to him and an academic, since he usually was attending lectures and classes on topics that interested him.

After James received his M.D. in 1869 he fell into a deep bout of depression that he called "soul sickness." This started with his back giving out on his twenty-eighth birthday and bringing about, what he termed as, a "moral collapse" (Richardson, 2006). Later that year, he learned of the death of his favorite cousin, Minnie Temple, due to an illness. This was a defining moment in James's life, as it sent him into a two year depression and challenged his beliefs on free will. As he watched Minnie's condition worsen as she became weaker, thinner, and unable to sleep, despite her resilient attitude, he suffered a crisis because her condition directly opposed his belief that people can control their lives. On February 1, 1870, a few days after meeting with an ill Minnie, James wrote in his diary, "Today I about touched bottom, and perceive plainly that I must face the choice with open eyes: shall I frankly throw the moral business overboard . . . or shall I follow it, and it alone, making everything else merely stuff for it?" (Richardson, 2006) What James means by the "moral business" is his belief that even after all that happens to people, they are still able to "will" and to choose their own paths in life. This quote from his diary shows that Minnie's worsening condition caused James to rethink his personal philosophy. Being almost forced to accept the idea that people are powerless in their lives, he became haunted by this idea. This was the beginning of James's step into philosophy, as he started questioning the workings of the world and creating his own beliefs about life. This life crisis was also the precursor to his famous essay, "The Will to

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Believe,” which was not published until 1897, but had its makings in the questioning that James went through in response to Minnie’s illness and deterioration.

In 1872, James’s period of “soul sickness” finally ended with a job offer from Charles W. Eliot, the President of Harvard University, to teach physiology. James accepted this position as professor mainly because he had not yet done much to make a living for himself and he did not want to become a burden to his family. His eyes, however, were giving him trouble so he hired students to read to him so that his own intellect would not suffer. He began teaching in the spring semester of 1873 and, at first, did not enjoy it, writing to a friend, “Dealing with students is a queer thing, there is no rebound to them. You say your say and they depart in silence.” This attitude towards teaching, however, was very short lived, with James writing to his brother Henry in mid-February, “My own spirits are very good as I have got some things rather straightened out in my mind lately, and this external responsibility and college work agree with human nature better than lonely self-culture.” (Richardson, 2006) This quote shows that James’s decision to teach was a major turning point in his life, as it effectively ended his major depression which had lasted slightly over two years. He never again had a depression that lasted nearly as long as that one. Towards the end of the semester, James informed Eliot that he had every intention of continuing to teach and would even like to offer more courses for the next semester. His life now had meaning and he was constantly in contact with young, bright minds and now enjoyed a position of power not only in the class room, but over his own life too. At the end of the term, though, James took a much needed rest, his first term of teaching being the first regular work he had ever done in his life. But James was thankful for the new love he had found in teaching, although he was now unsure of what to teach. Then, in the summer, between terms, James’s health took a turn for the worse and he decided to take off the first semester and go abroad to Germany to improve his health. It was here where he properly discovered the new science of psychology, which he would help promote in America for the remainder of his academic life.

While planning to go abroad, James had an urgent feeling about the trip, placing much hope in it to improve his health. He wrote to Henry, “I feel that I must get well now or give up. It seems as if I should too – for nothing remains but this goddamned weakness of nerve now.” (Richardson, 2006) The weather in Europe did nothing for his health but only made him want to return to teaching. While in Germany though, he heard much about a new science called psychology and, upon returning to America, began studying it. James returned to America in April of 1874 and that fall began teaching physiology again. During this time, he began petitioning to be able to teach a course in psychology. Finally in the fall semester of 1876, he began teaching a course in “Physiological Psychology” (Richardson, 2006). This began James’s work to create a Psychology department at Harvard and by 1880, Granville Stanley Hall had graduated with a Ph.D. in Philosophy (however, it is widely accepted that this degree was a Doctorate in Psychology). James then went on to write *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890, the first major book on the science of psychology. He also set up the first psychology laboratory in America at Harvard once he had established a fully recognized psychology department there. He did much to support psychology and was a founding member of the American Psychological Association (APA) and its president for a year.

Finally, another field that James did much to build up was the field of philosophy. He did much to support and expound upon the philosophy of pragmatism, the only true American philosophy, and was the leading figure in the pragmatic movement. James's philosophical writing became popular with his publication, "The Will to Believe," in 1897. In this, he discusses how people are able to choose to believe in things, using religion as his main example. He also defines what makes something an option, showing how some "choices" aren't really choices at all. James's form of pragmatism was very attractive to many people because of the feeling of control and independence it brought about, seeming very "American" in a way. James was also very optimistic in a time when many philosophers and writers were condemning the Gilded Age and writing about how it was the beginning of America's downfall, James seemed very certain that things were not that bad and would get better no matter what (McDermott, 1977). James's pluralistic ideas also helped make his philosophy attractive and his belief that order came about by accident supported his optimistic views that the world would be fine. However, he did criticize the commercial values of the Gilded Age, claiming that they distracted people from what really caused joy i.e., a person's inner virtues. Ultimately though, William James's philosophy of pragmatism was a philosophy founded on Gilded Age ideals making it a natural "American" way of thought.

The role William James played in the Gilded Age was momentous, playing a crucial role in the science of psychology becoming popular in America. His beliefs were very much in line with those of the Gilded Age, his concern with usefulness and his optimism being only a few of the traits he shared with the age in which he lived. His philosophy of pragmatism became a very popular way of thought as his ideas helped to shape the country at a very interesting time in its history. His influences are still felt even today, as psychology has become a very popular science and the ideals of pragmatism are still seen in American attitudes in the present time.

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